

What Research Doesn't Show About Gifted Dropouts

We don't know how many gifted students drop out, but it's not 18 percent.

A persistent bit of information, or misinformation, about gifted students concerns the large number who are dropouts. The problem apparently stems from a statement in the Marland Report (1972), which has been incorrectly interpreted as showing that approximately 18 percent of high school dropouts are gifted. If that figure were correct, it would be dramatic indeed. It would indicate that gifted students, who comprise about 4 percent of the total student population, are dropping out three to six times more frequently than other students. It defies common sense!

It also defies mathematical logic. If the dropout rate for all students is as low as 28 percent (lower than many estimates) and 18 percent of those are gifted, then *all* of gifted students are dropping out of school.

Calculate it yourself. Of 100 students, 28 drop out. Of these, 18 percent are gifted. Eighteen percent of 28 is approximately 5. So of the original 100 students, 5 gifted students dropped out. If 5 percent of the students are gifted, how many gifted students remain in school? None!

It is time now to lay this myth to rest, and to try to put the actual research finding into better perspective.

Origin of the 18 Percent Figure

The 18 percent figure is an approximation; it may vary between 17 and 20

percent, depending on whose statement you hear. Whatever the exact figure used, it appears to be a misinterpretation of a statement contained in the Marland Report (1972). Martinson (1972) reviewed research about the gifted for that report. As part of the review, she stated: "Approximately 3.4 percent of dropouts in a statewide study were found to have an IQ of 120 or higher. . . . This total loss represented a 17.6 percent loss through dropouts among the talented." Unfortunately, the 17.6 percent figure is the one that has attracted attention. Even more unfortunately, that figure has been misinterpreted as the percent of dropouts who are gifted, rather than the percent of the gifted who drop out of school.

The statewide study cited by Martinson was part of a larger study of high school dropouts, conducted in Iowa sometime before 1958 (Van Dyke and Hoyt 1958). Later, Green (1962) used data from the Iowa study to describe differences between talented dropouts and similar students remaining in school. Green's study was first published in the *Vocational Guidance Quarterly* and was reprinted in the revised edition of *Educating the Gifted* (French 1964). Martinson cited that volume in her review for the Marland Report.

Limitations in the Study

Green's study received widespread attention because it was cited by Martin-

son in the Marland Report. But how extensive was the study? How far can the findings be generalized? The following facts may help put it in perspective.

1. The study was carried out in 1958 or before; the relevance of the data 29 years later is questionable.

2. It was conducted in one state, Iowa.

3. It involved 1,652 students, of whom 165 were designated as "talented."

4. Green defined "talented" as having a measured IQ of 120 or higher. Significantly, he did not use the term "gifted." That label was added in the Marland Report.

5. Green did not identify the test used as the criterion for determining IQ.

These limitations raise several questions. How relevant for the 1980s are data from the 1950s? Do results from a study in one state tell much about the condition of education in other parts of the country or in the nation as a whole? Would results be different if a stricter definition of "gifted" were used?

The Persistence of the 18 Percent Figure

More recent uses of the 18 percent figure demonstrate both how persistent that particular number is and how misinformation can proliferate.

"If the dropout rate for all students is as low as 28 percent (lower than many estimates) and 18 percent of those are gifted, then all of gifted students are dropping out of school."

An article in the 8 August 1983 issue of *U.S. News & World Report* reported that "studies show that up to 18 percent of all high school dropouts are gifted students" (Solorzano 1983). As is so often the case when writers or speakers state that "studies show," they do not identify the studies. That does not prevent others from using the figure, however. In this case, on 3 May 1984 Congressman Austin J. Murphy of Pennsylvania cited the article and that figure in introducing legislation into the House of Representatives supporting the education of gifted students. A few months later, Ballard (1984) unquestioningly quoted two paragraphs of Murphy's remarks, including the 18 percent figure, in the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*.

What Is the Actual Figure?

In spite of the prevalence of the 18 percent figure, there seems to have been little effort to verify it. The literature on gifted students does not reveal either a review of the Green study or new research to corroborate his findings. Therefore, the question remains: how many school dropouts are gifted?

Perhaps Green's original figure, which indicated that 3.5 percent of the dropouts in his study were "talented" (not necessarily gifted), provides a hint. However, that study was too limited geographically and is too remote in time to be convincing evidence. In a more recent review of research on the dropouts who are gifted, Lajoie and Shore (1981) concluded that "the balance of findings on dropouts suggests ... that the proportion of gifted dropouts may be average." Until we take a systematic look at gifted dropouts in the 1980s, such generalities may have to suffice.

Lessons from the Gifted Dropouts Episode

What can be learned from the way in which this research has been used?

First, Green's research probably has little bearing on education of the gifted at present. It was carried out in another era. It dealt with above-average students but not specifically with the gifted. It was limited in size and geographical representation. As good as the study may have been at the time and for its purposes, it seems to have

little usefulness for interpreting the impact of today's schools on gifted students.

Second, the whole episode illustrates the importance of using primary sources when citing research. It should be unnecessary to point out the importance of reading research accurately, which some readers did not do.

Finally, evidence of the value of gifted programs should be based on affirmative data. Negative evidence provides no assurance that programs for the gifted will have positive results. Rather than citing evidence of negative outcomes without programs for the gifted, we must seek and publicize the positive results of good programs. That kind of evidence is much more likely to be persuasive over the long term. □

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