

# How to Get an “A” on Your Dropout Prevention Report Card

A coordinated effort by all segments of society, led by the schools, can decrease the number of dropouts, increasing the chances that more young people will lead productive lives.

In 1985-86 more than 600,000 young people dropped out of public schools<sup>1</sup> at a projected cost to society of \$120 billion in lost productivity during their lifetimes.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the costs aren't measured just in economic terms. We're talking about human lives, and one wasted life is too many.

Whether you perceive the issue of students' dropping out of school as a national crisis or are skeptical that there is in fact a problem, the controversy goes beyond numbers. If the number of dropouts were the only point of contention between the two camps, it could be settled by mutual acceptance of a standard definition and an accurate accounting system. However, the issue is also one of values and philosophies about people, their problems, and what can be done about them.

For example, one editorial writer succinctly summarized the view of those who don't believe there is a dropout problem:

Figures quoted by dropout prevention advocates are exaggerations ... The anti-dropout campaign is driven by an opposition to higher standards ... There are numerous causes of dropping out. Virtually all of them are personal and family causes.

Even the ones related to schooling, for instance, frustration with the work for having fallen behind, are not caused by the school or subject to meaningful change by more educational manipulation.<sup>3</sup>

**Any dropout rate represents an incalculable loss of human potential and a staggering economic cost to society.**

Unfortunately, this type of thinking isn't reserved to newspaper editors. Some educators also agree. My view, however, is that the problem is real, and ownership of the problem and the solutions must begin with the schools. To start the process, we must dispel three myths.

***Myth One: There is not a dropout problem.*** We can get lost in arguments about whether the dropout rate is 5 percent, 14 percent, or 25 percent. Regardless of which figure we choose (they differ because of different ways of calculating them), any dropout rate represents an incalculable loss of human potential and a staggering economic cost to society.

***Myth Two: Some children just do not belong in school.*** Our education system is based upon the principle of universal free public schooling. Although some children have more difficulty adjusting to school than others, they all deserve every chance we can give them to succeed.

***Myth Three: Schools do not cause***

*dropouts and can do nothing to keep children from dropping out.* This is probably the most devastatingly inaccurate belief educators can hold. It lets us off the hook too easily. If we can believe what dropouts themselves tell us about why they left school, failure, boredom, and loss of self-esteem stand high on their lists. To set standards for young people, have them fail these standards, and then blame the failure entirely on them, their families, or some other element outside of school is an abdication of our roles as educators.

We must recognize, then, that there is indeed a dropout problem, reaffirm our commitment to education for all youth, and, most of all, recognize that schools can make a difference. Fortunately, there are steps that schools can take, starting now, to stem the flow of dropouts. Here I describe eight such areas where schools can make a difference, along with suggested activities. (See resources box [p. 27] for publications from which I gleaned the activities described here.)

#### Awareness

The first step in increasing awareness of the dropout problem among students, parents, and community leaders is *communication*. Educators should communicate often with these groups about what is happening in the school—both the good things and the not-so-good. Most parents and community leaders will accept our shortcomings if we announce them in conjunction with proposals for improvement. To increase everyone's awareness, schools can:

- Appoint a public relations person or committee to study the problem, its consequences, and what is being done about it and to communicate regularly with students, parents, and community leaders.

- Use the school newspaper, PTA newsletters and programs, letters from the school, bumper stickers, banners, flyers, and plays, for example, to keep people informed of the problem and the progress being made to combat it.

- Use the local media regularly to get your message across.

## We must recognize that there is indeed a dropout problem, reaffirm our commitment to education for all youth, and, most of all, recognize that schools can make a difference.

- Involve individual students and clubs as much as possible; students can come up with innovative ways to solve problems.

- Cooperate with business and industry to publicize the importance of staying in school to their employees, many of whom are parents.

- Make videotapes of leaders from business, industry, athletics, and other fields explaining why a diploma is important; let students view tapes in the school library.

- If parents do not come to school for meetings, develop creative ways to take meetings to the parents; involve parents and students in deciding how this can be done. (Schools may wish to focus less on "parental" involvement and more on "family" involvement. This allows the child with a single parent to involve an aunt, uncle, grandparent, or other relative who may have time for participation.)

*Motto:* Keep them informed.

#### Attendance

A pattern of poor attendance is one of the most obvious early signs of the potential dropout. Therefore, educators must make early and continuous contact with students who miss school often and devise ways to keep them coming to school. Here are some things that schools can do:

- Develop a comprehensive attendance policy and communicate it to students, parents, and community leaders. This policy should reflect the beliefs that every student should be in school and that the school values attendance.

- Develop a systematic accounting system for early identification and continuous monitoring of student absences with special attention to students with chronic absenteeism.

- Let parents know immediately when their child is absent by writing letters, using volunteers or automatic calling machines to notify parents, or asking a local radio station to announce daily the names of student absentees.

- Develop a makeup program for excessive absences that is flexible enough to accommodate a range of situations but rigid enough to discourage abuses.

- Develop incentives for good attendance for individuals, classes, and schools. Reward individuals and groups for perfect and almost-perfect attendance for a month, a semester, or the entire year, for example, by recognizing them in local newspapers or on radio and television or by issuing tickets with which students can select items from a menu of prizes that they helped establish. Schools can also acknowledge attendance with ribbons, buttons, trophies, plaques, certificates, savings bonds, and coupons from fast-food restaurants.

- Encourage teachers to communicate the importance of being in school by using anticipation statements daily (e.g., "I'll see you in the morning," "Tomorrow we will talk about why the leaves change colors," "Next Tuesday is the day our special guest will be here").

- Organize peer calling groups whose members call one another each morning before school to encourage attendance or call a member who is absent to urge a quick return.

- Reward teacher attendance. In many school districts, the rate of teacher absenteeism is higher than that of the students. Teachers need incentives, too.

- When students must be removed from the regular classroom for disciplinary reasons, an in-school suspension program is better than out-of-school suspension for three reasons: it keeps students under supervision, it ensures that they keep up with their academic work, and it pays economic dividends when funds are allocated on the basis of attendance.

*Motto:* Keep them coming to school.

### Achievement

Improving attendance is important, but it is not enough just to get students to come to school; there must be good reasons for them to stay. Students who reach the middle or upper grades unable to read at a functional level and who have already been retained once or twice are prime candidates to drop out.<sup>4</sup> One of the most effective ways to keep students in school is to keep them continuously learning something relevant. Students don't drop out of school because they do not want to learn. They drop out because they are failing to learn. Everyone wants to learn if the outcome serves a purpose and the process is more positive than negative, because *competence* gives us power, and power gives us confidence. Using just the instructional technology and motivational strategies available to us now, schools can:

- Develop continuous-progress mastery approaches to instruction in basic skills to avoid grade retention of students,<sup>5</sup> including individualized, self-paced, competency-based instruction with monitoring and feedback. There are other content areas where whole-group tasks and cooperative learning are more appropriate; for example, when the goals include development of interpersonal relations, higher cognitive functioning, and social problem-solving skills.
- Develop Tech-Prep 2+2 programs when possible.<sup>6</sup> This approach allows a student to take two years of specific courses during the junior and senior years of high school in preparation for a two-year associate degree at a college or junior college. This program provides a more structured, focused, coordinated curriculum than is possible

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with a group of general education courses many students take merely to fulfill diploma requirements.

- Recognize improvement as well as absolute achievement by expanding honor rolls, sending letters to parents, awarding ribbons. When determining these rewards, use objective measures that are not as susceptible to teacher bias as grades or teacher recommendations.

- Involve parents in their children's learning, especially in the early grades. Provide classes for parents in how to help their children learn.

- Develop peer tutoring programs. At-risk students can serve as tutors, as well as being tutored by other students.

- Use volunteer tutors at all grade levels, including parents, senior citizens, high school students, college students, businesspersons, and anyone else with the interest and skills to help.

*Motto:* Keep them learning.

### Attitude

When we speak of attitudes, we are actually talking about our value systems. Our attitudes and values about the world and about ourselves, except

for responses at a basic biological level, are learned from our experiences and from what other people tell us about the world and about ourselves. When we seek out conditions that enhance our survival at the biological and psychological levels, we call this a positive attitude. When we avoid threatening conditions, we display a negative attitude.<sup>7</sup> The totality of beliefs and attitudes we hold about ourselves and our place in the scheme of things is what we call an identity.<sup>8</sup> Identity develops as we come to see things as a real part of us and as we come to attach strong emotional ties to people and things in our world. We constantly seek confirmation of ourselves as individuals.

This view is important in understanding why so many young people drop out of school. Simply speaking, they perceive school as a threatening place and want to escape the aversiveness they feel there. This view also gives us guidance in keeping students in school. First, we must make school a pleasant, relevant place that students find enhancing. Second, we must make school a place with which all students can identify and to which they can become committed. We can accomplish these tasks in two ways: make students competent learners, and confirm them as worthy individuals by treating them with respect and acceptance. The keys are meaningful instruction provided by competent teachers and a school environment characterized by care and concern. For example, schools can:

- Develop and communicate a philosophy that each and every student is a worthwhile individual deserving of the best the school has to offer.

- Establish a regular series of informal discussions or "rap" sessions in the school—students with students, students with teachers, students with counselors, counselors with teachers, counselors with parents, teachers with parents, all with one another. Such meetings allow participants to get to know one another on a more personal basis, express feelings, share individual perspectives, and learn other points of view. Dialogue in a nonthreatening,

## The Phoenix Curriculum

Bettie B. Youngs

How can educators provide both the knowledge students need to be contributing members of society and the self-esteem they need to be motivated to acquire that knowledge? No matter how excellent an education we offer, unless our students are motivated to take advantage of it, they will not apply themselves enough to learn. The Phoenix Curriculum for Students, a motivational program developed by the Phoenix Educational Foundation, is designed to help teachers meet this challenge. The goal of the Phoenix Curriculum is to help teenagers gain an understanding of their potential and an appreciation of themselves. The curriculum consists of a ten-module program for grades 6, 7, and 8, divided into three units focusing on personal relationships, responsibility, happiness and success, and goal setting and achievement. Included in the program is an instructor's guide, a pre- and post-assessment, and students' workbooks with dyad exercises, class discussion topics, homework assignments, and individual projects. Field-tested with high school students in 13 school districts in the United States and Canada, the Phoenix Curriculum builds self-esteem, clarifies values, improves self-reliance, and decreases delinquency, dropouts, and other problems caused by low motivation.

To date, the program has been used in more than 300 schools in 31 states by over 65,000 students. It is also being used to teach incarcerated juveniles, pregnant minors, and residents of halfway houses. The Phoenix Educational Foundation offers the program to schools for \$250 (rather than the \$5,000 purchase price to corporations and other foundations); schools receive updated program materials, as they are produced, at no additional cost. The Phoenix Educational Foundation also provides teacher training support upon request.

The Phoenix Curriculum provides an organized, well-focused approach to overcome boredom, negativity, and defeatism. The real strength of the program is that, as students learn about goal setting and personal choice, it allows them to take more and more responsibility for themselves and for learning. Students learn to trust themselves and to take pride in who they are. Once they have that self-confidence—the belief that they can achieve whatever they set their minds to—teachers can proceed with the traditional part of their job: providing opportunities for learning.

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**We must make school a pleasant, relevant place that students find enhancing, and we must make school a place with which all students can identify and to which they can become committed.**

friendly atmosphere contributes to changes in perception, an important ingredient in attitude development and change.

• Involve students, especially those at risk of dropping out, in extracurricular activities.

• Bring in former dropouts to talk to students and school personnel about choices and consequences.

• Provide staff development in building positive interpersonal relations for all school personnel, including custodians, cafeteria workers, clerical staff, and others.

• Enlist adult and peer mentors for at-risk students.

*Motto:* Keep them enhanced.

### Atmosphere

People avoid situations in which they feel physically or emotionally threatened. Therefore, it is essential that we

make the school *climate* as secure as possible. Physical conditions must be safe and comfortable. The emotional atmosphere must be positive so that students will not fear a loss of self-esteem by being there. Here are directions that schools can take:

- Provide adequate and safe facilities and equipment, and maintain them well. Physical conditions should be closely and regular monitored, and repairs or replacements made when needed.

- Develop a plan with law enforcement officials and the school staff to monitor visitor traffic on the school grounds so that unauthorized persons do not interfere with the school program.

- Develop a proactive comprehensive student management plan with input from students, faculty, administrators, and parents. This plan should be as important as the instructional program. It should be designed to help students learn prosocial behaviors through structured activities and not just to punish inappropriate behavior.

- Arrange staff development programs for school personnel on how to create positive interpersonal relations and how to avoid adversarial situations between themselves and students. Behavior modification,<sup>9</sup> Teacher Effectiveness Training,<sup>10</sup> Transactional Analysis,<sup>11</sup> Invitational Learning,<sup>12</sup> and other models of counseling and personal relations are helpful in this regard.

*Motto:* Keep them secure.

### Adaptation

Rapid changes in our society have caused schools to accept a variety of responsibilities once fulfilled by other segments of the community. Therefore, in addition to teaching basic academic skills and transmitting general cultural knowledge, schools have found it necessary to provide students with job training and personal coping skills. These activities often call for specialized training in guidance and *counseling*, requiring the efforts not only of professionally trained school counselors but knowledgeable and

## The keys are meaningful instruction provided by competent teachers and a school environment characterized by care and concern.

skilled teachers and administrators as well. Schools can:

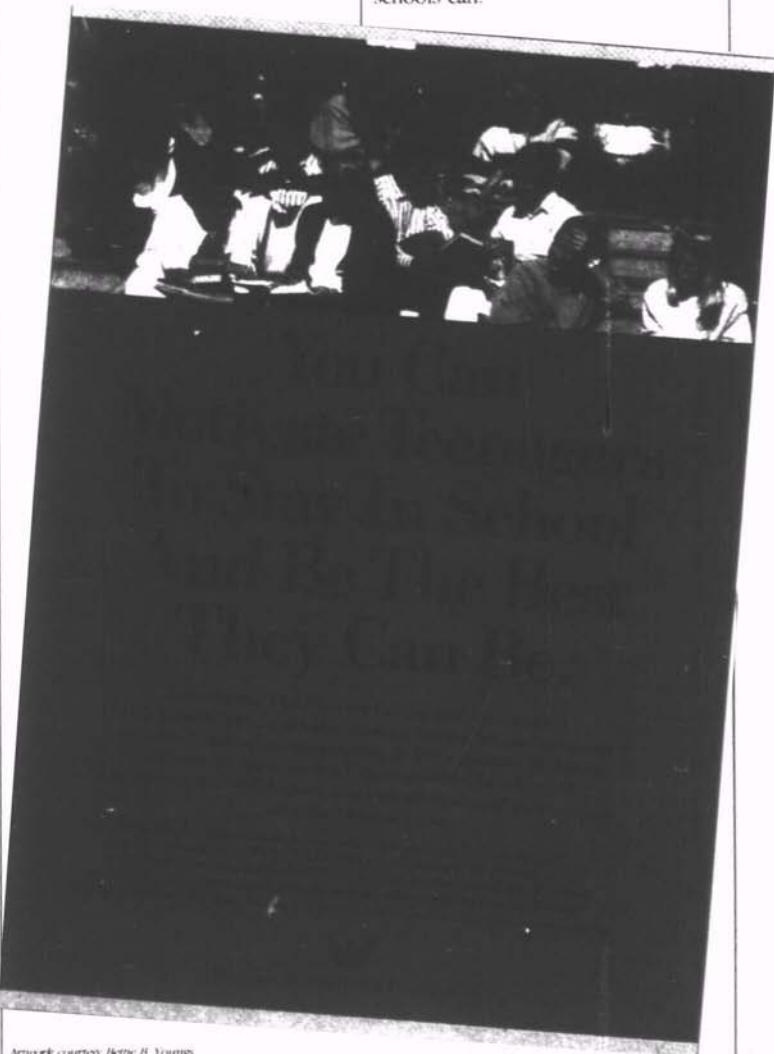
- Provide frequent group and individual counseling for students' personal problems at all levels of schooling.
- Provide broad-based career education in the early grades and work-related experiences in the higher grades.
- Involve students at all grade levels in both instructional and real-life situations that force them to confront issues of personal living; for example, interpersonal skills, money management, family living and parenting, leisure time management, personal hygiene and self-care, lifelong learning, and citizenship responsibilities. These experiences should be required of all students, although they need not be structured as academic courses nor assigned credit.
- Use community resources to the fullest, both by bringing people into the school and by taking students on field trips; establish a network of resources within the community and the state.
- Hold an annual career carnival whereby businesses, industries, and service groups set up booths at school to explain job requirements and distribute materials.
- Create a library of videotapes, filmstrips, slide presentations, and other media about jobs and careers.

*Motto: Keep them coping*

### Alternatives

We should offer alternatives in the earliest grades, not necessarily alternative schools, but, rather, alternative goals and alternative means to the same goal. Of course, providing alternatives for numerous students can be a logistical nightmare; but schools are getting better at it, especially with the

development of advanced technology, the use of volunteers, and creative staffing procedures. The use of alternative programs will enable schools to provide a set of curriculum offerings with more *comprehensiveness* while at the same time keeping students directed toward more individually relevant educational goals. For example, schools can:



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- Provide after-school tutoring classes for students at all grade levels who are having academic problems.

- Hold Saturday classes for students who want to make up work missed due to absences, who need extra help, and who want to advance more quickly.

- Establish flexible scheduling of coursework for students who are unable or disinclined to follow the regular school plan; provide more afternoon and night classes.

- Provide summer school programs for students at all grade levels to ease the anxiety caused by grade retention and course failure.

- Develop minicourses with the use of computer-assisted instruction and learning modules to provide variety for students.

- Implement the School-within-a-School concept when possible. One version, the block organization, is especially suited to middle and junior high school. The first year's class stays for two years with a common group of peers, a block leader, and a team of teachers qualified in math, reading, science, social studies, and language arts. In the last year, students are placed in separate blocks where they are prepared for transition into high school. In a very large school, a block includes a principal and counselors, and students stay together the entire time they are in the middle school or junior high school. A common approach in high school is a mostly self-contained alternative school for at-risk students located in a regular high school or vocational school.

- Cooperate with local technical schools or junior colleges to develop Tech-Prep 2+2 programs.

*Motto:* Keep them directed and focused.

### Advocacy

Schools may not have the financial resources nor the personnel to do alone all the things expected of them, but they must take the lead in speaking for children. Students drop out of school; therefore, school is the locus of the problem. Schools must become more aggressive in demonstrating the

positive side of what they are doing while seeking outside help to solve problems. Schools cannot wait for others to come to them—they must involve all segments of the community. Schools can form coalitions with agencies that deal with at-risk students to share information, cooperate in planning, and coordinate activities. *Coordination* is the key. Here are some things schools can do:

- Establish "case management teams" to deal with students who are seriously at risk.

- Recruit volunteers to relieve teachers of clerical duties, to tutor students, and to perform routine administrative tasks.

- Form networks of community agency resources.

- Develop interagency councils to coordinate efforts in dealing with mutual clients.

- Seek advice from all segments of the community when developing policies, procedures, curriculums, and programs.

- Keep policymakers informed, especially school board members and state legislators.

- Communicate to students in explicit ways that the school is for them and that it supports them in their efforts to learn.

*Motto:* Keep them involved.

### A Word about Funding and Evaluation

The preceding ideas are just a few of the many strategies schools can use to prevent students from dropping out of school. Some are costly, some are difficult, but, as shown here, with creative thinking many can be readily incorporated into the structure of schooling.

Schools can develop innovative, low-cost ways to supplement general school appropriations. A number of free services are also available in almost every district. Schools can organize outreach committees to work with faculty and the administration in developing plans for establishing these services on a regular basis. They include:

- volunteers;
- community youth service agencies and organizations;

- state and federal agencies;
- state departments of education;
- peer tutoring and peer counseling;
- innovative and creative assignment of staff;
- donations of lottery items, prizes, awards, and equipment from businesses and industries;
- Adopt-a-School programs by businesses and industries.

Many private foundations are interested in funding practical dropout prevention activities. In addition to the well-known national ones, many smaller foundations fund proposals within individual states. These foundations are listed in the *Foundation Directory*, available in university, public, or state libraries.

Finally, schools can raise money on their own by organizing lotteries, paper drives, student art shows (with money coming from admission and from sale of art objects), school carnivals, talent shows, literary journals (advertisements), and coin containers in businesses and restaurants, to name just a few activities.

Any program worth spending time and money on is a candidate for evaluation. Few educators would consider teaching a lesson without checking to see if the students learned what was intended, yet we often implement programs with no process to assess their effects. When we set up new programs or employ untried strategies, we should do at least five things:

- establish clear objectives to guide our program efforts and to serve as the basis for evaluation;
- collect pre- and post-test data and, if possible, quantitative data;
- run the program long enough so that efforts will have a chance to take effect;
- compare the program group with similar students not participating in the program;
- use a third-party evaluator to give the evaluation more credibility.

### The Vanishing American Dream?

The dropout problem in this country is a "quiet killer of the American dream."<sup>13</sup> To attack this problem effectively will

### Sources of Dropout Prevention Activities

The dropout prevention activities described in this article come from a number of sources. For example, the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University has a database of programs operating in over 30 states, the District of Columbia, and Canada. Other sources of activities include the following reports, manuals, program summaries, resource guides, and books describing strategies and techniques for dealing with truants and dropouts.

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Wells, Shirley. *At-Risk Youth: Research Programs and Recommendations*. Denver: Education Commission of the States, January 1987.

—John V. Hamby

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take nothing less than the coordinated efforts of all segments of society. Schools, as advocates of youth, can take the lead in such a coordinated effort to ensure that every young person has the opportunity at least to strive to achieve the American dream. □

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12. William Watson Purkey and John M. Novak, *Inviting School Success: A Self-Concept Approach to Teaching and Learning*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1984).

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