



Nevada KIDS COUNT Issue Brief



Addressing the High School Dropout Epidemic Policy Brief

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In a fast-paced, complex, information-based economy like ours, education is a must. In order to compete and become a productive member of one's community and ultimately society as a whole depends upon the fundamental skills acquired in high school. Individuals today need to have the ability to communicate with clarity, confidence, and precision when they speak, read, and write just to function in everyday life. Without an adequate educational background individuals are often unable to succeed during their adult lives. In fact, many who find themselves in this position are not only incapable of becoming upwardly mobile and contributing to society, but in addition, create costly problems that society must deal with. This puts a strain on the personal lives of these individuals and subsequently places an undue burden on the backs of the communities that must deal with the problems associated with dropping out of high school.

When dealing with the problems associated with dropouts a proverbial statement often comes to mind: "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Due to personal and social costs that high school dropouts can cause, it is important for society and communities as a whole to familiarize themselves with the issue of dropping out of high school. And, there is nowhere more appropriate to learn about this issue than in the state of Nevada, where the statistics on high school dropouts are among the highest in the nation.

Nevada has seen a large number of high school students making the decision to leave before receiving their diploma. There is no doubt that the people of Nevada have a serious problem on their hands, and one that needs to be addressed by not only our state and local governments, but by all members of the Nevada community. This brief, in an attempt to educate, is written to provide a concise review of the literature on this issue. Since few studies have been done on Nevada, this brief reviews some

of the national data and programs that have been instituted to help address the problem. In particular, it will discuss the extent of the problem, the social issues surrounding it, and workable solutions associated with dropping out of high school.

How High School Dropouts Are Measured

There are three types of measures used to determine the dropout rates of students. The following definitions are from the U.S. Department of Education.¹ First, the event dropout rate measures the proportion of students who drop out in a single year without completing high school. This helps to provide information on how effective the schools are at retaining students. Second, the status dropout rate measures the proportion of the population that has not completed high school and is not enrolled at one point in time, regardless of when they dropped out. This measure tends to run higher than event rates because it includes all dropouts from ages 16 to 24, regardless of when they last attended school. Thirdly, the cohort dropout rate measures what happens to a single group of students over a certain period of time.¹ This method categorizes students by similar social situations and measures how many dropouts occur over a period of time.

The high school completion rate “represents the proportion of 18-24 year olds who have completed a high school diploma or an equivalent credential, including a General Educational Development (GED) credential.”²

High School Dropouts in Nevada

In Nevada the statewide dropout rate, as reported by the Nevada Department of

Education, for grades 9-12 was 6.1 percent for 1999-2000. This was a decrease from 7.9 percent in 1998-1999.

Among racial/ethnic categories, Hispanics had the largest percentage of high school dropouts in Nevada (9.2 percent), followed by American Indian/Alaskan Natives (8.3 percent), blacks (8.0 percent), whites (4.9 percent), and Asian/Pacific Islanders (4.6 percent).³ Thus, it appears that those groups generally most in need of upward mobility have the highest rates of children at risk to drop out.

Identifying the Prominent Social Issues

Due to the reality of finite resources, a focused approach must be taken in order to successfully combat the problem of dropping out of high school. In particular, this involves the identification of the prominent social indicators that are correlated with Nevada's dropout problem. These factors help to distinguish which individuals need the most intervention and, thus, what needs to be addressed in relation to the development of effective programs dedicated to keeping them in school.

First, by using broad-brush social groupings of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status pictures of at-risk youths emerge. As previously mentioned, Hispanics, Native Americans, and African-Americans had the highest dropout rates in the state. The data suggest a higher likelihood of dropping out among these groups. National studies conducted on high school dropouts have validated this type of hypothesis.⁴ Likewise, one's position in the socioeconomic stratum is an influential factor in the decision to drop

out or stay in school.^{5,6} That is, the lower a child is on the economic ladder the more likely she/he is to drop out of school. Minority groups are disproportionately represented among the lower socioeconomic classes. Thus, by using these broad-classification efforts educators can target at-risk youth likely to drop out.

Secondly, factors such as problematic social environments and inappropriate behavior can be used in identifying at-risk youth. For example, youth from unstable home environments such as broken homes or families that move a lot, exhibit a higher likelihood of dropping out.⁴ Furthermore, juvenile delinquency and behavioral problems in school are indicators of potential dropouts. In other words, improper actions such as truancy, tardiness, and criminal activity can aid in the identification of at-risk youth.⁴ Additionally, problems such as these are more likely to occur among lower socioeconomic classes.

Lastly, academic performance is a key component in identifying potential dropouts. Grade retention and its effect on self-esteem can be detrimental to an individual deciding to stay in school. “Most research shows that flunking students leads to poorer academic performance in the long run, and also impairs self esteem.”⁷ Indeed, the repetition of a grade usually does not improve scholastic results and can have “long-term effects on self-esteem and school attachment” thereby placing students “at a higher risk of dropping out of school.”⁸ In neighborhoods of lower socioeconomic status, “where failing children is more common,” close to 50 percent of students have been retained by the time they reach high school.

What Schools Are Doing to Help Reduce Dropout Rates

Many of the proposed solutions recommended to combat the problem of high school dropouts focus on dealing with the social issues that teenagers encounter on a daily basis. Studies center on the idea that if family issues and social problems do not distract children then they will be able to successfully function in school. The solutions heavily target “at-risk” youth, making sure they have the necessary tools and guidance to successfully complete their education. School districts across the country have used these studies as building blocks in the development of programs designed to prevent their students from leaving school. These programs help teachers to identify at-risk youth and address potential problems early. Alternative education programs have been introduced at schools throughout the United States. These alternatives to “normal” schools offer specialized assistance to at-risk youth and broken families. In sum, the common theme throughout these proposed solutions is parents, educators, administrators, and communities working together to support students in their efforts to obtain a high school diploma. The following is a more detailed examination of some of the most widely proposed programs.

Intervention at an Early Age

The Oregon School Board Association advocates working with children at a young age to teach the importance of staying in school. Schools in Oregon have led the way in the development of effective programs for their students. One of the programs they have pioneered begins in the third grade. Remarkably, they have been able to predict

with 90 percent accuracy whether or not a student of this age will grow up to drop out. The primary focus of this program centers on the idea that if schools begin working with children early they can often help to reverse, or stop, the effects of any social problems in which these children are growing up. They simply reinforce learning fundamentals such as reading, writing, and making students feel like they are important.³ Moreover, they stress the importance of making sure that students do not fall behind and are all given equal opportunities. Dr. Robert Barr, author of “Hope at Last for At-Risk Youth,” argues the importance of basic fundamentals for every student so as to “ensure that every child will learn to read. I strongly believe it is their birth right” (p. 63). By working with students at a young age, and ensuring they are all given the equivalent education, the program has helped to significantly reduce the dropout rates of these students, as they grow older.

The Importance of School Environment

Building strong and stable school environments is a necessary factor in the development of specific programs for children who need specialized attention. It is important to start with the essential elements of a sound school environment, beginning with the organization of the administration and ending with the overall school culture. E. Gregory Woods, in his article, “Reducing the Dropout Rate,”⁹ explains how overall attention must be given to every aspect of a school and how it functions. For example, the size and location of a school play an important role in dropout prevention. It has been found that large schools can help prevent the dropout problem by developing a schools-within-school

system to give more individualized attention to their students. School climate, in terms of building safety and nonthreatening environments, can be very powerful in helping to ensure that students feel like they have a positive place in school. The way the curriculum is taught by teachers also plays an important role in fighting the dropout problem. Successful curricula involve the fundamentals. That is, a good curriculum will stress test-taking skills, self-esteem building, social-skills training, and real-world applications. Indeed, by using every aspect of a school’s environment, educators and administrators can help build a healthy and positive learning environment, a place where their students will want to attend everyday.⁹

Alternative Education Programs

There are some students for whom “traditional” high schools simply do not work. For example, for teenagers who need to work to support themselves or their family, or for young girls facing pregnancy, going to school during the day may simply not be feasible. Thus, one idea that has been introduced is for school districts to offer alternative high schools. Through the design and implementation of alternative programs for students who would not have succeeded in a traditional school setting, educators are beginning to realize that what works for the majority of students may not work for all. Although it is often believed that children simply do not want to go to school, in many cases they are simply just not able to because of circumstances in their lives. Therefore, by offering classes in the evenings, students are still given the option to complete school (just simply on a better time schedule for them.) The introduction of these alternative

programs has been a successful tool in helping students get their high school diploma or Graduate Equivalency Degree and, thus, avoid becoming a high school dropout statistic.¹⁰

Conclusion

To sum up, Nevada has a serious problem to address within its public-education system. That is, this state has a dismal record when it comes to the prevention of its youth from dropping out of school. Thus, it is important for the citizens of this state to familiarize themselves with this issue in order to address the problem effectively. Although there are difficulties in pinpointing those in need of help, it can be done. Significant social factors surrounding those that drop out of school can be used to identify at-risk youth. Once the target has been identified, models of successful programs around the country can be used in the development and implementation of programs in Nevada aimed at getting children through school. Truly, it is up to the citizenry of this great state to prevent their children from dropping out of high school.

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