



Facing the School Dropout Dilemma

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has the right to an education that develops their “personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.” According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE) (2011), an estimated 1.3 million American high school students drop out every year; a disproportionate number of whom are youth of color.

The nation’s children are its future workers, citizens, and leaders. Education remains the major tool by which people become empowered and the economic, social, and personal well-being of all citizens in a pluralistic society increases. A high dropout rate diminishes the pool of qualified people from diverse backgrounds who will enter the professional and political ranks that make important public policy decisions (APA, 1996). The mission for every school should be to educate students to equip them to become “knowledgeable, responsible, socially skilled, healthy, caring, and contributing citizens” (Greenberg et al., 2003).

The fact that so many students never complete high school has a deep and wide-ranging impact on the U.S.’s long-term economic outlook. The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2011) reports that the median income of persons ages 18 through 67 who had not completed high school was roughly \$25,000 in 2009. At current rates, a significant segment of the population will remain entrenched in poverty while on a global scale the competitiveness of the American labor force will continue to lag behind.

APA has a longstanding commitment to school dropout prevention as is evident from its 1996 resolution on the topic (APA, 1996).

Who is dropping out?

NCES reports that on average, 3.4 percent of students who were enrolled in public or private high schools in October 2008 left school before October 2009 without completing a high school program. Broken down by race, the estimated event dropout rates were 2.4% for Whites, 4.8% for African Americans, and 5.8% for Latinos. NCES did not find a significant difference in the 2009 event dropout rates for males and females. In terms of age, older students (ages 20 through 24) are at a greater dropout risk than students aged 15 through 17.

A strong link exists between poverty and high school dropout rates. Students from low-income families dropped out of high school five times more than students from high-income families in 2009.

The term “dropout factories” was coined to refer to high schools that graduate 60 percent or less of their students. Those schools produce 50% of the nation’s dropouts and two-thirds ethnic minority dropouts according to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011). The dropouts are highly influenced by poverty in the school locations. Dropout factories are mainly found in 15 states primarily in the North, West, and South of the U.S. (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). These schools are only 12% of the national total yet they are estimated to produce *about half* of the nation’s dropouts overall (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Slight good news is that dropout factories



have continued to decline; estimated at in 1,634 in 2009 compared to 2,007 in 2002 and 1,746 in 2008, according to America's Promise Alliance (2011). However, an estimated 2.1 million students still attend dropout factories as of 2009; 183,701 students fewer than in 2008 (America's Promise Alliance, 2011).

- The overriding common characteristic for these schools is location in poverty-stricken areas with high rates of unemployment, crime, and ill health. In addition, their student bodies are comprised disproportionately of children of color (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). More than 60 percent of black students attend schools where more than 50 percent of the school population is identified as living in poverty, compared to 18 percent of white students (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011).
- Approximately 42 percent of Hispanic students, 43 percent of African American, and 46 percent of American Indian students will not graduate on time with a regular diploma, compared to 17 percent of Asian students and 22 percent of white students (AEE, 2011).
- These “dropout factories” are estimated to produce 81% of Native American, 73% of African American, 66% of Latino, and 34% of White dropouts respectively (Balfanz, 2007).
- Ethnic minority students who are fortunate enough to attend middle class or affluent high schools are promoted to the 12th grade at similar rates as their White peers (Balfanz & Legters, 2006).
- However, nearly half of the nation's African American and Latino students attend high schools in low-income areas with dropout rates that hover in the 40-50% range (Balfanz & Legters, 2006; Children's Defense Fund, 2004).

There is no single prominent risk factor predicting dropout. Rather, there are numerous risk factors that in combination with each other raise the probability of youth leaving high school early (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). These factors fall into four broad categories related to *individuals* (e.g., truancy, poor school attitude), *families* (e.g., low-income, lack of parental involvement), *schools* (e.g., negative school climate, low expectations), and *communities* (e.g., high crime, lack of community support for schools), according to the Center for Mental Health in Schools, UCLA (2007). Dropout rates particularly correlate with high poverty rates, poor school attendance, poor academic performance, grade retention (i.e., being held back), and disengagement from school (Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007). Fortunately, there is a growing and encouraging body of research for schools on how to prevent dropout by addressing problem behaviors, promoting academic success, and enhancing overall health and wellbeing for students.

The importance of early education and early literacy

Research is discovering that dropouts arise from an accumulation of various risk factors throughout children's schooling that peak once in high school. It is increasingly evident that school dropout prevention must begin as early as possible. Some researchers have identified early predictors of dropout in children before they are enrolled in kindergarten (Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007).



Early childhood lays the foundation upon which to build future academic success. It provides a critical window for optimal brain development; 90% of brain development is estimated to occur before age five (Jensen, 1998).

Early childhood is also a period when children are most vulnerable to environmental risk factors such as poverty, malnutrition, trauma/abuse, or maternal depression (National Center for Children in Poverty, 1999).

Recipients of high quality early childhood education (i.e., consisting of a holistic, nurturing, consistent, and stimulating curriculum) exhibit lower rates of grade retention, higher levels of academic achievement, fewer special education services, and a stronger commitment to graduate from high school (Stegelin, 2004).

Early literacy development is also vital to later academic success. Children with poor reading skills are more likely to repeat a grade setting the stage for a pattern of failure in school. The fundamentals for being a good reader (i.e., cognitive and language skills) are learned before children reach school age (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2009).

Interventions targeted at children during the birth-to-three, preschool, and kindergarten stages can prepare them to enter elementary school with good language development, cognitive skills, and self concept regardless of their family backgrounds or personal characteristics (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2009).

Critical milestones in schooling

As children progress through school, their failure to meet certain milestones is highly predictive of later dropout. Parents and educators should be particularly vigilant regarding each child's academic performance. Recognizing the warning signs promptly is crucial to early and effective intervention.

- By the 3rd grade, it is very important for children to have mastered how to read since it underpins future learning in the upper elementary grades where more complex reading skills are required. They should have transitioned from “learning to read to reading to learn” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010).
- As children progress through the sixth and eighth grades, poor academic performance in math and English, low reading scores, absenteeism, and disengagement from school become very reliable predictors of whether they will later drop out of high school (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).
- On the individual level, it is also important to consider children's beliefs in their own competence and motivation to succeed academically. Research seems to indicate that children's beliefs in their abilities tend to become increasingly negative as they grow older, at least through early adolescence. When children believe they are less competent in certain academic activities, they tend to value them less which has negative implications for the effort they will put into school work (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).
- Student effort (i.e., the level of school attachment, involvement, and commitment) is highly correlated with more positive academic outcomes (Stewart, 2008).



- Peer associations also have an important effect on academic outcomes. Peer relationships can create a set of norms and values that either promote or undermine academic achievement. Meaningful (or positive) relationships with peers that promote psychological and life skills may promote academic achievement and motivation, however, negative peer pressure or social disapproval toward school work might lead some students to drop out of school (Stewart, 2008; Nicholas & White 2001).
- The transition into ninth grade can also be particularly difficult for many youth. At this stage, many students move from middle schools into high schools where they are likely to feel lost and where academic rigor increases substantially (Balfanz, 2007).
- Many students are held back in the ninth grade and subsequently do not get promoted to or drop out in the tenth grade creating the “ninth grade bulge” and “tenth grade dip” in school enrollments. The ninth grade attrition rate is exacerbated by poverty; 40% of dropouts in low income schools leave after ninth grade compared to 27% of dropouts in low poverty districts (National High School Center, 2007).
- Poor grades, poor attendance, and disengagement from school become particularly threatening to the completion of high school at this stage and four major high school dropout categories begin to emerge (Balfanz, 2007):
 - *Life events* – dropout is prompted by something that happens to the student outside of school, e.g., teen pregnancy, foster care placement, high school mobility.
 - *Fade outs* – dropout is prompted by frustration and boredom with school even though the student has not repeated or failed any grades.
 - *Push outs* – dropouts are subtly or explicitly encouraged to withdraw or transfer away from school because they are perceived to be difficult or detrimental to the success of the school.
 - *Failure to succeed* – dropouts leave school after a history of academic failure, absenteeism, or lack of engagement.
- In addition to improving the quality of the school environment, students benefit from prevention programs that enhance their social and emotional assets (e.g., managing emotions and interpersonal situations effectively, establishing positive goals, enhancing feelings of competence) (Greenberg et al., 2003).
- School programs that focus on social, emotional, and academic learning from kindergarten through high school have been found to improve school attitudes, behavior, and academic performance (Zins, Weissberg, Wang & Walberg, 2004).

The approaches that have produced positive outcomes include:

 - Partnership between schools and families to encourage learning
 - Safe and orderly school and classroom environments
 - Caring relationships between students and teachers
 - Cooperative learning and proactive classroom management
 - High academic expectations of youth from both adults and peers.

The interaction of race/ethnicity and poverty with school dropout rates

It is evident from the statistics above that a disproportionate number of ethnic minority students drop out of high school. These disparities are particularly pronounced for African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Latino youth.



- The predictors of dropout (i.e., delayed reading skills, grade retention, absenteeism, and school disengagement) are significantly higher for students of color, which can be linked primarily to higher rates of poverty, less access to high quality early childhood education, and higher representation in “dropout factories”.
- For Latino youth in particular, a significant number are recent immigrants who are English-language learners, i.e., not fully fluent in English and speak another language at home, which exacerbates their risk of dropping out or not completing high school on time (Fry, 2003).
- Recent encouraging research has found that young Latino children in low-income areas show strong social skills in the classroom due to good parenting practices that facilitate learning in elementary school. However, these gains are undermined by mediocre schools as they grow older (Fuller & Coll, 2010).
- Several risk factors affect children born at the intersection of race and poverty throughout their development predicting school failure or dropout and entry into the juvenile justice system. Children of color struggling academically or acting out are often met with police intervention, suspensions, or expulsions instead of appropriate academic intervention in schools of poor quality (Children’s Defense Fund, 2007).
- African American students in particular are disciplined or suspended at disproportionate rates for reasons that include lack of teacher training (in classroom management or culturally competent practices) and racial stereotypes only contributing further to disengagement and later dropout from school (APA, 2008).
- Risk of falling into the school to prison pipeline is particularly pronounced for boys of color with approximately 1 in 3 African American boys and 1 in 6 Latino boys projected to become incarcerated at least once in their lifetimes (Children’s Defense Fund, 2007).
- Given the right opportunities and necessary investment, students of color living in poverty can achieve success in school and avoid the dropout trap. Schools that have employed interventions that maximize:
 - intensive instruction (longer school hours and Saturday school),
 - monitoring and encouragement of attendance,
 - student mentoring,
 - after-school and extra-curricular programs,
 - high expectations of students from adults and peers,
 - engagement and involvement of parents, families, and communitieshave demonstrated positive results in academic achievement and dropout prevention for students of color (APA, 2008; Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Toldson, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2006).
- For dropout prevention to be successful for low-income minority students in many of our nation’s schools, attention must be paid to social and emotional factors that support academic achievement i.e., academic and school attachment, teacher support, peer values and overall mental health and wellbeing (Becker & Luthar, 2002).

The interaction of sexual orientation with school dropout rates

Precise statistics on dropout rates among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students (LGBT) are difficult to find, although some have estimated that almost a third of LGBT students drop out of high school, more than triple the national rate (Bart, 1998).



- The main cause of dropout among LGBT high school students appears to be the hostile school climate created by continual bullying and harassment from peers due to their sexual orientation. Nearly 9 out of 10 LGBT students (86.2%) experienced harassment at school in the past year, three-fifths (60.8%) felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and about a third (32.7%) skipped a day of school in the past month due to feeling unsafe (Kosciw, Diaz & Greytak, 2008).
- A national survey data found that LGBT students fared worse on many measures of academic achievement and school engagement than their peers (i.e., having a lower GPA, higher likelihood of failing a class, and less positive feelings towards teachers or school in general) (Pearson, Muller & Wilkinson, 2007).
- LGBT students stand to benefit from school policies that counteract bullying and harassment; support the coming out process, and reaffirm the dignity and rights of all students (APA, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

The interaction of disabilities with school dropout rates

NCES reports that in 2009, the event dropout rate for students with disabilities was not significantly different from dropout rate for students without disabilities. From 1996–1997 through 2005–2006, the percentage of students who exited special education and school (dropped out) decreased from 45.9 percent to 26.2 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

- More still, U.S. Department of Education data from 2005–2006 shows that students with disabilities who do not complete high school had emotional disturbance (44.9%); , speech or language impairments (22.7%), and specific learning disabilities (25.1%); intellectual disabilities (22.3%), and other health impairments (23.4%). On a positive note, during the same period 56.5% of students with disabilities graduated with a high school diploma.
- Although there are fewer data available, students with disabilities, especially those with emotional and behavioral disorders, appear to be suspended and expelled at rates disproportionate to their representation in the population (APA, 2008).
- In addition, arrest rates are relatively high for students with disabilities who drop out. Approximately one-third of students with disabilities who drop out of high school have spent a night in jail; triple the rate of students with disabilities who have completed high school (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine & Garza, 2006).
- One dropout prevention program that has been successful with students with disabilities uses consistent monitoring of students at risk of dropout (e.g., course failures, tardiness, missed classes, absenteeism, detention and suspension) and then connecting with them through academic support, in-depth problem solving, and coordination with community services (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

How do high dropout rates affect the U.S. economy?

The societal and economic costs of a high dropout rate for the U.S. are gigantic. It is estimated that approximately 12 million students will dropout over the next decade or so costing the U.S. about \$3 trillion (AEE, 2007). Dropouts are far more likely to experience reduced job and income opportunities, chronic unemployment, incarceration, or require government assistance than the rest of the population.



- In 2009, the average annual income for a high school dropout was \$19,540, compared to \$27,380 for a high school graduate.
- High school dropouts are bearing the brunt of the ongoing recession more than the rest of the population. While the national unemployment rate as of January 2012 is 8.3%, for individuals without a high school diploma it is 13.1% compared to 8.4% for high school and 4.2% for college graduates (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).
- The risk of incarceration (jails, prisons, juvenile detention centers) for male dropouts is significant. In 2007, male dropouts aged 16-24 were 6.3 times more likely to be institutionalized than high school graduates and when compared with those with a bachelor degree or higher, their risk skyrocketed to 63 times more likely, according to the Center for Labor Market Studies (2009).
- On a global scale, the U.S. is underperforming its competitors. The U.S. ranks 8th from the bottom in a comparison of high school graduation rates among the 30 member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2009).
- It has been estimated that if dropouts from the Class of 2009 had graduated, the nation's economy would benefit from nearly \$335 billion in additional income over the course of their lifetimes (AEE, 2010).
- Just halving the Class of 2008 dropout rate in the nation's largest cities has been estimated to bring several billion additional dollars in economic benefits including increased earnings, home and auto sales, jobs, tax revenue, spending and investment, and long term economic growth (AEE, 2010).

Conclusion

Dropping out of high school severely limits the chances of future success for far too many children. It deepens and continues the cycle of poverty into future generations. Receiving a good education is the lifeline by which many youth can lift themselves out of poverty. Facing the high school dropout dilemma will require commitment and investment in high quality early childhood education, attention to social and emotional learning, continual monitoring of student attendance and academic progress, intensive instruction for those falling behind, using alternatives to school push-out, fostering of a positive school climate, and engagement with parents, families, and communities. America's future depends on the delivery of a high quality education to all children regardless of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or disability so they may develop *to their fullest potential*.

Dropout Prevention Resources

[APA Center for Psychology in Schools and Education](#)

[Alliance for Excellent Education](#)

[America's Promise Alliance](#)

[Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#)

[Children's Defense Fund](#)

[National Center for Education Statistics](#)

[National Dropout Prevention Center/Network](#)

[National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities](#)



[What Works Clearinghouse \(Institute for Education Sciences\)](#)

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