

**Dropout Prevention Strategies:
What Works?**

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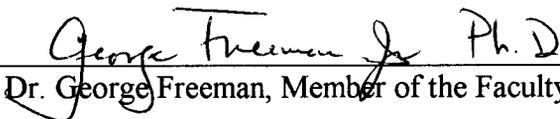
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ABSTRACT

This paper asks the question: What are effective strategies for preventing students from dropping out of school? Students are at risk of dropping out of school for many reasons, not all of which are obvious. Although much research has been devoted to the reasons *why* students drop out of school, comparatively little has been done on programs aimed at keeping students in school. Although school dropout rates are lower than at any time in history, there is more concern than ever for keeping students in school until graduation. Schools today are concerned with reducing dropout rates while raising academic standards and increasing graduation requirements. The challenge now is for schools to find ways to help *all* students complete high school. To do so, schools must offer programs that appeal to and assist all segments of the school population. After exploring the historical background of compulsory education in America in order to determine how the dropout “problem” came to be viewed as such, this paper reviews current research literature on dropout prevention programs that have been shown to be effective.

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Introduction

In the last two decades high schools in America have been faced with the dilemma of how to raise academic standards and increase graduation requirements while—at the same time—decreasing dropout rates. This dual effort began partly in response to reports in the early 1980s that were critical of American education (Kaufman, McMillen, & Sweet, 1996). One such report, *A Nation at Risk*, sounded an alarm that America’s “well-educated and strongly motivated competitors” were surpassing them in the global market place (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Schools were pressured to increase classroom time and raise graduation requirements in basic subjects (Kaufman et al.). But increasing standards seemed at odds with the goal of increasing high school completion; some feared that students already in danger of dropping out would be forced to do so because of the higher graduation requirements (Hamilton, 1986; Wilson, 1989).

On March 31, 1994, President Clinton signed into law the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. Intended as a guideline for state education reform, the second of the Act’s six goals is to increase high school graduation rates to 90 per cent by the year 2000 (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). This push to decrease dropout rates continues in spite of statistics that point to an existing low dropout rate.

Dropout statistics are computed by several means:

Event rates indicate the number of students who leave high school each year and are compared with the previous years....*Cohort rates* describe the number

of dropouts from a single age group or specific grade (or cohort) of students over a period of time. (Woods, 1995, p. 1)

Kaufman et al. (1996), using data from the High School and Beyond (HS&B) surveys and the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), examined the changing nature of high school populations over a decade in order to determine various characteristics of students that might affect their tendency to drop out. (The HS&B and NELS:88 surveys, when combined, had gathered data from over 2,000 high schools all over the U.S.) After compiling data collected on two *cohorts* of high school sophomores from 1980-82 and 1990-92, Kaufman et al. found that the dropout rate for these cohorts fell from 11.4 percent in 1982, to 6.2 percent in 1992, with dropout rates for minorities falling at approximately the same rate as for whites. Broken down by race/ethnicity, percentages for the 1980-82 cohort were: Hispanics 19.2, blacks 13.5, whites, 10.2; and for the 1990-92 cohort: Hispanics, 12.1, blacks, 7.9, and whites, 5.0.

A report published in 1997 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that *event* dropout rates are also low: “In October of 1995, 6 percent of students who were in grades 10-12 the previous October were not enrolled again and had not graduated from high school” (p. 60). Broken down by race/ethnicity, however, these statistics differ significantly: whites, 4.5%; blacks, 6.4%; and Hispanics, 12.4%. Because of their higher dropout rates, the particular needs of minority students need to be addressed in effective dropout prevention programs.

It is important to note that there are inherent difficulties in comparing dropout statistics. These statistics may vary greatly depending upon the institution that gathers them and for what purpose they are compiled. Analyses of current statistics are further complicated by the fact that there have been recent changes in the survey methodology, the editing procedures for school enrollment, and how the data are collected and reported (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1996).

Regardless of how they are gathered, the various statistics appear to be lower than at any point in the past; but ironically, there is more concern than ever about keeping students in school (Dorn, 1996). One cause for this concern may be the fact that although dropout rates have declined significantly for the general population, there is a portion of the population that has not shown any discernible progress:

Dropout rates remained constant for poor students and those who were less academically prepared. Thus whatever reforms may have helped reduce dropout rates overall, they have not reached the students who are conceivably in the greatest need. Moreover, the proportion of students with these risk factors that make them likely candidates for dropping out seems to be growing. (Kaufman et al., 1996, p. 3)

It appears that poverty may be the single greatest factor putting students at risk of dropping out. Minority students are more likely to be poor, therefore they represent the greatest at-risk population (Kaufman et al., 1996; NCES, 1997; West, 1991).

West (1991) defines an at-risk student as “any student in danger of dropping out before graduation.” Although individual differences vary greatly, there are some general causal factors that put students at risk. McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1985)

have divided these factors into three main categories: school related, family conditions, and economic conditions. School related issues are poor grades, truancy, and in-school delinquency; family conditions may include teenage pregnancy, single parent homes, and parents who did not complete school; and economic conditions that make it necessary for students to hold down jobs that require them to work long hours, while trying to keep up with school work, is also a strong predictor of students dropping out (McDill et al.).

Though national dropout rates are low, they are distributed unevenly across communities (Whelage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Ferdandez, 1989). The challenge now is for schools to find ways to help *all* students complete high school. To do so, schools must offer programs that appeal to and assist all segments of the school population. And they must do so under pressure to increase the academic rigor of their curricula.

Although much political awareness and concern has been expressed over the dropout “problem,” the initial concern was not for the at-risk population itself (Wells, 1990). Attention was focused “not so much on the number of dropouts as on their impact on the nation’s social and economic future” (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 1). Students who do not finish high school become a financial drain on society, with a future of low wage jobs or no jobs at all. Dropouts are more likely to collect unemployment and welfare benefits than high school graduates (Wehlage et al.; West, 1991). Over their lifetimes, warns West, each year’s class of dropouts will cost the government billions of dollars due to lost wages and foregone tax revenue.

This paper is concerned with dropout prevention programs aimed at keeping these students in school. The programs considered for this paper will not be for special populations, for example students with physical or developmental “special needs,” or those students whose violent or delinquent behavior necessitates setting them apart from the mainstream population. My goal in investigating literature on this topic will be to determine what have been shown to be effective strategies in dropout prevention programs.

Rationale

I first became interested in dropout prevention several years ago when my son began skipping classes in high school and had to repeat two semesters, one each in his sophomore and junior years. Although he was bright and had been placed in “gifted” programs in grade school, by the time he was a sophomore he had lost interest in school. He did graduate eventually, but only after much prodding and maneuvering on my part. I began to wonder why some students finish high school, and why some do not.

My interest in the dropout problem was renewed two years ago as I observed a high school program for at-risk students. The program was for students who did not have severe disciplinary problems, but nevertheless did not do well in the traditional classroom setting. Some of those students told me that had it not been for their participating in that program, they would not be in school. Watching this program in action stirred my interest in finding out more about dropout prevention programs that target at-risk students.

Learning which dropout prevention strategies that research has shown to be successful is important to me because state educational reforms that involve mastery testing for high school graduation could put some students—especially poor and minority students—at a greater risk than ever for dropping out of high school (McDill et al., 1985; Rumberger, 1987).

Researching this topic I found that there are those who question the value and equity of high school completion and its accompanying accreditation. Michelle Fine (1991) states that “a high school diploma reap[s] very different economic benefits according to its holder’s class, race/ethnicity, and gender” (p. xii). Dropouts are also blamed for the social ills of today’s society, and this is wrong (Fine).

MacLeod (1995) has also expressed grave concern regarding the poor, lower class portion of the population. He believes that the future of the poor is virtually predetermined by the socioeconomic conditions into which they are born, and that schools do nothing to address this problem. In fact, says MacLeod, “schools actually maintain and legitimize social inequality,” and educational reform “leaves the underlying structure of economic inequality untouched” (p. 262).

Sherman Dorn (1996), considers dropouts to be a “social construct,” and he points to obvious contradictions in our nation’s goals and policies regarding dropouts as evidence of this fact.

First, the dropout problem appeared despite improvements in the proportion of the population graduating from high school. Second, policies supposedly responding to the dropout problem were too small and isolated to have much influence on larger demographic trends. Third, the dominant construction of

the dropout problem omitted issues (such as racial disparities in education) that would have been sensible components of any analysis of school attrition.

(p. 3)

I have included these authors' opinions of the dropout problem because I believe it is necessary when looking at an issue to view it from every possible angle. Regardless of how the dropout situation is viewed, however, I found a consensus of opinion that there is a need to address the issue of students failing to complete high school. In today's market place a high school diploma is a minimum requirement for virtually every job, even those that require minimal skills.

During my teaching career I will assuredly encounter some students who are considering dropping out of school. Learning what the effective strategies are in dropout prevention programs will inform my teaching practices as to how to help them successfully finish high school. Classroom teachers are the first to notice the signs if a student is in danger of dropping out of school. Ideally, once a teacher has detected this, that particular student could be referred to a dropout prevention program. But the reality is, there are few of these programs available; they are costly and most school districts do not have the financial means to initiate and conduct them. By working together with school staff and counselors I can employ effective dropout prevention strategies in my classroom to help these students. As a teacher, my primary job will be to assist and motivate all students to successfully finish high school. Strategies that work for at-risk students could be used for everyone.

Today we take high school graduation for granted. It is a rite of passage, a task that our society deems necessary to turn adolescents into ideal citizens, the

producers and consumers of tomorrow. But high school graduation has not always been the norm. For “only since World War II has a majority of teenagers graduated from high school or a diploma become required for most jobs” (Dorn, 1996, p. 2). To better understand the phenomenon of the “dropout,” we must turn to the history of compulsory education in America.

A Historical View

Compulsory Education

The concept of *dropouts* would be incomprehensible if compulsory education laws had never been enacted. But it was not until compulsory school attendance was required of older children that conflicts arose, giving birth to the term. The first compulsory education law in America dates back to colonial times. In 1642 the Massachusetts Bay Colony required “the Select men of the Town” to teach their “Children and Apprentices” to read and write which would “enable them perfectly to read the English tongue and...Capital Lawes” (Shaw, 1892a, pp. 445-446). Five years later Massachusetts passed the Old Deluder Satan Law which required communities to establish and support schools (Spring, 1997).

Although it is tempting to project what transpired in New England onto the rest of colonial America, it is important to remember that there were significant regional differences. Most Massachusetts colonists were separatists, seeking to isolate themselves from the evils of a changing world. The European colonists who settled in Chesapeake, Virginia, and Carolina were more representative of the “dissent, diversity, individualism, and economic competition” that was happening in the old world in the first part of the seventeenth century (Urban & Waggoner, 1996, p. 15). Settlements from Chesapeake southward along the Atlantic coast followed the prevailing European precept that education was essentially a private matter. For the most part, parents taught their children or hired tutors to do so, but there were some exceptions. Members of the Church of England (Anglicans) were required to have their children receive basic instruction in religious matters from

ministers. Missionary societies established “charity schools” for indigent and poor children all along the eastern seaboard. Children could also learn a trade by serving an apprenticeship (Urban & Waggoner). But education in America remained essentially a private matter until after the Revolutionary War.

Education and the economy. Economic conditions in America changed after the Revolutionary War. No longer reliant on England for manufactured goods, American households became units of production. Children were needed to work in the fields or to otherwise contribute to the family’s income; they relied on their mothers for instruction or received none at all (Unger, 1996). There was occasional support for schools by local governments, but little action was taken to establish universal schooling. Those excluded from citizenship—women, Native Americans, and African Americans were left “essentially outside the scheme of things” (Urban & Waggoner, 1996, p. 92). For most, schooling outside the home remained an anomaly.

After 1820 “a new industrial system began to prevail” in New England (Shaw, 1892a, p. 447). Children began working in factories, and families relied on the meager wages their children earned. In factories, most children were deprived of any form of schooling. Some states passed laws similar to the 1836 Massachusetts law that prohibited manufacturing establishments to employ children under 15 years of age unless they had at least three months schooling per year (Shaw, 1892a). Some labor unions were thought to have backed compulsory education laws to prevent competition from child labor (Tyack, 1974). But these laws were hard to enforce (Katz, 1975; Shaw, 1892a; Unger, 1996; Urban & Waggoner, 1996).

By mid-nineteenth century, although most states had passed compulsory school attendance laws, no responsibility was placed on parents or employers for upholding the law. Fines could be imposed for violations, but no provision was made for enforcing them (Shaw, 1892a). Children *were* attending school, however, because their families voluntarily sent them. Early compulsory education laws, which usually stipulated twelve as the legal minimum age for terminating school, “did not result in increased attendance” (Troen, 1976, p. 240). Tyack (1974) concludes that the fact that most Americans sent their children to school without compulsion “demonstrated their faith in the value of formal education” (p. 68) Nevertheless, though school attendance increased dramatically in the second half of the nineteenth century, children remained the main source of cheap labor into the first two decades of the twentieth century (Troen; Tyack, 1974).

Educating freedmen. The Civil War ended slavery, but the South’s economic survival depended on the freedmen’s continued cheap labor. What had formerly been a slave society became a capitalist society with much of its workers “in virtual peonage” (Anderson, 1988). Sharecropping kept blacks in perpetual debt, financially dependent on planters (Bennet, 1984). Southerners remained opposed to educating blacks, just as they had been before the War. But efforts for educating freed black slaves began upon the heels of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 (Anderson; Butchart, 1980; Franklin & Moss, 1994).

Popular sentiment in pre-Civil War South had held that it was unwise to educate slaves, because “the more you cultivate the minds of slaves, the more unserviceable you make them” (Woodson, 1915, p. 9). This attitude was held by

most southern slave-holders who, for the most part, echoed the views of their aristocratic forbears. Some southerners criticized this view, however, arguing that “the education of slaves, if thoroughly religious and otherwise limited...created a bond between master and slave, and indeed, that the best-behaved slaves were those who could read” (Kaestle, 1976, pp. 185-186). But educated slaves instigated rebellions, and after 1820 laws were enacted that made teaching slaves a crime.

Although most slaves were illiterate, many had learned to read and write through various means. Sunday schools had taught “literary and moral instruction,” (Urban & Waggoner, 1996, p. 132); abolitionists, missionaries, and some slave masters had also taught slaves to read; and they learned clandestinely from each other (Anderson, 1988; Urban & Waggoner; Woodson, 1915).

Former slaves took the initiative in establishing their own schools during the Civil War (Spring, 1997). This was noted by educators who worked for the Freedman’s Bureau, a government agency established to give aid to freed slaves during Reconstruction (Spring). Reconstruction, in regard to teaching slaves to prepare them for free citizenship, started before the end of the Civil War (Butchart, 1980). Freedmen’s Aid Societies, both secular and evangelical, began to educate slaves. The philosophy behind this philanthropic movement was to change the culture of the freedmen and to assist in restructuring southern society by transplanting the northern school to the South, thereby “creating a free-labor class” (Butchart, p. 31). By 1870 the freedmen’s movement had established 4,239 schools for former slaves (Butchart). But in general ex-slaves preferred to send their children to many schools they had built themselves. Tyack (1974) notes that during the

nineteenth century “no group in the United States had a greater faith in the equalizing power of schooling or a clearer understanding of the democratic promise of public education than did black Americans” (p. 110). Because of the system of free schools they established, former slaves played “a central role in etching the idea of universal public education into southern state constitutional law” (Anderson, 1988, p. 19).

But ex-slaves’ initiative in establishing free schools presented a problem to the dominant class of whites—“the possibility of an emerging literate black working class in the midst of a largely illiterate poor white class” (Anderson, 1988, p. 27). Southern whites devised a way to reduce the burgeoning power of the freedmen—deprive them of the vote.

Jim Crow laws were enacted that circumvented the Fifteenth Amendment, disenfranchising blacks and many poor whites by means of poll taxes and literacy tests; southern blacks remained disenfranchised until well into the twentieth century (Anderson, 1988; Bennet, 1984; Butchart, 1980). These laws also called for strict segregation of the races. With blacks unable to vote, little tax money went to their schools. But in spite of inadequate money for buildings and teachers, free black schools proliferated. The illiteracy rate for southern blacks dropped from 95% in 1860 to 30% by 1910 (Anderson). Ultimately free black schools, poor as they were, sowed the seeds for the destruction of the southern “peculiar system of biracialism” (Ravitch, 1983, p. 118).

Industries came to the South in the early 1900s, and the need for black laborers diminished. Agricultural workers were displaced by machines (Cashman, 1991). Blacks moved to the cities and had access to better schools (Ravitch, 1983).

Literate blacks began to chafe against Jim Crow laws that had gradually done away with rights gained during Reconstruction: In 1883 the Supreme Court invalidated the Civil Rights Act of 1875; and in 1896 the Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld state laws requiring "separate but equal" accommodations for blacks. The way to defeat these laws, blacks decided, was through the courts (Bennet, 1984; Ravitch, 1983). In 1909 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded, and through this organization a campaign was launched to challenge segregation laws (Bennet; Ravitch).

The Great Depression of the 1930s reduced the number of jobs available, and unemployed whites competed with blacks for jobs "they would once have thought beneath them" (Cashman, 1991). Blacks across the country, particularly in the South, were reduced to even greater levels of poverty. The NAACP, threatened with extinction by lack of funds, joined with the Urban League and other groups to pool their resources. In 1934 the legal arm of the NAACP, headed first by Charles Houston and later Thurgood Marshall, began an assault on school segregation (Cashman; Franklin & Moss, 1994; Ravitch, 1983). They contended that racial discrimination violated the equal protection provision of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. The legal campaign culminated in the 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared state imposed school segregation unconstitutional (Bennet, 1984; Cashman; Ravitch). In deciding the *Brown* case, the Court had relied mainly on evidence presented by psychologists and sociologists regarding the detrimental effects of segregation on black school children

(Dye, 1971). Psychologists argued that segregating children by race provoked hostility in the dominated group, and caused personality damage to both groups of children (Spring, 1997).

Winning the *Brown* case was a major victory, but the war on school segregation had yet to be won. Implementation of desegregation was left to local school authorities. Southern white leaders, especially in the deep South, vehemently denounced the Court's decision; efforts to enforce it sometimes resulted in physical violence (Ravitch, 1983). Compulsory education laws now applied to blacks, but they wanted equity in education. Hard-fought battles waged another ten years, until Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VI of the Act denied federal financial assistance to all who refused to comply with desegregation requirements. Money talked, and "the threat of monetary loss did more to bring about desegregation than all of the previous actions of the federal courts" (Dye, 1971, p. 43).

Throughout the 1960s civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Roy Wilkins, and Malcom X continued to fight for equal rights. At last, in October of 1969 the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that school districts "must end racial segregation 'with all deliberate speed'" (McKissack & McKissack, 1987); and in 1971 the Court approved busing as a way to achieve racial balance in schools. With schools no longer segregated, equal education opportunity could become a reality.

Compulsory education and society. School attendance in the second half of the nineteenth century varied by gender and socioeconomic status. Altenbaugh,

Engel, and Martin (1995) found that during the 1870s in Lowell, Massachusetts, a greater percentage of boys than girls attended school. Between the ages of 10-13 “the vast majority of boys...remained in school and did not work, in contrast to girls of the same age” (p. 28). Parents thought that schooling was more important for boys, and girls were expected to work (Altenbaugh, et al.). More wealthy children than poor attended school because compulsory school attendance laws could be waived for parents who claimed to be poor (Troen, 1976).

Universal compulsory education meant that schools could no longer afford to be sectarian. If taxes were to be used to support schools, then Catholics and Protestants alike should be able to attend. This presented a problem for those who did not want to secularize schools. In a paper read before the Portland (Maine) Fraternity Club in 1875, I. Washburne (1877) argued that it was impractical to tax citizens for support of separate religious schools. By making education “strictly non-sectarian, and severely compulsory, it may be made universal” (p. 77). To Washburne, the prospect of diverting public monies to support sectarian schools was “fatal to our Republican system” (p. 77).

By 1890, with compulsory (and secular) education laws in effect in every state of the union, public attitudes toward compulsory education became more positive (Tyack, 1976). Little opposition to raising age levels of compulsory attendance was posed. And new laws, with provisions for enforcement, were more effective at keeping students in school. In 1892 William Shaw (1892b) proclaimed that “great progress has been made in bringing [child workers] into the schools, and in some communities truancy seems to have been practically done away with” (p.

131). Shaw also called for measures to help feed and clothe destitute children so that poverty would not bar them from their education. By 1900, most states held that public and parochial schools alike fell under compulsory education laws (Shaw, 1892b).

Overall attendance records of late nineteenth century reflected the general opinion that public schools were doing a good job (Tyack, 1976). The 1890 census reported that eight or nine children out of ten were attending school from age ten to fourteen. Even children from middle-class families spent a relatively brief period of time in school. In industrial states children usually started school earlier and ended earlier than in farm states (Tyack). Children usually began to drop out of school around age 12, and by age 16 less than 20 per cent were still enrolled (Troen, 1976). William Harris (1900), United States Commissioner of Education, reported in 1898 that “the typical child could expect to attend school for five years.” Harris and others considered this figure a sign of success, for educators and the general public at that time thought that “schools’ prime responsibility was to impart to students the requisite tools with which to continue their education on their own after leaving school” (Troen, p. 240). At this time the United States led the world in providing mass education (Tyack).

Early twentieth century America was rapidly becoming more industrialized; the population was shifting from rural to urban. Technologies began rendering obsolete many menial jobs youths had traditionally held. Additionally, as part of the general reform movement of the time, people began agitating for child labor laws that would remove children from factories and shops (Tyack, 1976; Urban & Waggoner,

1996). Children became the source of trouble when they were out of work and in the streets. One solution was to raise the age for compulsory school attendance from age 12 to 14 (Troen, 1976). Efforts to coerce children to stay in school longer began in earnest.

Initially, coercion was for the “deviant minority” whose very act of truancy proved they were most in need of schooling (Tyack, 1974). Many school officials and teachers voiced opposition to having disruptive hooligans and poorly trained “uncultured child[ren] of the factory” in their classrooms. Even so, “in the arguments of many advocates of coercive attendance, and even more so in the actions of the police and truant officers who rounded up the street arabs [sic], schooling became a form of preventive detention” (Tyack, 1974, p. 69).

By 1918 that the last of the 48 states had passed compulsory education laws (Unger, 1996). These laws required school attendance to the age of 14, which usually meant graduating from the eighth grade (Altenbaugh, et al., 1995). Hunt and Clawson (1975) characterize the conflict that resulted from the enforcement of these laws.

As a result of compulsory education laws, the schools inherited a problem. They were forced to assume the roles of caretaker and custodian. School became a place a youngster was compelled to attend. Some did not want to go to school. For them, for one reason or another, school was an unpleasant place to be. The schools on the other hand, were legally ordered to keep them. In spite of legislation, even of a primitive nature, and despite the

efforts of truant or attendance officers, the situation was ‘fluid’ and has remained so. (pp. 238-39)

Progressives and adolescents. Late nineteenth century America was a time of political and social reform. Referred to by historians as the Progressive Era, the reform movement lasted from approximately 1890 to the end of World War I. The progressive education movement was part of this general reform. During the progressive reform movement, the purpose of schooling shifted from the “moral virtue” of the common school movement to “economic betterment” (Urban & Waggoner, 1996). High schools became the “primary means of sorting individuals to meet the needs of the labor market” (Spring, 1997, p. 220).

The move toward progressive education began as a reaction to the strict formalism of traditional education, which progressives regarded as outdated (Tyack, 1974). Progressive educators focused on the “whole child,” with attention paid to children’s physical, emotional, and intellectual growth. David Tyack (1976) explains that “children and youth came to be seen as individuals with categorical needs: as patients requiring specialized medical care; as ‘delinquents’ needing particular treatment in the courts; and as students deserving elaborately differentiated schooling” (p. 64). Educators began to broaden the curriculum of schools to entice older pupils to stay in school.

As early as the 1890s schools had began offering manual training courses (Troen, 1976). In addition to the regular academic courses, students could choose from an increasing array of classes that prepared them for jobs; “schools became the surrogate for apprenticeship” (p. 246). “Comprehensive” high schools that offered

both vocational and academic courses became the norm (Troen). So successful was this trend toward keeping students in school that between 1910 and 1920 enrollments doubled (Troen).

Bureaucracies. The Progressive Era was a time of political reform, and part of that reform meant pressure to create a unified nation of good citizens (Troen, 1976; Urban & Waggoner, 1996). To make the system more efficient, education was becoming bureaucratized. School bureaucracies reflected a trend toward centralizing government across America.

The new compulsory school attendance laws had included provisions for strict enforcement. Enforcement of these laws, plus massive immigration and migration from farms to cities, all contributed to a huge increase in the size of urban schools. Administrative progressives saw in these circumstances a need to centralize; centralized schools could be run efficiently, like factories (Urban & Waggoner, 1996).

Administrative experts took over. "Schools grew in size, added tiers of officials, and became segmented into functional division" (Tyack, 1976, p. 74). Compulsory education laws created school bureaucracies that were required to keep count of their pupils in order to receive state funding (Troen, 1976; Tyack, 1976). Attendance experts developed elaborate means for reporting attendance. Their numbers increased as they became an indispensable part of school administrations, and by 1911 school attendance officers began their own professional organization (Tyack, 1974).

School administrators believed that students should learn that bureaucratic organization was necessary for functioning in a modern industrial society (Tyack, 1974). Spring (1997) says that the “mania that developed among...educators over student attendance and punctuality” demonstrated their desire to inculcate “organizational values” (p. 139). Graded schools became the norm. They were run by male superintendents and principals, with female teachers in the subordinate role (Spring; Urban & Waggoner, 1996).

According to Katz (1971), this division of labor “was the process of underlying social development” (p. 67). The hierarchical structure reflected society as a whole. To make the education “an attractive profession to men, ‘promotion within the ranks’ was necessary” (p. 69). The bureaucratic administrative model was advantageous to educators in their quest for “professionalism” (Katz).

Bureaucratization of education, along with increasing school enrollments, assured professional educators that their jobs were secure.

Compulsory education and immigrants. New technologies at the turn of the twentieth century caused the expansion of industries. Workers were attracted to the cities from rural America and from foreign countries. Immigrant workers, poor and illiterate for the most part, fled their homelands to come to America. These new immigrants had an unfamiliar culture. Eastern and southern European immigrants were “refugees of pogroms and poverty” and came from “areas of authoritarian rule, with religious ideas decidedly different from those of earlier arrivals” (Isser & Schwartz, 1985, p. 6). They also had lower standards of living and higher illiteracy rates (Isser & Schwartz).

From the 1870s to 1900 America's economy had been experiencing intermittent depression, and the "new" immigrants were viewed as a threat to American jobs. The popular press made much of this perceived threat and fanned already existing prejudices (Isser & Schwartz, 1985). An article in the August 1892 *Yale Review* referred to recent "vast numbers" of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe as "ignorant" and "unskilled" masses, who "crowded into filthy tenement-houses" (Walker, 1892). It was this "atmosphere of fear, together with concern for young children being forced to work in factories, [that accounted] in part for the wave of compulsory attendance laws that swept the country by the end of the nineteenth century" (Urban & Waggoner, 1996, p. 163).

Schools sought to acculturate the children of these immigrants by instilling in them American ideals. Although this effort toward Americanization was often "crude and chauvinistic," it was frequently sponsored by immigrants themselves. Most immigrants realized the value of learning English, while still holding onto their ethnic traditions (Ravitch, 1976). Spring (1997) asserts that "public schools became defenders of Anglo-American values with each new wave of immigrants" (p. 2), proposing that American values were forced onto immigrants against their will by the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture. In regard to this point of view, historian Julia Wrigley (1982) counters that

if it is true...that a social elite was able to impose schooling upon a reluctant population, this implies a great deal about the cohesiveness, farsightedness, and power of the elite group. And conversely, it implies the weakness and disorganization of the immigrant and working population which...was unable

to mount an effective challenge to the imposition of an alien set of cultural values. (p. 3)

For the most part, claim Isser and Schwartz (1985), progressive educators at the turn of the twentieth century “believed in the theory of the ‘melting pot’ and felt the schools should be the avenue of acculturation for the young...and improve the lot and life of everyone” (pp. 6-7). Diametrically opposed to this way of viewing immigrants were the Social Darwinists who espoused racist views and perpetuated vicious stereotypes. Most of the paranoia over immigrants came from a vocal minority. John Higham (1994) concludes that “the concept of a *new* [italics added] immigration would seem to have been largely the work of cultivated minds rather than a simple derivative of popular instincts” (p. 70). *All* immigrants, say Isser & Schwartz, suffered alienation, discrimination, and hostility from older generations of Americans.

Regardless of the motivation for educating immigrant children, there was a push to get them into schools and keep them there. Their attendance became a focus of school social workers in the first part of the twentieth century.

School social workers. Beginning in 1906, social workers from settlement houses helped to enforce compulsory school attendance laws (Allen-Meares, 1988; Costin, 1987; Radin, 1989). Part of the “impulse of the progressive movement,” social workers brought to schools the programs that had originated in settlement houses (Ravitch, 1974). Creating a bridge between home and school, the school social worker impressed upon parents, especially recent immigrants, the importance of school attendance for their children (Costin). These social workers, first known as

visiting teachers, were also acting in response to “new knowledge about individual differences among children and their capacities to respond to improved conditions, and the realization of the strategic place of school and education in the lives of children and youths” (Costin, p. 539). Visiting teachers worked with school psychologists to obtain family and developmental histories of children, and then helped to implement the psychologists’ recommendations for treatment (Allen-Meares).

By 1918 all states had compulsory school attendance laws, and visiting teachers stressed to parents that it was illegal to keep their children out of school, even if the family needed their wages (Radin, 1989). Lack of enforcement for these laws created the need for school attendance officers—another term for social workers (Allen-Meares, 1988). Attendance officers played the role of “clarifying and sensitizing the school personnel to the effects that children’s out-of-school lives had on them” (Allen-Meares, p. 403). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, school attendance officers continued to help schools and children adapt to each other (Radin; Allen-Meares).

During the 1930s the work of school social workers evolved into casework, which focused on the personal needs of the individual child (Costin, 1987). This emphasis on the individual continued until the 1960s, at which time social workers turned their attention to “schools as a social system” (Costin). Schools came under attack, and were seen by many to create problems in students. Social workers began group work with parents and students, attempting to rectify inequities that existed in the system (Allen-Meares, 1988; Costin). This “ecological perspective” included

discussions about the phenomenon of school dropouts (Allen-Meares, 1988). Emphasis on systems remained the focus in the 1970s, and greater attention was paid to students' rights with regard to suspension, expulsion, and tracking (Costin). The focus on higher academic standards in the 1980s caused social workers to expand their roles. They began moving "toward an approach more indicative of an emphasis on facilitating home-school-community relations and providing educationally oriented counseling for a child and parents" (Costin, p. 541).

With current emphasis on keeping students in school, school psychologists are counseling at-risk students to prevent them from dropping out of school. Counseling is one of many dropout prevention strategies that research has shown to be effective (Wirth-Bond, Coyne, & Adams, 1991).

Dropouts

Although American school administrators had long been frustrated over "school leavers," it wasn't until 1900 that the actual term *dropout* was coined. In that year James Greenwood, Kansas City school Superintendent, delivered a speech to the National Education Association in which he gave the statistics on the number of "dropouts" from fifteen schools and their reasons for dropping out of high school in their first year (Altenbaugh et al., 1995). Age appeared to be the biggest factor. It was customary for schools to "retard" students, which meant that they were held back, regardless of their age, if they did not pass their courses. It took on average ten years to complete eight years of schooling (Ayers, 1909).

Concern over school leavers prompted a study in 1909 by Leonard Ayers for the Russell Sage Foundation. Ayers wanted to find out why some students were

“unable to keep up with their fellows” (p. xiii). Significant among his findings were that schools were better suited for girls than boys (because more girls graduated from eighth grade) and that courses were too difficult and “not fitted for the average child” (p. 218). Ayres thought it was unconscionable for schools to continue with practices that produced school-leavers because all students had the capability to learn. Schools were like factories; when not “economically organized,” they were inefficient. To ensure maximum efficiency, one needed to determine the number of students beginning each school year in order to ascertain how many remained in school to the final grade. Finding this number would show the “relation of the finished product to the raw material” (p. 176). To retain more students, schools needed to have a curriculum “attuned to the needs of a new population and a new industrial order” (Kliebard, 1992, p. 88). The era of social and industrial reforms had swept school reform into its wake.

But it was not the curriculum of schools alone that caused early school leaving. Schools did not offer a safe and friendly environment. They were “joyless places that subjected children to various forms of corporal punishment and ridicule” (Whelage et al., 1989, p. 31). Many children preferred to work in dangerous factories rather than put up with the mistreatment meted out by tyrannical school teachers (Kliebard, 1992). It seems that working in a factory was not always an economic necessity; “to some extent, the schools around the turn of the century drove them there” (Kliebard, p. 6). In 1910, elementary students dropped out of school at a rate of 50 per cent before finishing the eighth grade (Gulick, 1910).

Dr. Luther Gulick (1910), using data collected in Ayers's earlier study, concluded that the high rate of "school failures" in New York City was due in part to the fact that there were "six-year laws" for "eight-year courses." Students were beginning school as late as nine or ten years old, then dropping out before completing the eighth grade. It was a "biological fact" that children needed to leave school by age fourteen or fifteen. "When the wings of the nestling are grown it leaves the nest....The same kind of force drives children out of the elementary school soon after they are fourteen," argued Gulick (pp. 11-12). The doctor's solution to increase the percentage of students completing all eight grades was to increase medical inspections in schools, pass laws that required school entrance by age six, and to adapt a course of study to "the average" so that "as many will go faster as go slower than the mass" (p. 28). He was concerned that the schools were best suited to the "unusually bright" student, not the "abilities of the average pupil" (p. 25). Average students were not going on to secondary schools at this time, and schools needed to take this into consideration.

High schools met the challenge of increasing their enrollments by offering vocational training. Courses were offered which would enable pupils to earn a better living than had their parents. Companies began contracting with schools; students were trained in the factory during the day, and attending school at night (Altenbaugh et al., 1995). For the economy to grow, companies needed educated workers who could do their jobs efficiently. Vocational training offered social mobility to the poor. After World War I, education had a new image:

Through schooling, social groups formerly caught in the jaws of grinding poverty could lift themselves out of the slums and into respectable working-class status. Working-class children could hope to enter white-collar occupations on the basis of training received at public expense. (Angus, 1965, p. 49)

With the Great Depression came changes in how America's schools were perceived. Angus (1965) describes schools as a place of refuge where "thousands of children went...simply because there was no place else to go. The schoolroom was warm, if not necessarily friendly, and often the school lunch...was the closest thing to a complete meal the child received" (p. 65). Schools once again changed the curriculum to meet the needs of the time. Assuming unemployment was inevitable for youth, schools offered "life education" courses such as "personal services, diet, etiquette, and dating" (Altenbaugh, et al., 1995, p. 40). High schools had increasingly become institutions which trained students to become good citizens (Altenbaugh, et al.).

Eckert and Marshall (1939) conducted a study to determine whether high schools were doing all that could be done to encourage more students to finish. Results of this study showed that schools needed to become more attuned to students' needs, because

the characteristic American belief in the efficacy of education, reinforced by the limited opportunity which industry holds today for immature workers, has resulted in a steady lengthening of the period of training. As a result, the

secondary school is increasingly being committed to the task of educating *all adolescents* [italics added]. (p. 15)

Evidence from their study also caused Eckert and Marshall to conclude that students who did not finish high school were not “socially competent” to take their place in society. Early leaving for most was due to the narrow curriculum which favored the “college-bound.” In addition, schools favored those students from higher social and economic levels. The researchers noted that “a marked correlation exist[ed] between privilege and opportunity, with the result that the economic disadvantage of withdrawing pupils [was] intensified by notably ineffective school preparation” (p. 17). One remedy for this was for school counselors to get to know their students’ strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations, some of which were out of touch with reality. Only by getting to know their students could any “individualized treatment” take place. Wehlage, et al. (1989) point to the fact that

many of the questions, observations and conclusions offered by Eckert and Marshall have a contemporary ring to them. Many students today view the school as failing to show concern for their problems and having little knowledge about the needs and talents of individuals. A persistent charge holds that some professionals are insensitive to the backgrounds of lower-class and minority students. (p. 34)

When World War II began, schools again had to change their curricula to meet the changing social conditions. Job opportunities opened up for youth that had not existed during the Depression. Schools began emphasizing vocational courses in an effort to keep students in school (Altenbaugh et al., 1995). In spite of efforts to

retain students, many students left school to take advantage of available jobs.

Because of this, high school populations declined. Angus (1965) reported that from 1940 to 1943 high school enrollments went down by almost one million.

After World War II high school enrollments swelled, and there was a change in attitude toward those students who failed to graduate. The Cold War was on and with it came an increased demand for skilled laborers (Dorn, 1996). To many, “attrition became a threat to national security” (Dorn, p. 61). While the original intent of the call for technically skilled workers was aimed at training the elite, some educators read it as applying to all students (Dorn). This point in history is seen by Dorn as a time when the dichotomy of the goal of education emerged. As he explains,

 this compromise between skilled training and comprehensive education was fraught with tension between seeing schools as a place to identify the gifted and seeing schools primarily as a place to socialize young citizens.

 The dropout problem could conceivably have served as a floating metaphor for this conflict between sorting and socializing. (p. 62)

At this time also, researchers began attributing dropping out of school to reasons other than the schools; by the end of the 1950s there was increased interest in the dropouts themselves (Dorn, 1996). With increased enrollments, high schools became the inevitable institutions for adolescents from which there was no escape.

Graduation rates exceeded 50 per cent in the 1950s and by the 1960s reached 75 per cent (Altenbaugh, et al., 1995).

By the 1960s high school completion was an accepted norm. Because schools had become so successful in attracting and holding students, dropouts were “characterized as deviants” (Whelage, et al., 1989). Concerns over school leaving became focused on identifying attrition as a social problem. Studies such as one published in 1962, *The Drop-Outs* (Lichter, Rapien, Seibert, & Sklansky), give evidence to the trend of blaming dropouts for their own shortcomings. These authors hypothesized that “intensive individualized treatment could effect a better emotional, social, and educational adjustment for drop-out or potential drop-out students” (p. 3). Dropouts were children with personality disorders, some of whom needed “a highly structured and controlled environment” (Lichter et al., p. 265). A few years later, Cervantes (1965) published an even stronger indictment of dropouts. In a particularly vitriolic account, he claimed to have discovered a new and “variant breed of teenagers” who were part of an “army” that would “have but the slightest chance of integration within the economy of a free society” (pp. 1, 5). Attempting to determine the reasons and remedies for dropouts, Cervantes espoused social capital theories. He predicted dire consequences by which the “band of delinquents,” the “proletariat of tomorrow,” could bring down the economy of the nation. Recommendations by Cervantes’s study included rehabilitating the student and his family, preferably before entering school. Cervantes also made suggestions for altering the curriculum, such as tracking students and offering occupational courses “for those whose aptitudes suit them for unskilled labor” (p. 208). So at a time when adolescents were graduating at record numbers, instead of celebrating their successes, educators were fixated on their “failures.” This method of blaming

the victim, say Wehlage et al., served to “deflect attention away from the problems in the school itself” (p. 35).

Sherman Dorn (1996) explains that during the 1960s several themes developed in the numerous articles written about dropouts. These themes involved “equating the dropout problem with unemployment, linking it with urban poverty, using the language of juvenile delinquency, assuming that dropouts were male, or asserting psychological defects were a primary distinction between dropouts and graduates” (p. 68). Preconceived notions about teenagers, mostly negative, became part of the “flexible” literature on dropouts (Dorn). As noted in the introduction to this paper, dropouts became the scapegoats on which to blame all the ills of society. The focus of concern over dropouts was how they would adversely affect the economic and social future of the nation.

Concerns regarding unemployment, poverty, juvenile delinquency, and personality disorders had been voiced earlier, but by 1960 they became commonly identified as part of a specific problem called “dropping out.” By 1965 school districts across the state were instituting programs designed for dropouts that offered counseling for the maladjusted, and work-experience programs for the academically challenged (Dorn, 1996). These programs, however, operated on a “social construction” that was “irrational” in three ways:

First, the perceived crisis was not in response to a real demographic trend; graduation became more, not less, prevalent in the middle twentieth century....Second, the perceived crisis did not lead to effective or even

widespread policy changes. Most dropout programs were too small and isolated.... Third, the public debate over dropping out omitted issues and perspectives that a rational discussion should have included. (Dorn, p. 99)

Whatever their intent, these programs were largely unsuccessful. Graduation rates continued to rise, not because of the minimal and transitory dropout programs, but because the “same factors that had pushed high school attendance up since the late nineteenth century—the common desire for education and the credential value of high school attendance and diplomas—kept operating” (Dorn, p. 98). This increased desire for credentials continued into the following decade.

The first dropout prevention programs utilized the school social worker and vocational program structures that were already in place. Counseling and work-experience programs were recommended to help potential dropouts adjust to the demands of school and work (Dorn, 1996).

During the 1970s, interest waned considerably regarding dropouts; other issues superseded the problem (Dorn, 1996). But by the 1980s, interest in dropout prevention returned. Tied to education in general, it became a political issue (Dorn; Kaufman et al., West, 1991). One catalyst for sparking this political interest in dropouts was the report issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) that called for stricter academic standards in schools. The report responded to a movement to apply higher standards to graduation and promotion. The issue of equity, first addressed in the 1960s, became a focus of attention once again as a result of raising requirements for graduation. Fine (1991) sees dropouts as symptomatic of inequities across the broader spectrum of American society:

Dramatically different patterns of dropping out by social class, race, ethnicity, gender, and disability characterize U.S. public schools. The patterns stand as evidence that the promise of equal opportunity is subverted institutionally by the guarantee of unequal educational outcomes. Students who begin with the greatest economic disadvantages receive the least enriching educations and end up with fewer, less valuable, and historically deflating diplomas. (p. 26)

Studies in the 1980s also began to shift their direction “toward school effectiveness rather than an exclusive focus on student characteristics” (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 23). An important part of that effectiveness was centered on balancing equity and excellence issues. One report, *America’s Shame, America’s Hope* (Smith & Lincoln, 1988), called for changes that would “marry the equity conditions of the 1970s with the Excellence-in-Education concerns of the 1980s” by educating students in such a way that even those beyond the “advantaged ones in the front rows” could be reached (p. 6). McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1985) expressed concern over “a number of commission reports” that called for raising standards. Included in their paper were concerns regarding potential dropouts. Studies had “demonstrated how student perceptions of school performance standards as unattainable led to various forms of student disengagement from high school, including apathy, participation in negative activities, and absenteeism,” they cautioned (p. 426). These researchers feared that because the commissions were “insensitive to issues of educational equity,” the reform movement could have “the unintended consequences of increasing dropout rates” (p. 416).

With the renewed concern over dropouts came an increase in dropout prevention programs. The federal government called for schools to create programs (Dorn, 1996) that would “stem the flow of dropouts from America’s schools” (Wehlage, et al., 1989). These programs were as varied as the views of those who instituted them. As was the case in the 1960s, those who believed that dropouts lacked something in their psychological make-up thought individual or group counseling was the answer; those who believed that a work ethic needed to be instilled in at-risk youth recommended vocational or school-to-work programs; and those who believed that schools themselves needed reforming called for policy changes and a restructuring of schools (Dorn).

The impetus for dropout programs and the philosophies behind them have continued from the 1980s into the 1990s. Like the goals that prompted them, these programs sometimes seem at odds with each other. Torn between the conservative “urge to select graduates and the [liberal] urge to socialize everyone” (Dorn, 1996, p. 5), dropout programs continue to be more of a political lip service than an integral part of schooling.

Researchers continue to study these programs, but the challenge is to find out which ones produce the best results for the greatest number. Students in danger of dropping out of school do not always fit the usual “at-risk” profile. Some students are at risk simply because they are not motivated to finish school. Wells (1990) found little difference between the academic ability and intelligence level between those students who drop out and those who graduate but do not go on to college. Even students who have the potential to graduate and go on to college can become

dropouts. Roberston (1993) says that gifted and talented students have essentially the same dropout rate as do the rest of the so-called normal population. Although they have the potential to finish school, they are disillusioned and lack the motivation to do so (p. 62). Because these students do not conform to the usual dropout profile they are hard to identify. This emphasizes the need for dropout prevention programs to include many methods that address and appeal to a broad population.

Related Research

Although the main focus of this paper is on direct intervention methods that prevent students from dropping out of school, there is additional research worth mentioning. While many researchers continued to look at reasons for school leaving within the students themselves, numerous others (Baker & Sansone, 1990; Eineder & Bishop, 1997; McNeal, 1997; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987) shifted their focus of research onto the schools—school constructs, policies and programs. Other research has been directed at investigating how adolescents' peer relationships affect their decisions to drop out of school.

School structures. Pittman and Haughwout (1987), using data from the *High School and Beyond (HS&B)* study by the National Center of Educational Statistics, conducted a study to determine whether high school size has an influence on dropout rates. Results of their study showed that there was a slight (.31) correlation between the two, which they concluded could have a *potential* influence on dropout rates. Pittman and Haughwout hypothesized that school size is related to dropout rate due mainly to the effect on the school's environment rather than any other factor. To these researchers, their findings contradicted the "predominant view" and assumption

that increasing student numbers increased curricular offerings and academic facilities, thereby creating a “more educationally responsive environment” that would increase retention (p. 339). Pittman and Haughwout believe it is the “climate” of schools, rather than program diversity, that keeps students in school. Morgan and Alwin (1980) agree that size matters in schools, having found that there is more of a sense of community in smaller schools which leads to a feeling of inclusion.

A sense of community could also be attained with block scheduling of classes. Eineder and Bishop (1997) conducted a year-long study of a high school which had recently switched to block scheduling. Comparing the academic performance of eleventh and twelfth graders to the past year, they found that “these students had achieved a 24 percent increase in the number of A’s and a 15 percent decrease in the number of F’s” (p. 47). Attendance also increased significantly, and the percentage of dropouts decreased slightly.

With block scheduling there are only four classes each day, as opposed to six classes in traditional scheduling. Eineder and Bishop (1997) believe that because there are less class changes during the day there is less opportunity for students to misbehave; transition times, when the school population is in the halls, are when most disruptive behavior occurs. With the implementation of block scheduling in this particular school, there was a significant decrease in discipline referrals, tardy referrals, and suspensions. Two important advantages that Eineder and Bishop noted regarding block scheduling are: Teachers and students have a smaller load of work, more quality time, and improved relationships; and because of increased time, teachers are able to complete a wider variety of projects.

While not a definitive study, as these researchers note, there is sufficient evidence to merit further study regarding block scheduling as a way to reduce dropouts. More time with teachers could mean more time for cooperative learning, which has been found to promote positive relationships and improved achievement (Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989). But block scheduling could present problems in addition to its benefits. Increased time with at-risk students may require additional support for teachers, say Mei and Others (1990). Teachers can be overwhelmed with the extra work needed to keep these students interested, therefore “more supportive consultation” is needed to attract teachers to these programs (p. 35).

Baker and Sansone (1990) were also concerned as to how schools themselves might influence dropout rates. Interested in the impact of school structures on students, this research team examined the effects of the staffing committee of a large urban high school. The committee handled referrals of students considered at risk of dropping out. There were numerous interventions from which committee members could choose: “individual accommodations, available school-level structures, available district-level structures, and available community-level structures” (p. 184). After studying the committee Baker and Sansone found that the interventions used for 70 students over a three month period in 1987 resulted in 55% of those students still attending school the following year.

While having in-school staff meetings that involve teachers, administrators, and counselors is undoubtedly a good idea, it could be that it was not the committee itself that was responsible for the reduction in dropouts, but the interventions that were implemented.

McNeal (1997) wanted to find out how certain elements of school structures affect dropout rates. Disagreeing with McDill et al.'s (1988) earlier study, McNeal found that raising academic standards does not significantly affect dropping out. Analyzing data from the *HS&B* study, McNeal (1997) sought to answer definitively what the role of the school is in creating dropouts. Specifically, he examined the “impact of the school structural (size, pupil/teacher ratio, specialization, and teacher intensity) and contextual (school climate, academic emphasis, and social milieu) elements” on the likelihood of a student dropping out (p. 210-211). Results of the study showed that school structures such as a school's emphasis on academic achievement and its focus on teaching (student/teacher ratio) do not have a significant effect on dropping out. However, McNeal believes that these factors in addition to other at-risk characteristics such as being a minority, low socioeconomic status, having failed one or more grades, etc., have a cumulative effect on a student's desire to leave school.

Peer relationships. Turning from school structures, Kaplan, Peck, and Kaplan (1997) and Walters and Bowen (1997) focused on the effects of peer relationships on at-risk adolescents. Both of these studies identify academic failure as an important reason for students dropping out of school. Students who experience continued academic failure feel discouraged, perceiving little interest, caring, or acceptance from teachers (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

Walters and Bowen (1997) compiled data from a questionnaire administered to a large group of at-risk middle and high school students who were enrolled in dropout prevention programs. The results of their study show that acceptance by

peers “made a statistically significant and unique contribution” in assessing school-related attitudes (p. 423), but only an indirect influence on academic performance. Overall, say Walters and Bowen, peer group acceptance is important because a sense of belonging not only helps students avoid getting into trouble, but keeps them from dropping out. Because of this, Walters and Bowen caution that schools must avoid strict policies that restrict students’ participation in activities that involve interaction with peers. Given this warning, it is clear that these researchers regard peers as exemplary students who exert only positive influences on their companions.

For many students, peers who exhibit negative behavior could have deleterious effects (Kaplan et al., 1997). The exploratory study of Kaplan et al. found that association with deviant peers was partially to blame for academic failure. Other significant factors influencing dropout behavior were perceived rejection by peers and low motivation. Low motivation, they found, was directly affected by earlier academic failure.

These two studies place emphasis on the fact that adolescents can be significantly affected by peer relationships, and because of this it is important to channel students into activities that build relationships while offering guidelines and supervision. Walters and Bowen (1997) note the positive influence of extracurricular activities, something that McNeal (1995) has researched.

McNeal (1995) claims that a student’s participation in extracurricular activities reduces the chances that he or she will drop out of school. Using data taken from the 1980 *HS&B* study, McNeal found that although all extracurricular activities result in some positive effects on students, only athletics and fine arts

significantly reduce dropout rates. Participation in other activities such as vocational or academic clubs has no significant effect.

Inferences can be drawn from this study that point to the amount of time spent on an extracurricular activity rather than the specific activity. McNeal (1995) tentatively concludes that the effects of athletics and fine arts activities may be more “integrating because of frequent interaction with peers and a more time-intensive commitment” (p. 76).

Although research on extraneous variables that influence students’ decisions to drop out of school is informative, it does not involve the direct interventions in dropout programs that are the main focus of this paper. In the next chapter I review research literature on dropout prevention strategies that turn the focus away from outside influences back to the potential dropouts themselves.

A Review of the Literature

The previous chapters of this paper highlighted reasons for my interest in dropout prevention strategies, and the historical foundations that led to the “dropout problem.” The historical section also noted research that investigated variables related to dropout prevention. In this section I review research that focuses on dropout prevention interventions. This critical review, though by no means comprehensive, points to some promising ways to help keep students in school. The literature review does not investigate strategies directly aimed at specific minority populations. There is no single minority experience. To investigate individual strategies that focus solely on minorities is outside the scope of this paper. The research included here, however, encompasses a wide range of strategies that could be of help to all students in danger of dropping out of school, regardless of their backgrounds.

Early Intervention

Intervention at an early age is often crucial in order to prevent students from dropping out of school. Smith (1997) reported “lasting results” for a program that provides support for middle and junior high students transitioning into high school. Using data from the *National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS)* of 1988, 1990, and 1992, Smith examined records of a random sample of over 7,000 eighth grade students. Follow-up surveys were taken four years later to identify students who were no longer in school. From among the middle-grade schools included in the study, a possibility of thirteen transition programs were available. Smith grouped the programs according to target audience—parent, student, or school staff.

From this grouping, a school was identified as having a full transition program if it offered programs involving all three groups in the process of making this critical transition. Schools that provided programs targeting only one or two of these groups were identified as having a partial transition program in place. The contrast in both cases was with schools that offered no transition programs. (p. 146)

One important component of both the full and partial transition programs was high school counselors meeting with eighth-graders. The biggest difference between the full and partial programs was the percentage of methods that targeted parents and staff. For example, in 78% of the schools with full transition programs parents were allowed to visit the high schools, whereas this was permitted in only 35% of the schools with partial programs. Adult support for the transition process was generally the main difference between these groups of schools.

Results of the study showed that full transition programs produced a 20% reduction in the dropout rate; partial programs showed no statistical significance. Students in full transition programs also exhibited a slightly higher GPA. In addition to finding the efficacy of transition programs, Smith (1997) notes some “corollary effects” in middle schools.

Although stand-alone middle schools were originally designed to increase student retention, the national data suggest that elementary schools—schools that keep students in one building for most or all of their early schooling through the eighth grade—do a better job at keeping students actively involved in school as evidenced by lower subsequent dropout rates. (p. 149)

Smith concluded that students who transition in large groups have a greater chance of getting lost, “ultimately opting out of the schooling environment” (p. 149). This conclusion is in line with Pittman and Haughwaut’s (1987) earlier study that found that smaller schools build a sense of community. Another study in 1987 by Miller, Leinhardt, and Zigmmond agreed with Smith’s findings, advising accommodation and “integration into the fabric of school life” (p. 466) as a means to keep students from dropping out.

Community Service

Delaney and Corbett (1994) studied a strategy in a dropout prevention program intended to boost students’ “academic self-esteem” (p. 12). Students Serving Students is a program that gives at-risk students an opportunity to help students with severe disabilities. In helping out these students with limited abilities, the at-risk students gain self-respect, improve their academic ability, and make a valuable contribution to their community. The researchers hypothesized that improving at-risk students’ self-esteem and academic ability motivates them stay in school.

Two mornings a week a group of students enrolled in a dropout prevention program helped students in the special school. Their duties ranged from helping dress the disabled students to interacting in social events with them. The program began in February 1993 and lasted until the end of the school year.

The researchers chose as a comparison group a pre-algebra class that was similar in size (14) to the at-risk class (9), with students of approximately the same age and ability. Comparing the two groups’ before and after grades, Delaney and

Corbett (1994) reported that “the dropout prevention students’ class GPA rose from 76.4 to 80.7 while the pre-algebra students’ class GPA dropped from 81.3 to 81.0” (p. 13). This means that while the at-risk students’ grade point average rose over 4 percent, the control groups’ grade point average stayed relatively the same. The at-risk group’s self-concept also rose significantly over that of the pre-algebra group.

This study had a population size too small from which to draw any generalizations, and was conducted over a very short period of time. It is possible that over a longer period of time the at-risk students may have become bored or burnt out. The program seems to have possibilities, though. Giving students deemed at-risk an opportunity to help those who are less fortunate seems to be a win-win situation. A program such as this is keeping in line with the trend toward schools requiring students to perform community service in order to graduate. The implications to include community service in a dropout prevention program are strong, and may well be a way for schools to help students at risk find reasons to stay in school (Keith, 1994). Jones (1996) recommends that schools work with community based organizations because they have a vested interest in the community. These companies could also supply the much needed funding that dropout prevention programs find in short supply.

Vocational Programs

Often dropout prevention programs combine vocational training and academic instruction. Turner (1993), Stern, Dayton, Paik, Weisberg, and Evans (1988), and Bauer and Michael (1993) conducted research on some of these programs that showed promising results.

Jeannine Turner (1993) evaluated the Austin (Texas) Youth River Watch program from April of 1992 through June of 1993. This program involved 27 at-risk minority students working with nine student mentors to monitor the water quality of the lower Colorado River. The purpose of the program was threefold:

1. To improve the water quality of the Colorado River.
2. To reduce the dropout rate of students in the high...schools of Austin through positive role model interaction, and
3. To increase the participation of minority students in critical environmental issues and in technical careers that require understanding of science and mathematics. (p. 2)

Eleventh and twelfth grade “mentors” who were academically successful and knowledgeable about river water monitoring were hired to work with the ninth and tenth grade “trainees,” tutoring them in math in science for at least two hours per week. Both trainees and mentors were paid for the work they performed. Teachers, “trained in river water monitoring, would supervise the mentor/trainee teams and would give weekly monitoring data...to the program coordinator” (p. 3).

Quantitative data were collected by Turner (1993) from the school district’s student data files and student rosters. Qualitative data were obtained through interviews with program personnel. Additionally, questionnaires “provided student perceptions of program benefits and of the effect of their participation” (p. 1).

Results of data analysis for student retention were encouraging. When compared to all other high school students in the district, fewer Austin Youth River Watch program students dropped out of school than predicted, and none of the program

students were recommended to be retained after their 1992-93 grade level. Students also received recognition by the city of Austin for performing a “valuable service to the community” by discovering and reporting a sewage leak (p. 1).

The individual help that the at-risk students received by peer mentors appears to have helped keep these students in school. Their service to the community bolstered their self-esteem, which Delaney and Corbett (1994) have also reported.

What is not evident from this research is to what extent payment for their services kept students in the program. It would be interesting to learn how much both the trainees and mentors were paid. However, this program may have worked because it took students out of the classroom and made them feel they were doing something useful for their community. It also gave them hands-on, practical experience in work that required them to apply what they learned in science.

Stern et al. (1988) reported results of a three year study (1985-87) of schools that combined vocational and academic courses. Results indicated that students in the dropout prevention program earned higher grades and compiled more credits than a comparison group. Along with Mertens (1982), these researchers believe that vocational courses keep students from dropping out of school.

Stern et al. (1988) conducted a study of ten schools that implemented the California Peninsula model, a program that combines technical instruction with core academics. These programs were schools within schools that enrolled at-risk students grades 10-12.

Academy students at each grade level take some or most of their classes together, including English, math, science, and a lab or shop class. Academy

teachers work together to coordinate curriculum. Each academy focuses on a particular occupational sector such as the health industry or computer-related occupations....Representatives of local employers in the relevant occupational field participate in several ways, including one-to-one relationships as students' mentors. (p. 162)

Students elected to be in the academy programs or were selected to take part by their teachers, and all were considered at-risk. The combined number of academy students in the ten participating schools averaged around 360 for the three year period. The comparison groups, chosen from the same schools, averaged around 470. Selection of control group students was made by "combing the school rosters for students whose attendance, credits, grades and standardized test scores in the previous year most closely resembling those of the Academy students" (p. 164). Additionally, attempts were made to match age, race or ethnicity, and gender of participants. The study followed the at-risk and comparison cohorts over a two year period.

A comparison analysis was made of combined data from both Academy and comparison group students for attendance, credits earned, grade point average, and dropout probability. Stern et al. (1988) reported statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) in program participants' academic achievement for all nine of the sites that reported. (One school did not follow the academic model's strict guidelines and was therefore excluded from the study.) The researchers admitted that their data showed that Academy programs are more successful in helping students bring up their grades than they are in keeping students in school. However, in eight of the ten sites that

reported dropout statistics, the dropout rate was higher for the comparison group than among the academy students.

There is some positive evidence within this study that could help future dropout prevention programs. Stern et al. (1988) reported that the small numbers of at-risk students in the academy programs (20-30) took nearly all of their classes together. The small class size could produce the sense of cohesiveness in smaller schools which Pittman and Haughwout (1987) and Morgan and Alwin (1980) say is missing in large schools. Additionally, a combination of academic and vocational programs are in line with today's trend toward interdisciplinary programs which speak to multiple learning styles and intelligences. But students who are set apart, as in the school-within-school type of program, are always in danger of being stigmatized. These students, the greatest percentage of whom are socioeconomically disadvantaged (Kaufman, et al.; West, 1991), are probably already traumatized by their living conditions. This is something that needs to be weighed against the overall benefits students gain by being part of a small, cohesive unit.

Project Success is a vocational education program designed to help ninth and tenth grade at-risk students finish high school and obtain meaningful employment (Bauer & Michael, 1993). The program helps students gain vocational skills and remediates individual deficiencies in basic academic skills. Two main goals of this program are to improve attendance and to retain 85-90% of students throughout the year.

The Success team of interdisciplinary teachers consists of one English teacher, one math teacher, four vocational teachers, and one paraprofessional. The

paraprofessional is assigned to each Project Success class, which does not exceed 20 students. Classes follow a block schedule for English, math, and vocational skills, and the Project Success class; students attend mainstream classes for the remainder of the day. Project Success emphasizes developing positive study skills, and uses “consistent positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior and improved class work” (p. 4). Life adjustment and career seeking skills, psychological and social needs, and vocational skills are all addressed in the program. Students who were “economically disadvantaged, scored below the 25th percentile on a standardized test, received a grade of ‘D’ or below in a vocational class, and [in] need [of] support services” could take part in the program, but participation was voluntary.

Bauer and Michael (1993) evaluated the results of this program for the academic years 1990-91 and 1991-92. These researchers claimed to have had difficulty in obtaining a comparison group, so they used the single group design. To obtain quantitative data from this basic single group, the researchers employed a pre- and post-test design. Data relevant to the program objectives were available on program participants prior to their entry into the program and upon completion of the first year of the program. Qualitative data were also obtained by interviews with teachers and administrators, and through student writings.

Attendance data were obtained from office records and analyzed. Between 1989 and 1991, mean absences for the group ($n = 39$) decreased from 7.63 to 4.71. For this small sample size, the p-value of .044 is statistically significant, reflecting “the ability of the program to keep students in school” (p. 14). The program also

proved successful in preventing dropouts, which is reflected in the “rate of between 81% and 93%” completing the program and remaining in school (p. 20).

This research is unclear as to the total number of participants, and because no control group was used the results are questionable. The claims are impressive, however, and research on a similar program using a control group is recommended. Project Success could work because it addresses multiple needs of students, not simply addressing future employment skills. Another reason for the success of this program could be that students have the benefit of being in a small group for part of the day, and take part in the mainstream school for the remainder of the day. Recommendations were made by Bauer and Michael (1993) to include a reading specialist in the program, and to continue the program into the eleventh and twelfth grades. This latter recommendation seems highly advisable. Although Wattenberg (1977) has said that students who drop out of high school usually decide to do so in the first two years, it would be reasonable to anticipate that if the support system keeping at-risk students in school were removed they might then decide to drop out.

The overall successful components of these vocational programs can be summarized as such: giving students vocational training while not neglecting important academic courses; keeping the class size small, which imparts a sense of cohesiveness; individual mentoring; and taking students out into the community and giving them the opportunity to accomplish meaningful and authentic tasks.

Counseling Programs

Wilhoit and Roesch (1989), recommend utilizing school counselors to effect positive behavior changes in potential dropouts. The Attitude Behavior Change

(ABC) program works with students identified as at-risk, assigning each student an adult “facilitator.” The facilitators are teachers who volunteer to take part in the program. They are trained by a school psychologist “to listen actively, monitor attendance and academic concerns, give positive feedback, and use the school and community system of support services” (p. 131). Each facilitator works with only one student at a time.

In a field study for the school year 1986-1987, Wilhoit and Roesch (1989) followed the progress of 71 students. These students volunteered for the ABC program and could exit at will. Data were taken from questionnaires given to facilitators, teachers, and the students themselves. Results showed significant and “observable” attitude and behavior changes, a decrease in attendance and disciplinary referrals, and a 75% success in keeping students from dropping out. The 25% who did drop out were “substance abusers.” The researchers attribute the success of this program to the one-on-one attention given to students by trained facilitators, and the amount of support the program had from school administrators. Individual attention seems like a good idea, but many school districts could probably not afford such a program for any length of time. Of interest would be a follow-up study of this program that used a control group for comparison.

Mayer and Mitchell (1993) were also interested in behavior modification as a means to reduce dropouts. In their study they “attempted to reduce dropouts and to increase the time engaged in academic work by making the school environment less punitive” (p. 136). They believe that a punitive classroom environment leads to decreased attendance, which in turn, leads to students dropping out of school.

The interventions utilized in this federally funded program included counselors who consulted with teachers regarding classroom management, tutoring and career development activities for program students during the academic year, and a summer program that included field trips to expose students to resources outside their immediate neighborhoods. Participants for the program came from five inner-city Los Angeles high schools. Three graduate students (counseling or school psychology) worked with the program teachers as part-time consultants and data collectors. Undergraduate students (20) from “ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds similar to those of the target students” acted as classroom tutors (Mayer & Mitchell, 1993, p. 137). The carefully chosen tutors were trained by university professors in communication skills and taught tutoring techniques for core subjects.

Consultants measured teacher behavior using the Teacher Approval-Disapproval scale. Student behavior was measured using the Planned Activity Check which counts the number of students who are engaged at pre-determined time intervals.

Consultants received training in the use of the [measuring] instruments until they achieved repeated interobserver coefficients of .80 or better. Baseline data were then collected. Throughout the baseline and treatment phases of the study consultants continued to conduct reliability observations at least 20% of the time to insure that interobserver agreement did not drop below .80. (Mayer & Mitchell, 1993, p. 139)

The consulting process emphasized positive reinforcement as a means to motivate students to attend class. Teachers decreased disapproving remarks, and with that, students' time on task increased. Results of the study showed that there was a 35.5% decrease in suspensions and dropouts, a figure that was substantially less than predicted for that (at-risk) population.

The results of this study are questionable. There was no random selection for the participants. And because both dropouts and suspensions were included in one variable, it is difficult to determine exactly how much the dropout percentage itself decreased. There were multiple treatments (consulting, tutoring, field trips, etc.) so it cannot be determined if the decrease in dropouts was due solely to the behavior modification treatment. One possible explanation for the decrease in suspensions and dropouts could be that the presence of consultants in the classroom increased the adult to student ratio.

Counselors promote positive relationships between adults and students, and according to Wirth-Bond et al. (1991), counseling can also reduce dropout rates. Wirth-Bond et al. administered a questionnaire to 117 high school students taking part in a Vocational Special Needs (VSN) program for at-risk students. VSN students were assigned special counselors to help them with study and problem-solving skills, and to assist them with their homework.

Although the researchers had hypothesized that having a "significant other adult" would reduce students' likelihood of dropping out, the results of the questionnaires did not support the hypothesis. Students who dropped out in the course of this research reported feeling a sense of belonging and an attachment to

school personnel. They dropped out anyway, and the research is unclear as to their reasons for doing so. The results of this study, say Wirth-Bond et al. (1991), are in contrast to findings of prior studies which claimed that students at risk of dropping out “hold poor perceptions of school personnel and that their sense of belonging in the school setting is low” (p. 136).

Data from this study show a remarkably low dropout rate of 8.4%. One possible reason for the results of this study is that the researchers relied solely on students’ self-reports; results may have been different if questionnaires had been given to the students’ teachers for cross reference. What was concluded from this study, however, was that additional adult supervision via counselors reduced the dropout rate for reasons unknown. It is possible that the increased supervision by counselors—another example of increased adult to student ratio—helped students improve academically, giving them a reason to stay in school.

Unlike the ABC program’s individual counseling, the counseling program in Catterall’s 1987 study was held in a large group setting. Catterall observed an intensive 4-day workshop for students at-risk in one southern California urban high school. The workshop, free of charge and held away from the school campus at a mountain retreat, was followed up by additional “attention” over the succeeding 10 weeks.

Participants for the group counseling program were chosen from a pool of 300 students deemed substantially at-risk by school personnel. From that pool, 100 students (the maximum capacity for the program) self-selected to participate on a “first-come, first-served [sic] basis.” From the remaining at-risk students, 20 “select

control” and “random control” were chosen for comparison. The 20 select control students were those who had shown up to take the bus to the retreat, but because the capacity (100) had already been reached, were unable to participate. Others in the control group were randomly selected. Both treatment and control groups had similar characteristics, with all students carrying approximately a 1.0 grade average. The mean age for all students was 16.

The workshop portion of the program featured activities “to promote student self-esteem and self-confidence,” taught students teamwork and life-course planning skills, and included a physical challenge course. Follow-up measures consisted of assigning all members of the treatment group to the same home-room with the dean of the school in charge.

At the end of the 10-week follow-up period, Catterall (1987) compiled data from school records and student and teacher questionnaires. Pre- and post-measures were made of students’ work habits, cooperation, punctuality, class attendance, and grade point average. Initially, the results seemed positive. Students and teachers alike gave good reports on the workshop. But when comparisons were later made between the two groups’ post measures, negative results became obvious. The control group scored higher in all five variables. Catterall makes numerous speculations as to why this was the case, the most notable being that the treatment group drew negative attention and became stigmatized as a “gang...that looked to itself for sources of satisfaction in daily school life, but not to teachers or to regular school activities” (p. 534)

Drawing such broad conclusions on a mere 4-day workshop with a 10-day follow-up seems a bit rash. And the researcher's conclusion that the treatment group members bonded, alienating them from the rest of the school community, seems an overreaction considering the short duration of the treatment. One could look at the students' decision to "look to itself" as being a positive rather than a negative choice, with students choosing autonomy and self-direction in looking to each other for support.

Rather than pronouncing a negative verdict on counseling programs, it seems that a more prudent path for Catterall (1997) to follow would be to conduct a longitudinal study of a similar program. Potential dropouts were not created in four days and most surely cannot be "rehabilitated" in such a short time. The objectives of that 4-day workshop were very extensive—far too many for such a short period of time. A factor that may have influenced the initial results may have been the students' desire to get away from the school campus. Time away from school could have motivated students to volunteer for the program. These students may have been less motivated toward making academic progress than the randomly selected at-risk control group. Random selection for both the treatment and control groups, in addition to a longer period of treatment, could possibly produce more positive results.

A summary of the positive aspects of counseling in dropout prevention programs includes increased one-on-one attention (a smaller ratio of teacher or adult to student), and teachers creating a less punitive—therefore more positive—environment.

Multidimensional Programs

The research investigated in this section is of such comprehensive and diverse interventions that it can only be categorized as multidimensional. The following dropout prevention programs seem to have pulled out all the stops, using all the available treatments in order to reach their goal of reducing dropouts.

Wilkinson and Griffith (1994) examined data collected from five “overage ninth-grade” dropout prevention programs in the Austin (Texas) Independent School District (AISD). Data collected was for the school year 1992-94. A “streamlined” analysis of quantitative data was made through the use of computer technology. Central computer files gathered data on attendance and dropout/retention status, and analyzed program effectiveness. Predicted figures were compared with actual student achievement to determine if there were significant differences due to participation in a dropout program. Three of five programs reported a significant reduction in dropout rates of students who took part. The following are descriptions of the three successful programs in this study.

Reagan High: Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID). The program at this high school served 13 students. Support team consisted of one teacher, one social worker, a social work intern, and a task force monitor who assessed each student’s progress bimonthly. Each student was assigned to regular school program courses, assuring that he or she was placed with teachers with “high success rates.” In addition, a teacher was hired to provide individual tutoring in core courses. Students were also assigned peer tutors, and the tutorial class was aided by software that would “assist teachers with accelerated learning” (Wilkinson

& Griffith, 1994, p. 3). Mentors from large Austin companies took part in the program, and students were taken on field trips to the business community every Friday. All overage ninth graders also participated in the Reality Oriented Physical Experience Session (ROPES) course.

Students participating in the AVID program showed a significant reduction in dropout rates. Out of the 13 students, the predicted number to drop out was 1; none dropped out.

Johnston High: Partnerships Activated for School Success (PASS). The PASS project was “designed as a comprehensive, systemic approach to prevent the causes of students’ dropping out of school” by assisting students “in becoming responsible for their own learning and planning for the future” (Wilkinson & Griffith, 1994, p. 5).

PASS served 32 students. Faculty were trained in self-management and responsibility skills, then trained the students in these same skills. This program utilized team teaching, staff mentoring, and peer tutoring. Among the goals of PASS was to decrease the dropout rate at Johnston High by 3% annually, and to increase attendance rate by 2% per year. Data showed that students in the program had better than predicted dropout rates (lower than the overall school district) and attendance improved. The predicted dropout number was 4, and none dropped out. This program did not get started until late spring of 1994, and because it served only 32 students, was very expensive.

Bowie High School: School-To-Work Transition Program. This

School-To-Work Transition Program, basically a school-within-a-school concept, centered around a core curriculum. Interdisciplinary teaching teams from core subject areas worked with representatives from major corporations in the Austin area to “develop a program which addressed resource management, interpersonal and communication skills, computer literacy, and mathematical understanding to at least the Algebra I level” (Wilkinson & Griffith, 1994, p. 9). Arrangements were made for students who had progressed to this level of competency to job shadow, then serve apprenticeships in a selected company. Eventually the high school would serve as a “temporary placement agency” that would keep track of students’ progress during a 90 day probationary period. Students who successfully completed the probationary period would enter into a contract that obligated the company to “fully fund a 2-year technical school or a 4-year college” (p. 9).

This program served 120 students. The predicted number of dropouts was ten, and five dropped out, which was lower than the District level. This was the most cost-effective of the three successful programs.

Because this study was for only one school year, follow-up longitudinal study is recommended. Of the many strategies involved in the AISD’s programs, the individual counseling and tutoring seem to have had the greatest effect. Also, programs that involve students interacting with businesses in the community (such as those in Reagan and Bowie High) succeed because schools working alone are not sufficient to meet the needs of students and their families (Baezerman & Compton, 1993). The business community is also able to provide needed financial help to

dropout prevention programs that might not be implemented if they had to rely solely on monies from the school district budget. Additional research (Syropoulow, 1996) has been conducted that indicates success in keeping ninth grade potential dropouts by using block scheduling; attendance, academic, and monitoring interventions; incentives and rewards; and team teaching. Block scheduling and team teaching add the element of additional time and attention given to each student.

Pearson and Banerji (1993) also investigated a dropout prevention program aimed at ninth-graders. The Ninth Grade Program (NGP) began in 1987 in Tampa, Florida. All six high schools in the district took part. These researchers gathered and analyzed data from the NGP for three years. Among the variables they examined were data for attendance and dropout rates.

The goals of the NGP were to (a) meet students' academic needs, (b) provide a caring atmosphere, and (c) provide a "relevant yet changing curriculum" (Pearson & Banerji, 1993, p. 249). To meet these goals, each of the six high schools was free to design its own program. The list of services offered is too lengthy to include in this paper, but the main categories included (1) Academics: tutorial services, staff and administrative support systems, etc.; (2) Orientation: student orientation, assignment of buddy system, NGP information given at registration, etc.; (3) Study skills: reading specialist, peer teachers, writing enhancement program, etc.; (4) Socialization: Teachers as Advisors Program in academic programs, NGP newsletter for parents, regular freshman class meetings, etc.; (5) Attendance: Referral to social worker, awards for good attendance, automated calling for attendance, parent letters sent for student absences, etc. (p. 253).

Pearson and Banerji (1993) took random sample data from 25% of the total program population for each of the three years the program was in operation. Using the year prior (1987-88) to the program's inception for baseline comparison, they conducted a trend analysis using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine the statistical changes across baseline and treatment years (p. 250). The results of this study show that the NGP increased attendance and reduced dropout rates significantly ($p < .001$) compared to baseline figures. Dropout percentages were reduced from 6.3 in the baseline year to 4.2 in the third year of the program. Attendance rate increased from 89.6% in the baseline year to 95.6% in the third year. Most of the reduction in dropouts occurred in the third year, leading Pearson and Banerji to conclude that the new program took several years to take effect.

The success of this program in reducing dropouts, say these researchers, can mainly be attributed to its focus on academic success and the development of study skills; and services in orientation, attendance, and social concerns. The effort to orient and integrate students quickly into high school is an important factor in keeping students in school (Smith, 1997; Miller et al., 1988).

Larrivee and Bourque (1991), finding a dearth of research that provided "clues as to how school [dropout prevention] programs should be designed to be effective," set about trying to find multidimensional programs that could be implemented "with minor alterations of existing resources and staffing" (p. 49). They conducted qualitative research on six different school sites that used widely diverse programs for dropout prevention:

Site one was an off-campus alternative school that offered a flexible schedule and developed basic skills and self-concept development; site two offered a vocational exploration program along with a home-school liaison; site three was a school-within-a-school that worked toward “gradual mainstreaming based on adaptive behavior” (Larivee & Bourque, 1991, p. 51) utilizing an assertive discipline approach; site four feature self-contained classes to teach core class and assigned students school guidance counselors; site five offered work release (students’ school and work schedules were coordinated) as an incentive for students to stay in school; and site six featured a teacher/mentor role model who monitored student attendance and in-class progress and resolved conflicts. Students in these programs ranged in age from 13 to 17. The total number of students enrolled in all six program sites was 227.

Because the administrators of the schools involved in this research felt they had a moral obligation to help *all* at-risk students, Larrivee and Bourque (1991) did not use a control group in their research design. They constructed questionnaires which they gave to the instructors and the students. The dependent variables used were: instructor ratings of classwork and behavior, student attitude and behavior ratings, school attendance and dropout rates. A test analysis was made of the teacher and student ratings, and data for school attendance and dropouts were analyzed.

All sites showed significant improvement in student behavior and attendance rates. Each program successfully achieved the “common goal of preventing students from leaving school prematurely because of poor attitudes or lack of motivation and

interest” (Larivee & Bourque, 1991, p. 61). The two sites (sites one and three) that had the most successful programs were those which involved the highest degree of “structural adaptations relative to the mainstream.” They both served junior high or middle school students and utilized peer tutoring and student contracts. Based on these facts the researchers concluded that there was some evidence to support “the generally accepted notion that programs implemented at an earlier age have greater potential for positive impact on at-risk students” (p. 62). This finding has also been supported by Smith (1997).

Agreeing with Baker and Sansone (1990), Larrivee and Bourque (1991) concluded that multifaceted programs are the direction that dropout prevention interventions must go in order to reach the most students. While this may be true, these programs also cost more, involve more time to plan and implement, and require more dedication on the part of teachers and staff. But the cost of these programs must be weighed against the economic benefits to society when students become productive, tax-paying citizens.

Conclusion

Over the years our expectations for the role of high schools has steadily grown. In addition to increasing students' knowledge, high schools are expected to socialize youth, mold good citizens, and prevent crime and poverty by instilling values and creating a productive work force. As the percentage of young people in the general population decreases, more importance is placed upon their education. Without educated citizens America's economic and political future is in question, or so it is feared.

Dropouts are a modern phenomenon, the result, ironically, of the steadily increasing holding power of America high schools. It was not until the 1960s, when graduation from high school became the norm, that educators, politicians, and society at large became obsessed with the dropout "problem" and how to fix it. Dropouts became synonymous with all the modern ills of society—poverty, unemployment, teenage pregnancy, and crime. As long as attention was paid to the dropout problem, attention was diverted from the problems in the education system itself.

Research on the dropout problem has produced a preponderance of studies to determine who these students are and what their reasons are for dropping out of school. What is lacking is research that investigates the long-term effects of dropout prevention programs that have shown initial success. Also lacking is definitive quantitative research that utilizes control groups; for ethical reasons, researchers and

program administrators feel the need to include *all* at-risk students in programs that could prevent them from dropping out of school.

Effective programs are hard to identify because there is a lack of pertinent information on their features and outcomes (Stern, et al., 1988). Catterall (1987) agrees, maintaining that the effects of dropout programs on participants' decisions to continue or not is virtually unknown, giving school professionals little to go on when creating them. These last two factors seem to go hand in hand. From what I have gleaned about dropout programs, they seem to come and go in brief displays of concern. Dropout programs are expensive, and their existence depends upon the interest of school administrators to institute them and keep them going. These administrations themselves change regularly, as do the school boards whose approval and support dropout prevention programs must of necessity enlist. There is also danger of teacher burn-out in programs that involve teachers' intense commitment. Often this is because they lose the support of their fellow staff and administrators.

Although there is no magic solution to prevent students from dropping out of school, the literature reveals that there are some strategies that seem more promising than others. These are the dropout prevention programs which I have discerned most promising:

Schools-within-schools. While smaller schools might not be cost-effective, programs like this could provide the sense of community missing in large schools. Some at-risk students get lost in the crowd, and a small in-school program provides a solution. These programs are probably a good compromise to the choice of alienating students by having them attend classes off-campus. Off-campus

“alternative” schools keep students separated from more “successful” students who could be good peer tutors and good role models.

Block classes. Research shows that fewer class changes means fewer disruptions and more quality time with teachers. Teachers who have longer periods of time with students have the opportunity to team teach interdisciplinary units that could not be offered in shorter class periods. More time with teachers increases the opportunity for one-on-one relationships, something that has been shown effective in dropout prevention.

Flexible schedules. Of the programs researched by Larivee and Bourque (1991), the site (site one) that adjusted its schedule to meet the needs of the students—meeting from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.—had the greatest success. Not one student left that program. My own experience with teenagers informs me that many of them have a difficult time functioning early in the day. Giving students an opportunity to begin their school day at a later time would help those who experience this difficulty. Flexible schedules could also fit students’ work schedules; many students work not by choice, but from economic necessity.

Early intervention. Identifying students early on who might have trouble coping with the rigors of school and giving them extra help would prevent problems later on. Assistance in transitioning from middle school or junior high to high school is also helpful.

Counseling. Counseling offers individual attention and support. Whether by school counselors, peer tutors, or teacher-mentors, this has been shown to be an

effective dropout prevention strategy. Counselors give students the one-on-one attention that bolsters their self-esteem.

Tutoring and mentoring. Tutoring and mentoring interventions appear to be effective in helping keep students in school. It is interesting to note, however, that in one study (Larivee & Bourque, 1991) only peer tutors (as opposed to staff tutors) seemed to make a difference, and mentoring seemed to help students' attitudes more than their academic progress.

Holistic programs. These programs include support for students' emotional and social problems without neglecting their academic and intellectual needs. Many of the "multidimensional" programs included in this critical review fall into this category.

In 1986 Wehlage and Rutter identified six essential characteristics for successful dropout prevention programs: (1) program autonomy—independence from traditional curriculum; (2) small size; (3) committed and caring teaching force; (4) nontraditional curriculum which includes an individualized approach, cooperative learning beginning at the individual's level, and use of "real life" examples; (5) experiential education that links the student to the community by work-study, tutoring younger children, and community service; and (6) a positive atmosphere with supportive peer culture. While these researchers were referring specifically to alternative programs, their recommendations could apply to dropout programs in particular, and schools in general.

There is a caveat, however, to these recommendations. It is important for educators to remember that adolescence is not a fatal disease; children do outgrow it.

Because all children do not mature at the same rate, age limitations should not be overstressed (Dorn, 1996) in education. Developmentally appropriate curriculum is necessary in order to reach every student. Perhaps it would be better for some students to drop out, then drop back in to school. But because there is a stigma attached to leaving school before graduation, most students are reluctant to do so. This is not the case in other countries. As Robertson (1993) has noted,

the word dropout is non-existent in Sweden. Students who leave school before the appointed time are thought to be “school tired”; it is assumed that they will return when ready. There is no stigma attached to leaving the formal education process during adolescence. (p. 68)

Adolescents who drop out of school in the United States are judged to be an aberration. Perhaps one way of dealing with the dropout problem in this country would be to develop “an educational position on school leave, giving adolescents permission to experience the real world before completing their education” (Robertson, p. 69). I agree. Some students reach a point where they just do not have the interest or motivation to continue. Dropping out of school, temporarily, may not be the best, but the only alternative at that time for some students.

Holding reluctant students in school by creating a negative stereotypical image of the dropout (read deviant, delinquent, etc.) does them a disservice. The notion of singling out students and labeling them as at-risk “is itself a risky business, [for] to identify [them] as ‘at risk’ is to pick them out for special treatment *not for what they have done but for what they might do*” [italics in original] (Kohl, 1994, p. 152).

Adolescents who feel alienated should be part of the decision as to what is best for them at that particular point in time. Conspicuous by its absence in the development of dropout prevention programs, however, is the voice of those most concerned—the students themselves. By identifying at-risk youths as potential “problems” to society, educators have become accomplices in these adolescents’ “crime.” Disenfranchising adolescents holds them powerless to become part of the solution. Roman (1996) explains that

when researchers and policy makers create youths as subjects at risk, they also become subjects of blame....inclusion alone is insufficient to prepare the ground for radical democratic empowerment of youth’s voices. Critically deconstructing moral panics about youth is one necessary (but insufficient) condition of enfranchising young people. (pp. 152-153)

While much research on *why* students drop out of school has necessitated questioning the students themselves, there is a lack of evidence that researchers have asked for students’ input as to what kinds of program would help them stay in school. Further studies that include students’ opinions regarding this matter would be helpful. What is *not* needed at this time is further research on dropouts that describe their characteristics, providing statistics as to their numbers and the dire consequences that will inevitably result from their dropping out. A report on the status of Goal 2 of Goals 2000, states this case more succinctly than I could:

The characteristics of students who are most likely to drop out and [their reasons for doing so] dominate current research. We know well that the invidious effects of poverty, broken families, illegitimacy, and drugs can pose

great obstacles to learning and graduation. But we know less about how these barriers can be overcome or how schools and society can help students resist their effects. The prospects for higher graduation rates would be increased if educators knew more about what motivates students to want to learn. (U.S. Department of Education, 1994)

Successful dropout prevention strategies need to be based on the “motivating properties” of students’ lives (U. S. Dept. of Education, 1994). They should not be one-dimensional nor should they be based on static conditions. Setting at-risk students apart from the rest of the population for extended periods may be harmful. Students need to feel like they are part of the larger community, not stigmatized as outsiders who do not fit in (Catterall, 1987; Fine, 1991; Roman, 1996). Programs considered as “treatments” for deviant behavior “may increase the identity of the group as oppressed and estranged from the school,” especially by teachers and other “successful” students (Catterall, p. 535). Integration into mainstream classrooms, whether daily or introduced gradually, is therefore advisable. Natriello, Pallas, McDill, McPartland, and Royster (1988) have suggested ways to facilitate students’ bonding to the school environment that include strengthening student-teacher and peer relationships. Ideally, this is something that teachers should be striving for with *all* students, not just those at risk.

Educators must also be cautioned against implementing short-term programs that unrealistically raise the expectations of students with underdeveloped academic skills. In order to determine which programs prove to be most effective, researchers need to conduct long-term comparative studies of promising programs which include

student input. These studies should also assess students' levels of academic achievement in addition to their rates of graduation. Even those students who have been declared "at-risk" deserve the same opportunity for academic achievement as do their contemporaries.

In the introduction to this paper I expressed a desire to learn about dropout prevention strategies that could apply to all students, whether they are considered at-risk or not. As a teacher, I will probably be the first to notice whether or not a student is in danger of dropping out of school. It will be up to me to see that this student receives help—not the baggage of being branded a hopeless failure who needs "treatment." I believe that the programs I have described all have elements that good teachers and good schools alike should direct toward the total school population. For all schools to have programs such as these would, of course, be ideal. Unfortunately, time and money limit the extent to which schools can individualize their curricula. But knowing what the methods are that will help the disaffected student population to succeed could give teachers the tools they need for early intervention. By aiming at the few, we can help all students achieve the goal of high school graduation.

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