



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of July 25-29, 2011

Avoiding the Dropout Hole

By UCLA IDEA

This week, a National Public Radio series reports that students who drop out of school are unemployed at nearly twice the rate of high school graduates. They are also more likely to commit crimes and experience drug and alcohol abuse, poverty, and other social ills that add up to “hundreds of billions of dollars in lost earnings, welfare and medical costs, and billions more for dropouts who end up in prison.”

Dropping out of school is typically represented as a personal choice. Boredom, lack of effort, truancy, pregnancy—all individual characteristics—are featured as common “causes” of high dropout rates. For example, the final NPR installment quotes a student’s reason for dropping out: “[In] ninth grade, I dropped out of school. I was 18. I flunked twice, I had no interest, and I told my mom ‘cause I was living at home at the time, I said, ‘I’m done, I’m not going back to school.’”

However, it is clear that students’ decisions to drop out could be vastly reduced with appropriate community and school policies. In the August issue of *American School Board Journal**, researchers (including IDEA’s Marisa Saunders) identify risk factors apparent as early as elementary and middle school that could double the chances of dropping out, such as failing a course, multiple absences, and being over-age for grade level. These factors often can be addressed at that early age.

The article, *Stemming the Dropout Tide*, reports that even as late as high school, proven programs and sufficient support can interrupt the likelihood of many students dropping out. Researchers found that 73 percent of students attending Los Angeles Unified magnet high schools graduated compared to 45 percent who attended other schools. Magnet schools focus on a particular theme such as arts, technology or medical careers. The magnets are often smaller schools and may garner more resources that are tailored to their programs.

Unfortunately, most high schools—magnet and other—lack the small class sizes, one-on-one interaction with well-qualified teachers and counselors, engaging curriculum and other supports that would encourage students to stay in school longer. The best dropout prevention may not be targeted “programs” to reach at-risk students, but to have in place as a routine matter all the schooling elements known to teach and guide students to success.

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IDEA's survey of California principals last year found a majority had increased class sizes, half had cut down the number of counselors, and many had cut back on arts, music and other electives. Narrowing course choices "negatively impacts motivation and engagement," said a Riverside County administrator.

The high dropout rates that different states report are shocking. But they are not particularly accurate, and the real figures are probably higher. The NPR report notes that states do not report their data in consistent ways, and that makes it hard for communities, policymakers, and school officials to formulate policies and hold themselves accountable. To that end, the U.S. Education Department will require states to use a uniform measurement formula. "You've got to know how deep the hole is in order to develop a strategy for getting out of it."

**The August issue is not yet available online. When it is, IDEA will feature the piece in its Education News Roundup.*

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