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Book Review of:
Dropouts in America:
Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis

National Center for School Engagement

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Book Review:
Dropouts in America – Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis
by the
National Center for School Engagement (NCSE)

This book review was compiled by the NCSE Research and Evaluation team at The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children. This book was selected because it summarizes decades of research in the school dropout field. The research is high quality, conducted by Harvard Education Press and it gives a quality overview for researchers as well as practitioners.

Dropouts in America – Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis

Edited by Gary Orfield

Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2004

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Chapter 1: Sketching a Portrait of Public High School Graduation: Who Graduates? Who Doesn't, by Christopher B. Swanson, p. 13-40.

This chapter…"provides the most extensive set of systematic empirical findings on public school graduation rates available to date…" so says,

Christopher Swanson. He uses the basic definition of Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) for graduation that meets the standards of the No Child Left Behind federal legislation. The data are qualified to explain sources and respective studies. Swanson delivers comprehensive coverage of this topic. His state-by-state analysis of graduation rates provides race/ethnicity breakdowns clearly showing the racial disparities between White and Asian students on the high end and American Indian, Hispanic and Black students who barely break the 50% level nationally. There are large regional differences with the greatest disparities in the Northeast where "…about one third of American Indians, 35 percent of Hispanic and 44 percent of black students can be expected to graduate from high school." Gender differences are also reported overall with girls outperforming boys – within racial groups by gender – girls keep a graduation rate lead over boys. The poverty level of a school district also greatly predicts graduation rates at nearly twice the effect of the next strongest predictor. This chapter does an excellent job of laying the groundwork for the rest of the book with good understandable data about the graduation crisis in the US.

Chapter 2: Graduation Rate Accountability Under the NCLB Act and the Disparate Impact on Students of Color, p 41-56 by Daniel J. Losen.

Daniel Losen succinctly describes the school accountability measures instituted by the No Child Left Behind Act, discusses the extent to which they are being enforced, and analyzes the implications of uneven enforcement. He points out that each state determined its own goals for graduation rate and test score improvement – goals used to determine whether or not individual schools achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The goals were supposed to apply to subgroups of students such as racial minorities or English language learners as well. (Schools that fail to meet AYP targets for two years in a row are designated as "identified for improvement" and may incur sanctions.)

In theory, not graduating enough students is cause for failing AYP, but not in practice. Losen posits three problems with the regulations. 1) States promoted methods of calculating graduation rates that violate NCLB requirements, but were given approval anyway. 2) The U. S. Department of Education mostly eliminated the graduation requirement provision of NCLB for minorities. 3) Every state received approval for its graduation rate plan, even though some states require only .1% annual improvement, and other states left graduation goals

out entirely. In practice, AYP now only applies to test score improvement. The result of uneven enforcement of test score versus graduation rate regulations, Losen argues, is a strong push-out effect. He concludes with a state-by-state summary of graduation rate accountability standards based on whether states have minimum graduation rates that each school must achieve, and whether those rates apply to racial minorities separately. This is an excellent article for educational policy makers, or anyone looking for a clear summary of NCLB requirements and the process by which they were determined.

Chapter 3: Locating the Dropout Crisis: Which High Schools Produce the Nation's Dropouts, p. 57-84 by Robert Balfanz and Nettie E. Legters.

Balfanz and Legters, in this chapter, observe that most school reform efforts and related funding have been invested in younger children with only 5% of federal funds for low performing schools going to high schools. They contend that we cannot cut back on this investment in younger students but that we need to target new investments in low performing high schools with high dropout rates and low graduation rates. Balfanz and Legters suggest rating schools using a standard measure of "promoting power" that calculate the difference between starting 9th graders and graduating seniors over 4 years. They report that 20% of high schools in the US have weak promoting power with graduation rates of 50% or less. Disturbingly, the promoting power of high schools has diminished over the 1990s with a 75% increase in low promoting schools. Most schools with weak promoting power are majority-minority schools with low-income students located in northern and western cities and throughout the south. The exception to the rule is high schools even with majority-minority enrollment in suburban communities with higher per pupil funding who can promote to graduation as well as predominantly white high schools.

The chapter discusses various approaches to improving the promoting power of high schools by reducing their size or converting them to small learning communities within the larger school settings. However these strategies have yet to be proven to transform the roughly 2,000 high schools in the US with low graduation rates. Because Balfanz and Legters have documented the positive impact of increasing funds to low promoting schools, they recommend an annual 10% increase in Title I federal funding each year to these targeted schools with a requirement that the schools implement reforms that engage students and promote achievement to graduation. They also recommend that middle schools feeding these 2000 high schools need attention

particularly in improving the transition to ninth grade. This is an excellent resource for local school accountability committees or those local task forces working on the graduation gap. It could be used as a template for local assessment and action planning. It also has national implications for federal action on funding targeted high schools with weak promoting power.

Chapter 4: High School Dropout, Race/Ethnicity, and Social Background form the 1970s to 1990s, p. 85-106 by Hauser, Robert, Simmons, Solon, & Pager, Devah.

Hauser, Simmons and Pager discuss three factors associated with trends in dropout rates; a) the state of the economy, b) geographic and social composition of students, and c) educational policy. This chapter focuses primarily on geographic and social composition of students. Using the Current Populations Surveys from 1972 – 1998, the authors studied 167,400 youth, aged 14 – 24, for an in-depth exploration of these factors. A dropout was defined as a student who was enrolled in school during October of the survey year and not enrolled the following year.

Based on this data set, the authors deduce that dropouts are greater in urban settings and the likelihood of dropout increases with age and grade. As the average number of children in the home increases, so does the likelihood of dropout. Youth of color, female head-of-households, and unemployed head-of-households were also associated with a higher likelihood of dropout. Homeownership and post secondary parental education were associated with a lower likelihood of dropout. In fact, each year of post secondary education was associated with a 10% decline in dropout.

The authors briefly cover the two other sources of trends, state of the economy and educational policy. It seems that a better economy increases dropout, however this does not hold true for African American students. The authors hypothesize that opportunities outside of school could be greater for whites than students of color. Finally, educational policies such as disciplinary practices and grade retention may increase drop out, although these are not discussed in detail. This article may be of interest to educational researchers and program developers who are trying to better understand what geo-social factors are associated with dropout.

Chapter 5: The National Dropout Data Collection System: History and the Search for Consistency, p. 107-130 by Phillip Kaufman.

Philip Kaufman discusses the pros and cons of education completion and dropout data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) collected by the US Census, the Common Core of Data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and data from the NCES Longitudinal Studies Program. The importance of this information really lies in the limitations of the data that are largely unconsidered by people who use and quote dropout rates. The author discusses the changes in the questionnaire design which make year to year comparison difficult. Other limitations include how GED completion was measured and how missing data are adjusted for. In addition, the prevalence of sampling and non-sampling errors, including the potential impact of minority under-representation, is explained. A common problem is also distinguishing between transfer students and dropouts; the latter group is often categorized as the former, which reduces the dropout rate. In general, Kaufman recommends longitudinal studies, (including some that are already being conducted) and implementing a national system to track students by a common identification number to improve the data on completion and dropout. The chapter is very well written and beneficial to anyone who will potentially use national dropout data, especially researchers who are familiar with statistical concepts.

Chapter 6: Why Students Drop Out of School, p. 131-155. by Rumberger, Russell W.

Russell Rumberger describes two conceptual frameworks to explain why students drop out of high school. The “individual” framework views the attitudes and behaviors of students in terms of school engagement. He defines school engagement as having both academic and social aspects. Dropping out as a result of three interrelated dimensions of education: educational achievement as measured by grades and tests; educational stability as measured by changes in schools and staying enrolled; and educational attainment as measured by years completed and degrees. Engagement and attainment are both influenced by students’ backgrounds prior to school. The author reviews the literature and discusses factors shown to be predictive of dropout. Dropping out, he points out, is a long-term process, and early academic and behavioral difficulties are indicators of later dropout.

The “institutional” framework includes factors within a student’s family, school and community. Examples of relevant factors include parental education and income, single parent families, student teacher ratios, and school size. Schools affect dropout indirectly through policies and practices that contribute to voluntary withdrawal, and directly via explicit policies that cause involuntary withdrawal. Such policies include rules concerning low grades, attendance, misbehavior, retention, and requiring that students pass a test in order to graduate. He also discusses alternate views on the mechanisms by which race and ethnicity affect a student’s chances of high school completion. This article should be of interest to educational policy makers and researchers, and to professionals who work with school age youth.

Chapter 7: High Stakes Testing In Chicago’s Elementary Schools, p157-179 by Allensworth, Elaine.

Elaine Allensworth summarizes the evaluation of the high stakes testing policy that Chicago implemented in its elementary schools in the 1995-1996 school year. The policy required that eighth graders must pass the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS)before matriculated to high school. Failing students received summer school and a chance to retake the test. If, at the conclusion of summer school, the student still did not pass, the student was retained in the eighth grade or sent to a transition school for children who are overage for grade. There is much evidence that children who are teacher-retained are more likely to dropout, however there is little or no evidence of the effect of high stakes testing retention.

Four cohorts were studies; two years prior to policy implementation and two years following policy implementation. The findings show that achievement did indeed improve dramatically for all students. Students were entering high school better prepared than in previous years. The high achievers were achieving even better. However, the policy most adversely affected students who were already at risk of dropping out ~ the low achievers. Unfortunately, this was the target group that high stakes testing was intended to help. With the implementation of the policy, racial achievement gaps increased. Additionally, many students who were retained had emotional and health issues. Despite these iatrogenic outcomes, students reported that they did try harder and they did get more help from teachers and parents.

At the time of the policy implementation, trends were showing increasing graduation rates and decreasing dropout rates. However,

the first two cohorts who experienced the policy halted these positive trends. Allensworth notes that these trends did resume with the third and fourth cohorts to experience the policy. She postulates that without the high stakes testing policy, perhaps the trends would have been even higher for these cohorts. This chapter is an excellent resource for policy makers and school administrators struggling to understand the impact of high stakes testing.

Chapter 8: Accountability and the Grade 9-10 Transition, p. 181-206 by Lisa Abrams and Walt Haney.

Abrams and Haney present an extensive analysis and discussion of grade enrollment data over the last several decades to see where the greatest numbers of students are lost. They found that the greatest hurdles seem to occur in grade 9 and then move on to grade 10. The number of students in this 9-10 transition who have disappeared from high school has tripled over the last 30 years. A "bulge" of student enrollment occurred in grade 9 building into the 2000-2001 year with large attrition at 10th grade. The larger enrollments at grade 9 indicate retentions. Another theory advanced by these authors is the impact of high stakes testing and how it caused both the retention or bulge at grade 9, and the attrition or significant loss of enrollment in grade 10. The state-by-state analysis demonstrates the correlation of states with high stakes testing and those without to support the theory.

In looking for where the students might end up after leaving public schools at grade 10, the researchers said it couldn't be explained by home schooling or shifts to private schools. Unfortunately, those who leave seem to become either push-outs or dropouts. Abrams and Haney explain this phenomenon of retention then attrition by three education trends over the past 30 years. The first was the minimum competency testing in the 1970s and 1980s. This was followed by the academic standards movement, as a response to ***A Nation at Risk*** report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education that called for increasing academic course requirements in high school and for the use of standardized tests at "major transition points from one level of schooling to another". The third increase, in high school attrition in the 1990s, appears to result from the high stakes testing that evolved in measuring the standards. These tests purported to not only measure student progress, but also school quality. Without adequate resources to address the problems of low achieving students,

"…schools are under intense pressure to increase test score averages…the easiest way to make test pass rates appear to increase is to exclude low achieving students from being tested." These well-supported causes and consequences help explain much about the loss of students most schools see in the transition between middle school and10th grades. The ninth grade transition looms large as both a major problem but a point for reform and intervention to avoid both push-outs and dropouts. High school reformers at state and local levels will find this chapter helpful whether they are community leaders or principals of middle schools and high schools. Studying locally this transition could lead to a good first step for high school reform toward improving the engagement and graduation of students.

Chapter 9: Whatever Happened to the Class of 2000? The Timing of Dropout in Philadelphia's Schools, p. 207-220. Neild, Ruth Curran and Elizabeth Farley.

Ruth Neild and Elizabeth Farley use school district administrative data from Philadelphia to examine dropout rates and timing for the cohort of 9th graders who entered high school in 1996. They discover that about 5 ½ years later between 21% and 36% of the students had dropped out, depending on whether missing or unclear drop codes are counted as dropouts or not. Without counting students who transferred out of the district, and who were therefore lost to this study, 52% graduated and 38% dropped out. As many as 46% of Latinos had dropped out, while whites were more likely to leave the school district, either for another district or to jail. 44% of boys and 20% of girls dropped out.

While focusing on the timing of dropout, the authors point out that the time of dropout can be measured either in terms of the amount of time a student is registered in school or by the number of credits earned, or by grade – and each calculation will paint a very different picture. They find that although more students drop out in their third year than any other year, the majority are still 9th graders because they have earned so few credits. This finding was true for all ethnic groups. Half of all students who had dropped out by the end of their third year in high school had earned no more than three credits, even though the average student earns six credits in 9th grade alone. They conclude that severe academic difficulty in 9th grade is indicative of a high probability of dropping out, and that prevention efforts should focus on the difficult transition year of 9th grade. This article is instructive for

anyone working to prevent dropout, and for researchers who are instructed to take care in defining time of dropout.

Chapter 10: Preventing Dropout: Use and Impact of Organizational Reforms Designed to Ease the Transition to High School, p. 221-242 by Kerr, K. and N. Legters.

Kerr and Legters surveyed 138 public high school administrators in Maryland in 2000 about their use of reform programs, and collected dropout rates and test scores matched to the schools. Based on a review of school improvement literature, the authors identified nine practices as promoting school attachment. They found that in general, high-poverty, high minority-schools were more likely to have implemented one or more of the identified practices than low-poverty low-minority schools. Also, the high-poverty high-minority schools have been using the reforms longer, and with a larger proportion of their students. The authors focused on two reforms – small learning communities (SLCs) and interdisciplinary teaming of teachers and students – using OLS regression to study their relationship to achievement, grade promotion, and dropout. They found that schools using interdisciplinary teams with a high level of implementation cut their dropout rate by over 50% from 6.5 to 3.5%, increased their promotion rate, and 10% more students passed the math test. Schools using SLCs with a high level of implementation lowered their dropout rate from 12 to 5%, increased the promotion rate by 16%, and 19% more students passed the math test. The authors found that the strongest results are achieved when these interventions are combined with other reforms. The high-poverty high-minority schools with high levels of implementation had started with below average graduation rates but increased their rates to match those of average schools. This article is an excellent resource for any high school administrator or teacher seeking proven methods of school improvement.

Chapter 11: What Can be Done to Reduce the Dropout Rate, p. 243-255. by Rumberger, Russell.

Rumberger describes findings from a literature of programs and strategies intended to reduce drop out. He argues that both individual and institutional factors influence dropout therefore, there are two categories of intervention – programs designed to change individual student's attitudes, values and behavior, and; environmental strategies intended to support and provide resources to families,

schools and communities. This chapter states that effective prevention strategies must focus on both of these areas. Additionally, earlier intervention is best because attitudes and behaviors can emerge as early as elementary school.

Based on a study conducted by the General Accounting Office, it appears that there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of drop out prevention approaches because not many of these programs are evaluated. However, the chapter discusses the limited h alternative and regular school programs that have proved effective, including some pre-school programs that have long term effects (e.g. High Scope Perry Preschool). Rumberger also describes the Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS). This program demonstrated marked improvements for 9th graders, however after program exit the outcomes were not sustained.

Systemic interventions are reviewed. However, Rumberger maintains that these are extremely difficult to achieve, due to the institutional changes that are required. For example, small classes, longer periods and shared decision-making are suggested. The evaluations reviewed suggest that these reform efforts often fail due to "slippage between policy and action, discord over reform policies and disjuncture between policy and community conditions" (p.251). Despite this lack of evidence, pervasive improvement requires both programmatic and systemic changes. Political will is often lacking which may mean that it would be easier to create new institutions that transform existing ones. This article is a good overview of effective drop out strategies and may be of interest to teachers, school administrators and community based youth workers.

Chapter 12: Interpreting the Evidence from Recent Federal Evaluations of Dropout-Prevention Programs: The State of Scientific Research, p. 255-268 by Mark Dynarski.

Mark Dynarski reviews several evaluations of Dropout-Prevention programs funded by the Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act and the School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program that were conducted between 1989 and 1996. Three evaluations that examined 30 programs using rigorous evaluation methods showed that "most programs did not reduce dropout rates," with the exception of an alternative high school on a community college campus and several alternative middle schools. Some programs showed success with other outcomes, such as improved GED completion and improved

grade promotion. Dynarski convincingly argues that the current evaluation findings do not lead to conclusions concerning best practices, because many programs that have similar components and philosophy do not reduce dropout. Effective programs were held in small settings, they paid attention to students' needs inside and outside of the classroom, provided students regular access to adults, and reported that staff in the programs went out of their way to provide help to the students. In addition, these programs provided individual counseling and challenged students academically. However, many programs where this was true were not effective. Consequently, the author argues that replicating the successful programs is necessary to find out if factors other than program components led to the desired outcomes. He concludes that a high degree of personalization is worth considering for any program that seeks to be effective. This chapter is appropriate for professionals seeking to reduce drop-out as well as researchers who want to understand relatively current evaluation findings.

Chapter 13: Essential Components of High School Dropout-Preventions Reforms, p. 269-288 by James M. McPartland and Will J. Jordan.

McPartland and Jordan argue that there are three categories of change that lead to successful high school reforms. The first category concerns "structural, organizational and governance changes to [re] establish school norms and interpersonal relations…" This includes teachers working in teams, and alternative on-site programs for problem students which ultimately lead to improved student attendance, course passing and completion rates. The second category involves curriculum and instructional innovations to give students time and help to be effective in their classes. For example, including extra time spent in core academic courses and opportunities to make up credits which lead to higher-order competencies. The third category is teacher support which includes providing in-class coaching and common planning time for teacher teams. Each of these categories of change leads to sustaining school and classroom improvements. The authors provide a helpful table to illustrate the manipulability of the components, the intermediate processes, and the student and teacher outcomes in each of the three categories. In addition they discuss concrete examples of their recommendations. This chapter is informative for anyone implementing a high school reform.

If you're interested in purchasing this book, here's the link to the Harvard Education Press… http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~hepg/

The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) is an initiative of The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC). NCSE strives to build a network of key stakeholders who share the belief that improving school attendance and school attachment promotes achievement and school success.

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NCSE was established as a result of more than a decade of educational research about youth out of the educational mainstream conducted by CFFC. The impact of this work has been the development of significant investments of state funds to reduce suspensions expulsions and truancy. Over five years ago, CFFC began working with the OJJDP, US Department of Justice to assist in the planning and implementation of pilot demonstration projects across the country. As projects developed, CFFC became the national evaluator of this five-year truancy demonstration project.

The culmination of ten years of program experience and research has identified truancy and school engagement as the centerpiece of NCSE's work to improve outcomes for youth who are at the greatest risk of school failure and delinquency. We are national leaders in applying research to help communities prevent and reduce truancy.

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