

What Happens to High School Dropouts Who Change Their Mind and Return to School?

In 2005/06, an estimated 1.2 million students failed to complete high school with their classmates, and in California, fewer than 75 percent of ninth graders are expected to graduate within a four-year time frame. While the magnitude and causes of the nation's dropout problem continue to make headlines and generate debate, less attention has been paid to high schoolers who, after dropping out, return and attempt to complete their graduation requirements. A new REL West study, *Reenrollment of High School Dropouts in a Large, Urban School District*, by senior researchers BethAnn Berliner and Vanessa Barrat, sheds light on this overlooked population by tracking a cohort of 3,856 first-time ninth graders in San Bernardino City Unified School District (SBCUSD) over a five-year period, from 2001/02 through 2005/06.

During the study's time frame, SBCUSD was California's seventh largest school district. While it had a dropout rate of 35 percent, it also had a staff dedicated to helping students return to high school. Documenting student trajectories over five years, the study found that both returning students and district staff encountered significant obstacles related to reenrollment. The study describes the size and scope of the district's dropout problem, the characteristics of reenrollees, and their graduation rates. It also reports what district students and staff say about policies and practices that could improve their graduation outcomes. The study found that:

- » Dropping out is not necessarily a permanent outcome: about one-third of SBCUSD dropouts reenrolled in district high schools.

- » A majority of reenrollees dropped out for the first time in the ninth grade.
- » Over half of those reenrolling returned to school for just one year.
- » Only 18 percent of reenrollees ultimately earned a diploma by 2005/06, representing just 6 percent of the students who dropped out.

Among students tracked in this study, 1,352 dropped out at least once over the five-year period; of these, 419 reenrolled, with 77 of these reenrollees graduating within five years. Students drop out for a variety of reasons, but the study found that "without exception, reenrollees reported mental health issues that impeded their ability to attend school regularly — anxiety, depression, and a sense of hopelessness." Other issues presenting personal challenges for these

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REL West Research Digest keeps educators and others abreast of the research carried out by the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) West at WestEd. In addition to providing abstracts of selected REL West research reports, this twice-yearly digest may include descriptions of upcoming REL West work, services, and events, and, as relevant to the Western region, of publications developed by other researchers.

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students included “family crises, such as homelessness, and alcohol and drug use, gang pressures, and violence in the community.” As to why they return after having dropped out, failure to find a job was the primary reason offered. But all reenrollees interviewed “acknowledged the persuasive power of caring and persistent school staff in helping to pull them back to high school.

Good intentions notwithstanding, returning students faced many hurdles in their efforts to make up courses. The study found that a third of reenrollees left school again before earning any course credit. While more research is needed on how best to help these students make up courses and recover credits, one option that emerged from interviews with district and school staff

and students is for schools to try to preempt the issue by enrolling all ninth- and tenth-grade students who fail a course in a credit-recovery program. Lead researcher Berliner notes that this is important because any student who falls behind faces a slippery slope: the study found that it becomes increasingly difficult for students to make up courses later.

(The full report is available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=142&productID=100>. The researchers will be presenting their findings at the National Conference on Alternatives to Expulsion, Suspension, and Dropping Out of School, in January 2009, and the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, in April 2009.)

Selected Fast-Response Project Reports

In carrying out fast-response projects intended to inform quick action and policy decisions, REL West researchers analyze or otherwise utilize existing data, studies, and research reviews. Results undergo external peer review to ensure that they meet the Institute of Education Sciences standards for scientifically valid research. Published reports are available on the national REL web site at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/index.asp>.

Course-taking patterns and preparation for postsecondary education in California’s public university systems among minority youth

This study finds that many high school graduates who fail to meet admission requirements for California’s public universities fall off the college-preparatory track as early as ninth grade. Students who postpone efforts to meet these requirements until later in high school face increasingly difficult hurdles.

Trends in California teacher demand: A county and regional perspective

This report highlights the differences among California counties and regions in current use of underprepared teachers and needs for new teachers in the coming decade, as driven by projected enrollment changes and teacher retirements.

Examining the link between grade-12 mathematics coursework and mathematics remediation in Nevada public colleges and universities

This study looks at what grade-12 mathematics courses Nevada high school graduates take and their

likelihood of needing to take remedial mathematics courses in Nevada’s public colleges and universities. Remediation rates are analyzed by students’ highest grade-12 mathematics course and grade-12 mathematics grade point average, and various student and school characteristics.

Implementation of the weighted student formula policy in San Francisco: A descriptive study of an equity-driven, student-based planning and budgeting policy

This report examines decisions made by San Francisco Unified School District in designing its weighted student formula (WSF) for school funding, by which schools have more control and money follows each student. The study also looks at if and how staffing and resource patterns have shifted with the WSF.

Training early intervention assistants in California’s community colleges

Under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, professionals working with children with disabilities from birth to age 3 may enter the field from a variety of educational backgrounds.

This report details how a pilot group of California community colleges are integrating early intervention competencies as part of an Associates degree in child development. It also summarizes how other states prepare and certify early intervention specialists.

Characteristics of Arizona school districts in improvement

This descriptive analysis provides a statistical profile of Arizona's lowest-performing school districts in the aggregate.

Characteristics of California school districts in program improvement (July)

Characteristics of California school districts in program improvement: 2008 update (October)

These descriptive analyses provide a statistical profile of California's Title I school districts in program improvement in the aggregate.

REL West Multi-Year Evaluations

REL West is has been conducting six randomized controlled trials (RTCs) to look for causal evidence of the impact of well-defined and fully developed education interventions that have shown promise through preliminary studies and that address high-priority needs in the region. (Interventions developed by WestEd, REL West's parent organization, are evaluated by outside researchers.) Results from two studies will be published in 2009:

High school instruction with problem-based economics

This study assesses student-level effects of a problem-based instructional approach to high school economics, a required course for high school graduation in California and Arizona and, as of 2006, a subject tested on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The problem-based curriculum approach is intended to increase class participation and content knowledge and has been shown to differentially benefit low-achieving students.

UPCOMING FAST-RESPONSE REPORTS FOR 2009

The status of California's independent study high schools

Over 80,000 California students are enrolled full-time in independent study, but little is known about the variety of independent study arrangements or about those schools in which most or all students are enrolled full time in independent study. This upcoming report begins to address that information gap.

State-level implementation of Response to Intervention

Response to Intervention (RtI) is a multi-tiered early intervention model for improving student achievement, as well as a special education diagnostic tool for early evaluation and identification of students with specific learning disabilities. This study examines state-level RtI implementation frameworks in nine states, including Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah.

Assessment accommodation for English language learners

This study investigates the effectiveness of linguistic modification as a means for increasing access to test content for English learner (EL) students by decreasing language load without modifying the content and underlying construct being assessed. Specifically, the study focuses on how linguistic modification affects students' ability to access math content during standardized achievement testing.

Work from Other Research Organizations

Education practice guides

Education practice guides, published by the Institute of Education Sciences' What Works Clearinghouse, provide specific and coherent evidence-based recommendations for addressing persistent education challenges that cannot currently be addressed by single interventions or programs. Each guide is developed by a panel of nationally recognized experts and is subjected to rigorous external peer review. Practice guides published in 2008 are *Dropout Prevention*; *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices*; *Reducing Behavior Problems in the Elementary School Classroom*; and *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools*. The guides are available in pdf form at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides>.

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