

## Approaches to Dropout Prevention: The Philosopher's Stone Revisited

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Dropout prevention has recently received considerable attention from both practitioners and researchers and, in fact, has been set as a national goal. Suggestions for prevention have been far-ranging and both national and local in scope. In this article, dropout prevention strategies, particularly the school-based efforts, are reviewed. While traditional research has been based on a "social deficiency model" of dropouts, a growing body of literature indicates that schools themselves may need to be restructured to effectively address the dropout problem.

### *Introduction*

During the middle ages, alchemists eagerly sought the philosopher's stone: The magic stone that would, with one touch, transform even the basest metal into solid gold. The scholars assumed that all matter must have a common base material, a physical common denominator; therefore, all material could be changed into another through the manipulation of this common base.

Today, our search for educational excellence bears some resemblance to the quest of these medieval scholars. A number of proposals to transform education have been offered (see Shepard, 1987). Through the proper combination of curriculum and teacher attitude, these proposals seek to transform *all* students into young adults with basic skills, a solid foundation of academic knowledge, and a zest for lifetime learning.

Because this reform movement seeks to improve education for all students—the advantaged and the disadvantaged, the gifted student and the slow learner, as well as the college and noncollege bound—considerable concern has developed over the dropout problem. By dropping out, students give up the possibility of a transformation; they are also, therefore, implicit critics of the reform movement (Fine, 1986). As a result, a sense of urgency has developed about dropout prevention.

Opinions about dropout prevention vary like those about general education itself, and both policy-makers and practitioners have definite opinions about what should be done (Hahn, Danzberger, & Lefkowitz, 1987). The literature on dropout prevention is prevalent in both monographs and media and far outstrips the research-based material on the topic. Part of this emotionalism about dropout prevention reflects a concern over students' aspirations in general. It underscores education's crucial role in elevating students' aspirations and conditions in

later life. A complete summary of these efforts is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. It is the intent of this article to summarize the major issues and perspectives regarding dropout prevention.

### *General Approaches to Prevention*

Bill Cosby says, "You're no fool; stay in school" (National Dropout Prevention Fund Publication, undated). The National Dropout Prevention Fund regards the dropout problem as a national crisis and projects a 40% dropout rate by the year 2000. The organization strives to increase national concern over the problem. They encourage citizens to raise the awareness of citizens in their local communities and to urge community leaders to get involved in solutions to the dropout problem. They also encourage contributions to help the National Dropout Prevention Center to act as a clearinghouse for effective programs.

In fact, the Center's literature appears to define two distinct aspects of the problem: First, they emphasize the difficulties to the individual in dropping out and the personal loss of income and future options. Second, they emphasize the cost to the nation in terms of both finances and an uneducated citizenry. Their literature raises the question of who owns the problem. Many dropouts are certainly quite content with how their lives have progressed (See, for example, Macdougall & McCaul, 1987). They have aspired to, and achieved, a high quality of life. Yet, it still remains an issue of national concern.

In fact, many authors treat it as a problem of national scope. Levin (1985) stated that "approaches to change must be viewed in the context of an overall strategy for placing the challenge of the disadvantaged on the national policy agenda and addressing the challenge effectively" (p. 18). He argued that addressing the problem of

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educationally disadvantaged students is a sound national investment, and the federal government should spearhead this effort. From there, the responsibility spreads to the states to identify the specific populations at risk and to establish programs to meet their needs; to the communities and school boards to establish dropout prevention as a priority; and to business and industry to encourage schools to provide a high-quality labor force and to help schools in their efforts to address the needs of the educationally disadvantaged. Levin addressed the problem as a political, rather than individual, problem; one of his major concerns is the creation of a dual society, composed of the "haves and have-nots," in constant conflict and tension.

Levin's emphasis on the involvement of the local community and of business and industry appears to be a major component of many agendas on the dropout problem. Sometimes this involvement is striking and receives considerable media attention. For example, a millionaire industrialist, Eugene Lang, offered the sixth graders at a Harlem school a free college education if they completed school (Banas, 1986). His efforts have motivated other businesses to establish scholarships for high-risk students who stay in school. Businesses are also sponsoring other incentives for students, including gifts and prizes for good grades and attendance (Mitang, 1987). The Ford Foundation has sponsored grants to selected school districts in which community leaders have gotten involved with matching at-risk students to programs that meet their needs ("Group to Match," 1986). Other programs, such as the Boston Compact and a recently initiated Chicago effort, arrange for guarantees by businesses to hire marginal students who remain in school and graduate ("Promising Ideas," 1986).

Mann (1986) also called for community involvement. He is, however, no dropout evangelist. He recognized that dropout prevention is a multifaceted problem and refers to it as "nested" problem: one with sociological, political, economic, and pedagogical dimensions. Mann noted that it is really a "galaxy" of problems; "virtually everything is being done and . . . at the delivery level we cannot yet tell to whom or with what effects" (p. 9). He also noted that even with a variety of approaches the dropout rate has remained steady for twenty years (p. 7). How then can one discuss solutions? Mann suggested that we document the extent of the problem and develop rough, but our best, judgments of what works (p. 12, 13). His own solutions are "the four Cs—coalitions, cash, care, and computers." The coalitions to which Mann referred are the links with business and industry, as well as employment-training agencies, noted earlier. In fact, the network may reach into virtually all aspects of a community, putting schools in contact with "parks and recreation, juvenile justice, family courts, social work, and youth employment." The second, cash, is related to the first and involves work experience programs for students that link educational experience with paid employment. Again, agencies such as Joint Training and Partnership (JTPA) have an important role in this linkage.

The other two Cs relate to more traditional school-related functions—care and computers. Mann cited the alienation and frustration of at-risk students and the evidence that smaller schools and personal contact with teachers seem to be effective in dropout prevention. Other authors have emphasized the "greater feelings of satisfaction with school life" in smaller schools (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1986), as well as the increased ability to individualize programs. Wehlage (1983) noted that one characteristic of effective alternative schools is that they are relatively small, no more than 25 to 60 students, so that they may treat students in a personal manner and respond to individual needs (p. 32, 33). Beck and Muia (1960) espoused a more traditional view when they stated "one such measure is for educators to demonstrate feelings of love and approval toward potential dropouts, letting them know they are valuable, important individuals" (p. 72).

Mann's final C represents computers—for both instructional management and student data management. He noted that the Job Corps has made intensive use of computers for instruction. With their management of information, computers allow access to information on basic skills competencies, career information, and job performance skills. Individualized computer-assisted instruction has demonstrated substantial student achievement gains (p. 15). Levin (1985) noted that "major achievement gains can be made for as little as \$120 a year per subject for each student in mathematics and reading through computer-assisted instruction" (p. 19). Computers may also keep track of dropout-related information. Since at-risk students are usually subject to "multiple impacts," computers can keep track of the relevant factors and alert educators to danger signals. In addition, computers may help to keep track of dropout statistics at the local level (p. 15).

### *School-Based Efforts*

There are, of course, myriad suggestions in dropout literature for school-based efforts on the problem. One of the most commonly cited solutions is early intervention. Schreiber (cited in Beck & Muia, 1980) observed that "over the long haul, programs in the nursery and kindergarten will probably be most beneficial in preventing dropouts" (p. 71). The early efforts, such as Headstart, to attack the problem of concomitant socioeconomic and educational disadvantage were aimed at the preschool population. Then, of course, prevention in the early grades focuses on the recognition of possible problems and on the social and educational remedial efforts necessary to attack the individual problem (Beck & Muia, 1980; Hahn, Danzberger, & Lefkowitz, 1987). Also, grade retention is a predictor of dropping out; Hahn, et al. (1987) argued, therefore, that retentions may be, in actuality, a form of punishment for students who began schooling at a disadvantage. They believed that remedial efforts as well as a developmental approach for the early grades, are far more effective than retention (p. 27, 28).

Of course, Hahn et al. recommended these efforts continue throughout a student's career. But, at the middle school level, caution must be taken so that students do not begin to "disappear" while making the necessary social adjustments. A school atmosphere that emphasizes teacher-student contact and support through the middle school years may help to reduce the student dropout rate. These authors also cited the success of a summer training institution for middle school students (sponsored by a Ford Foundation grant) in which students worked at a paid job, received academic instruction, and received intensive instruction in family life issues, including how to combat teen pregnancy (p. 30, 35).

Hamilton (1986), in a review of the literature on dropouts, stated that ability grouping or tracking may also have a negative effect. He noted that the literature indicates that tracking has dubious results in terms of achievement, but definite results in terms of a negative impact on the self-esteem of students in the lower tracks (p. 157). He argued that programs for dropouts should generally adhere to the "least restrictive environment principle" of special education. Separate programs can be justified only if the basis for the recommendation is substantial, the separate program is clearly understood by the student and the student's parents, and the student is clearly at considerable risk of dropping out (p. 158).

McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1986) cited several alterable school factors that may aid in dropout prevention. Schools with considerable social disorganization, such as high truancy rates and substantial discipline problems, can work to improve school atmosphere by improving staff-administrator relationships and by instituting fair and consistent discipline policies. Schools need to individualize their instruction and curriculum for those students who are at-risk of academic failure and who suffer from low self-esteem. At the same time, schools must strive to maintain an environment supportive of high achievement and intellectualism. One approach to maintaining this environment is through a system of rewards, such as learning contracts or token economies, that reinforce effort and achievement. These authors expressed their concern that low-achieving students may be particularly at risk dropping out because of the increased performance standards of the educational reform movement. In order to prevent a large scale dropout problem as a result of higher standards, the authors recommended four specific strategies: 1) Schools should monitor the impact of the new standards on potential dropouts in their district; 2) Program development and research should focus on the school characteristics associated with successful at-risk students; 3) Schools should maintain high standards for *all* students; 4) Schools should provide students with educational services that involve flexible time options. By this latter option, the authors mean that at-risk students, already under severe time constraints because of outside pressures, may need to opt for a program of less concentration but a longer duration. A five or six year program may more appropriately meet some students' needs (pp. 124-135). This particular

option is similar to the suggestion that students be given a voucher for a high school education. They are allowed to cash in this voucher at any time during their life and may work toward the diploma at the pace that they choose.

Hahn, et al. (1987) suggested several other strategies for high schools in reducing the dropout rate. First, they recommended that secondary training institutions concentrate on attacking the problem of a shortage of guidance counselors. If this crisis is overcome, potential dropouts could be set up in a mentorship with counselors. Second, they suggested a restructuring of the role of a truant officer to provide more effective coordination of efforts between home, school, and the community. Third, they noted that the dropout problem for females is inextricably tied to the alarming rise in teenage pregnancies. Motherhood, especially for the high-risk lower income populations, makes continuing an education extremely difficult. School-based health centers and infant care centers must, therefore, be more widely established in order to provide the services necessary to support young mothers and pregnant teens while they attend school. Fourth, full-time schools are able to offer at-risk youth a greater variety of options and programs. Finally, they cited the effectiveness of improved incentives for staying in school; tangible rewards—such as the cars, watches, cameras, and radios provided by a Chicago high school and funded by business leaders—can be effective motivators.

#### *Social and Cultural Issues in Dropout Prevention*

Hamilton (1986) examined the structure of schooling in West Germany, and the related process of apprenticeship training, in order to glean insight into dropout prevention. Based on his examination, Hamilton concluded that schools should, at least for clearly identified marginal students, rely more on out-of-school learning experience and on more intensive work-related training. He argued that research indicates the effectiveness of community-based learning, in terms of enhanced positive attitudes as well as increased achievement, and that "the concentration of recent reform proposals on in-class instructions is unwarranted, particularly for marginal students. Out-of-classroom educational programs should be part of current efforts to improve secondary schools" (p. 164). Manual training, on the other hand, needs to be taught in a context that views this training "a vehicle for teaching academic knowledge and skills." While special programs should be established for dropouts, Hamilton argued that selection, and classroom grouping in general, must be done with extreme care. He cited Rist (1970) whose research indicates selections for grouping may be based on social class rather than academic ability thus magnifying already existing social injustices (p. 159).

Certainly some ethnographic researchers, such as Fine (1986) and Fine & Rosenberg (1983), would view societal inequities as the heart of the dropout problem. In a sense, these authors would agree with early researchers

such as Bachman, Green, & Wirtinen (1972) that a student's decision to drop out is really symptomatic of a cluster of problems. Rather than viewing these problems as deficits in the individual student, however, these researchers would see the decision as symptomatic of larger societal problems: a basic inequity in society's treatment of racial minorities and women, an insidious racism and sexism in communities and schools, and a distorted sense of priorities in our national leaders.

In this vein, it is illustrative to note a comparison with a different culture, but this time with Australia rather than West Germany. Biddle, Bank, Anderson, Keats, and Keats (1981) explored the effects that dropping out of school has in two distinctly different cultures. The authors believed that adolescent's decision to drop out has different consequences depending upon the cultural values of the society. Specifically, their study advanced four hypotheses: 1) Within both countries, adolescents who have left high school are likely to be under-employed, and hence have leisure time to fill; 2) By comparison with adolescents still in school, school leavers in America (but not in Australia) will more often engage in problem behaviors and activities that they find boring; 3) By comparison with adolescents still in school, school leavers in Australia (but not in America) will more often engage in socially accepted forms of recreation; 4) By comparison with adolescents still in school, dropouts in America (but not in Australia) will be more isolated from their families (pp. 108-109). The authors obtained sample groups of in-school youth and dropouts in both countries (although they noted the difficulty in obtaining sample groups of dropouts), and the group members were interviewed over their activities in the weeks prior to the study. Responses were analyzed and compared with the authors' hypotheses.

Results supported the researchers first two hypotheses. In addition, the authors found more problem behaviors among American dropouts. Results also indicated that adolescents in both countries would like opportunities for more active sports and recreation, and suggest that the greater prevalence of these activities in Australia reflects greater preference . . . We suspect that American dropouts were led, through boredom, to visit, loaf, and engage in problem behaviors (p. 115).

American dropouts were also more likely to live away from home. In addition, they had less frequent interaction with their parents. American dropouts' responses indicated that they were less likely than Australian school leavers to talk over problems at home. Incidentally, differences in background characteristics, between American and Australian dropouts, were not statistically significant. The authors discussed the difficulties in generalizing from their sample, to the general population of dropouts or school leavers. Still, the experiences of youths who leave school seem to be very different depending on how the act is interpreted by society. Perhaps, the authors pointed out, some of the "verities" concerning what will

happen to dropouts depends on cultural expectations rather than on the intrinsic consequences of leaving school. The authors noted that school has taken on more and more responsibility for the lives of American youth over the past thirty years. At the same time, other experiences, such as apprenticeships, have declined. They suggested that more social support networks, similar to the Australian amateur sports clubs, may provide opportunities for American youth who have left school and have few activities to structure idle time.

### *The Alternative-School Approach*

Public school dropouts are not just an urban problem. Rural school officials have shown considerable concern over the dropout problem. A recent report by the National School Boards Association (1989) suggested that "as many as three-fifths of this [educationally at-risk] population may be dispersed throughout the country in rural and suburban areas" (p. 1).

The alternative school approach is presently a commonly used approach to addressing the dropout problem in rural communities (Hahn, Danzberger, & Lefkowitz, 1987). Alternative schools provide more structured and individualized settings for potential dropouts. Teachers generally have more autonomy for adjusting academic programs to meet students' needs. Vocational and personal counseling are often components of alternative school programs (Paulu, Gruskin, & Campbell, 1987).

Wehlage (1983) described several successful alternative programs and then discusses the characteristics of effective alternative programs. His research indicated that several common traits characterize these effective programs. As noted earlier, programs must be of manageable size and small enough to promote face-to-face contact between teachers and administrators as well as between teachers and students. Programs must also have autonomy; effective programs are run by a small cadre of teachers who feel empowered and able to be creative in approaching difficult-to-teach students. A positive teacher culture develops in effective programs with the teachers adopting a positive attitude relative to students' potential and relative to their own abilities as teachers. In fact, teachers must view themselves as "quasi-counselors" and deal effectively with the whole student, not just promoting academics to the detriment of social growth or, what Wehlage referred to as "social bonding"—the establishment of positive adult relationships. The teachers in effective programs also have high expectations of the students and firm, consistent guidelines for student behavior. They exhibit a collegiality which, in turn, develops a family style atmosphere in the school. This fosters a cooperative atmosphere among the students and a supportive peer culture. In terms of curriculum, the emphasis in effective programs is, according to Wehlage, on an individualized approach and real-life problem solving. Out-of-school experiences and community involvement are beneficial. Experiences are designed to develop a sense of responsibility, a sense of self-efficacy and competence, and a positive self-image (pp. 32-40). Wehlage's description

of effectiveness indicators lend guidance to schools as they mount their initiative to develop more effective dropout prevention programs.

### SUMMARY

It is difficult not to agree with Mann (1986) when he stated that “virtually anything can be related to the dropout problem” (p. 9). Societal inequities, the general cultural milieu, lack of business involvement, and school policies all seem to contribute to our nation’s dropout rate.

Still, there is some evidence that increased concern and attention to dropping-out may make a difference. Recently, President Reagan set a national goal of a 90% graduation rate, and many states have moved closer to that goal (*Tenth Annual Report to Congress*, 1988). Further, there has been growth in business involvement and concern over the dropout problem as is evidenced by the recent promise of college scholarships to elementary school children by Merrill-Lynch Foundation (Brune, 1988).

At the school level, it is easy to view the problem as too vast for effective intervention. However, educators can directly observe the impact of Mann’s third “c” in dropout prevention—care. Attention to individual students’ problems, and not just academic problems, is cited by most authors on the topic. Fine and Rosenberg (1983) have noted the role of insensitive educators in “pushing out” students. Hahn et al. (1987) cited the need for concern and sensitivity to the needs of teenage mothers. Wehlage (1983) noted the importance of teachers’ relationships with students in alternative programs.

Certainly, individual educators cannot be expected to shoulder the entire burden of dropout prevention. Gerics and Westheimer (1988) argued that superficial program changes will not ultimately alter the dropout rate; they believe only a radical reconstruction of the educational system will have a long-range impact. They viewed our present efforts as being based on the “deficiency model;” it is the student who must change, and we will accomplish this transformation with our educational philosopher’s stone.

Perhaps then, we must view “at-risk” students from a different perspective.

The failure of American education for at-risk students is an indictment of American democracy at large, not only of its schools . . . As long as educators look on the dropout phenomenon from a deficiency model, the problem will be seen as one of management . . . the issue is not only how to help at-risk students adapt (although this is an important concern and must be addressed), but the role of educators as more than technicians of educational methodology. Teachers must offer a vision, raise expectations, challenge students to grow—by enriching and enlarging the mean-

ings already present in students’ lives (Gerics & Westheimer, 1988, p. 57).

Some would challenge this vision; indeed, some would challenge the goal of dropout prevention. If public education is as fundamental to our democracy as many have claimed, however, then the dropout problem is not *their* problem—it is *our* problem. We may need to abandon the philosopher’s stone; we may need to change ourselves.

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