California Dropout Research Project

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Does State Policy Help or Hurt the Dropout Problem in California?

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By

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Abstract

This paper examines California education policy and its impact on school dropouts. It first assesses the difficulty of defining the scope and context of the dropout problem by summarizing the principal research findings on its causes. The paper then proposes a policy framework for mapping state policy strategies. The central question posed in the paper is whether the state suffers from policy dysfunction by, on the one hand, promulgating policies to keep students in school, while on the other hand promulgating policies that unintentionally drive students out of schools? What are the incentives or disincentives policies create for schools to either retain or push students out? Finally, this paper discusses the current system of state oversight and governance and its implications for dropouts and school completion.

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Introduction

The holding power of schools—their capacity to compete for the hearts and minds of young people with the lure of jobs, the pressures of personal and family life, and the social pressure of peers—, has been a challenge for educators since the creation of a system of common schools in the United States. Educators and policy makers have responded to these tensions in various ways. One was to make education compulsory for all students between certain ages. The other was to create a diversified educational system that matched students' occupational aspirations and life interests (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Powell, Farrar & Cohen, 1985). Over time, the compulsory age for schooling has changed. Currently the California Education Code requires that all children between the ages of six and 18 attend school full time[1]. What schools teach and what children are expected to learn has also changed, as societal expectations regarding the purposes of education changed. At the beginning of the 20th century, high schools were elite institutions with a curriculum focusing on the classics. As the nation's economy and demographic composition changed dramatically, so did compulsory education laws that required students to stay in school longer. With those changes, a differentiated curriculum emerged in an effort to increase the holding power of schools over students with limited academic aspirations (Tyack ,1974; Tyack and Hansot, 1982; Powell, Farrar & Cohen, 1985; Cremin, 1988 Kliebard, 1986).

This paper examines California's education policy and its impact on school dropouts. The paper first examines the difficulty of assessing the scope of the dropout problem. Second, it provides a context to the dropping out problem by summarizing the principal research findings on its causes. The paper then examines California state policies: those aimed at keeping students in school as well as those policies that may inadvertently push students out of school. Does the state suffer from "policy schizophrenia" by promulgating policies to keep students in school while it promulgates other policies that unintentionally drive students out of schools? What are the incentives or disincentives policies create for schools to either retain or push students out? Finally, this paper discusses the current system of state oversight and governance and its implications for dropouts and school completion.

[1] California Education Code sections 48200 and 48204.

Defining the Problem

In spite of educators' efforts to make schooling appealing to a wide range of student interests and aspirations, the ability of schools to hold students through high school graduation has varied considerably over time. By conventional estimates, just over 50 percent of adults held a high school diploma at the end of the Second World War. Between 1960 and the early to mid-1990s, high school completion rose substantially. In 1962, only 41.6 percent of Blacks and 69.2 percent of Whites completed high school. By 1980, graduation rates for Whites were 86.9 percent and for Blacks 76.6 percent (Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder, 2006). In California, the share of working-age adult population without a high school diploma has been fairly constant at 20 percent since 1970 (Reed, 2003).

Over the past several years, the rate of high school completion has received increased policy attention. Some studies show that only 68 percent of California's high school students are completing high school on time (de Cos, 2005). Other studies show that California is worse off than the rest of the nation. According to a Public Policy Institute study, the share of working-age adults in California who have not completed high school fell from 29 percent in 1968 to 19 percent in 1979 and has remained a this level since then. The share of students who have not completed ninth grade in California has stayed at 10 percent since the early 1970s, while in the rest of the nation it has fallen from 21 percent in 1968 to 4 percent in 2002 (Reed, 2003).

California's data looks considerably worse when low-income and ethnically diverse youth comprise the unit of analysis. One researcher estimates Latino high school graduation rates at 57 percent, African American graduation rates at 53.3 percent, and 49.7 percent for American Indians (Swanson et al., 2004) These numbers differ from the official, estimated four-year drop-out data from the California Department of Education, which calculates much higher completion rates for all groups in 2004-05: Whites at 92.2 percent, Latino at 82.4 percent, African American at 74.9 percent, and American Indian at 83.9 percent. Differences in dropout rate estimates point to a fundamental problem of inadequate data to track school dropouts accurately.

The problem is broader and deeper than just differences in dropout rates indicate. In its evaluation of the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE), the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO) estimates for the class of 2006, the overall pass rate for Latino students was 68 percent, while for African American students it was 63 percent (Wise, 2006); comparable figures for White and Asian students are 90 percent. For disadvantaged students, the pass rate is 66 percent. Nor is the data more encouraging in relation to the number of minority students who have completed coursework for admission to the University of California or California State University: 21.7 percent Latino, 25.1 percent African American, 39.5 percent White, and 56.2 percent Asian. While these particular data are not related directly to school dropouts, they are indicative of a more encompassing problem of academic achievement for large numbers of students, particularly low-income and minority students.

It is important to note how social policies have widened the gap between the haves and have-nots, limiting the latters' access to important resources. For example, racially segregated, poor neighborhoods increase the odds that children living in such neighborhoods (mainly African Americans and Latinos) will attend a low-performing school with high absenteeism, low promoting power, insufficient classroom supports, and fewer highly qualified teachers. Teachers who teach in such schools often work in sub-optimal working conditions (Darling Hammond, 2000; Civil Rights Project, 2005). As already noted, Latino, African American, and Native American youth have the highest dropout rates in the country, often hovering around the 50 percent mark (Hood, 2004).

Ignoring the dropout problem is not without significant costs. Researchers estimate that for each cohort of 120,000 twenty-year olds who do not complete high school the total economic cost to the state is $46.4 billion—equivalent to 2.9 percent of the Annual Gross State Product. These costs are based on the higher probability of crime, illness, poverty, and poor health among dropouts (Belfield & Levin, 2007).

Dropouts in California

A serious challenge faced by California high schools is helping the state's diverse group of students experience success. Although graduation rates in the state have increased since 1992, they

remain low, and differences among racial gaps are pronounced (Civil Rights Project, 2005). Despite decades of effort,, programs and services that consistently reduce California dropout rates have remained elusive (Warren, 2005).

Calculating Graduation Rates

Calculating graduation rates is a difficult task in California because the state lacks individual student identifiers that would enable accurate tracking of students as they move through grades in school or move from one school or district to the next. Such calculations are generally based on estimates of school or district data, and tend to vary because different schools and districts calculate those numbers differently. Depending on which estimated data are used, different conclusions may result (WestEd, 2004). For example, if dropout data is used, results can be very unreliable because of the inherent difficulty of tracking individual students. Dropouts do not file "dropout papers" but simply stop attending school, thereby leaving their actual status an open question (Warren, 2007). On the other hand, by using enrollment data, there is no way to know whether missing students dropped out completely, left the state, transferred to a private school, or repeated grades (WestEd, 2004).

According to the California Research Bureau (2005), the California Department of Education (CDE) produces and reports two graduation rates for its students: (1) the completer rate and (2) the basic completion ratio.

The *completer rate* corresponds to the National Center for Educational Statistics' (NCES) four-year completion rate. This is the rate that is used for reporting No Child Left Behind (NCLB)-required Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). "Completer rates" are calculated using information on high school graduates and high school dropouts aggregated over a four-year period. The *basic completion ratio* is the second way to estimate a graduation rate. The formula for calculating this ratio is to divide the number of graduates by the number of students in the ninth grade four years earlier. This method can only be calculated at the state level, and assumes that a student who enters and leaves school(s) will be captured at the state level.

How much weight is placed upon graduation rates varies, because states have been afforded a tremendous amount of latitude in implementing their accountability systems (Swanson, 2004). It is

important to note two major differences between the *basic completion ratio* and the NCES *completer rate*: 1) The NCES *completer rate* does not account for the changes in the enrollment of students who enter or leave the school system after the ninth grade, and 2) the NCES rate depends heavily on the number of dropouts, which are presumably underreported (de Cos, 2005). Thus, by excluding some students from the report, California's reporting of graduation rates, based on the NCES *completer rate*, violates basic criteria for an effective federally-required accountability system (Warren, 2007).

Another, more recently developed method for calculating school completion is the *cumulative promotion index (CPI).* This measure is used in *Education Week's* publication, *Diplomas Count.* The CPI estimates the percent of public high school students who graduate on time with a diploma; it does so by capturing four key steps a student must take in order to obtain a high school diploma: three grade-to-grade promotions, and ultimately earning a diploma. The last step in California requires students to have taken required courses and to pass the CAHSEE. The CPI only counts students who received standard high school diplomas as graduates, following the definition of the term *graduate*, as adopted by NCLB.[2]

Data Collection and Reporting

With increased attention on federal accountability requirements, there has been growing concern that official state-reported dropout rates in California are underestimated. Researchers have examined the number and percent of California high school graduates and have arrived at numbers different from those submitted by the CDE (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Greene, 2002; Oakes et al., 2004; Swanson 2004). Although explaining each study's methodology is beyond the scope of this paper, the conflicting reports of graduation and dropout rates complicate the formulation of strategic interventions and programs that improve student retention.

In the absence of accurate data to track students, high school graduation rates are based on reported enrollment data. As a result, there is some evidence that there are large numbers of students who are unaccounted for in official dropout or graduation rates reports (Orfield et al., 2004). The inadequacy

[2] For more information on how the CPI is calculated, see *Diplomas Count: The Graduation Project 2007. Education Week.* Vol. 26, No. 40. (2007) Also available at www.edweek.org/go/dc07

of both national and state systems for defining and collecting information about dropouts hinders the collection of accurate information; information that could truly hold schools accountable for students. An infrastructure for systematically collecting evidence can trump widely publicized scandals of falsifying data or poor record keeping (Swanson, 2004). Nonetheless, administrative record keeping can be exceedingly convoluted and difficult, particularly in communities characterized by high rates of mobility and household instability. Additionally, such comprehensive systems are costly to operate on an on-going basis, and much of the work and expense is borne by schools and districts. Yet, while collecting and maintaining data is costly, so is the social and economic cost to the state of large numbers of students leaving without a high school diploma (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Civil Rights Project, 2005).

If accountability systems are to work properly and meaningfully, states must demonstrate commitment to a common, representative, and accurate methodology for measurement. Graduation rates are a fundamental measure of school performance and, unless changes are made to improve current disparate policies, high school reform efforts will be undermined by a lack of valid and reliable information (Hall, 2005).

Why Students Drop Out

The literature on school dropouts suggests that pathways to dropping out of school are diverse and complex. There is no single cause or explanation why an increasing number of students do not complete high school on time or with a traditional diploma.[3] However, research on dropouts underscores several broad themes.

The National Education Longitudinal Study shows that 77 percent of students cited "school-related" reasons for leaving school. "Family related" reasons were mentioned by 34 percent, and "work-related" reasons were mentioned by 32 percent. Among those who cited school reasons, "did not like school" was cited by 46 percent and "failing school" by 39 percent. "Leaving school for a job" was cited by only 27 percent (Rumberger, 2004). Based on this study, it is logical to conclude that disengagement

[3] For a thorough review of the literature on why students dropout see R. Rumberger, "Why Students Drop Out of School" in G. Orfield (Ed.) *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press.

with school, rather than alternative opportunities such as work, is one of the chief factors in dropping out. That said, it still remains unclear why students leave school before graduation. It is difficult to interpret the precise meaning of "did not like school," and equally difficult to interpret "failing school." It is quite likely that both reasons represent cumulative effects that develop over a period of several years. For one child, the reason for not liking school may relate to social reasons—teasing and bullying, for instance—while for another it may stem from boredom or a succession of teachers whom the child did not like. "Failing school," too, may be a reason for some students to drop out, but does not inform why a student is failing. Students may be failing due to poor attendance (which may also be a result of multiple causes), inability to keep up with the school work, or any number of other reasons that may have nothing to do with school.

In his analysis of why students drop out, Rumberger (2004) offers two perspectives on the causes of dropping out: the *individual* perspective, which draws on various social science disciplines that focus on the attributes of students and how those might influence them to drop out of school; and the *institutional* perspective, which focuses on how the contexts—schools, families, communities—shape the behavior of individuals and how those may influence students' decisions about dropping out.

The individual perspective examines dropping out through the lens of engagement, which is manifested in two dimensions (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Newman et al., 1992; Welhage et al., 1989)—academic engagement and social engagement. The former encompasses student attitudes and behaviors with respect to the formal aspects of schooling—classrooms, curricula, and activities—while the latter encompasses informal aspects of schooling—peer and adult relationships (Rumberger, 2004; p. 133). According to Rumberger's review of the literature, dropping out is not simply a result of academic failure, but rather a consequence of both academic and social problems in school, often originating in the family and community. These finding suggest that reducing dropout rates will require comprehensive and coordinated approaches both to help at-risk students address the social and academic problems that they face, and to improve the at-risk settings that contribute to these problems.

Engagement is reflected in students' attitudes and behaviors with respect to both the formal aspects of schooling (classrooms and school activities) and informal aspects of schooling (peer and adult relationships). The following are among the chief *individual* or *student* predictors for dropping out:

- Poor academic achievement (students who were retained were eight to ten times more likely to drop out.
- Absenteeism and discipline problems.
- High rates of mobility—both residential mobility and school mobility (one study found that dropouts changed high schools at least once before dropping out).
- High school employment, especially working more than 20 hours per week (this may not be a causal factor for dropping out, but rather an indicator of disengagement).
- Pregnancy.

In addition to the student or individual factors that predict dropping out, there are a number of *institutional* variables. They are the following:

- Family structures: parent income, education level, home life.
- School factors: student composition.
- School policies and practices: academic and social climate.

Individual and Contextual Factors

The process of dropping out has been described as gradual, starting as early as elementary school (Entwistle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997). While stages of this process may differ from student to student, there are common characteristics related to a student's social and academic background (Lee & Burkam, 2003). There are a variety of factors that place students at-risk for failing in school. These factors can arise from the individual, family, school and community levels, and combinations of particular circumstances increase the potential for a student to leave school prior to graduation (Wells, 1990)..

According to the National Research Council (2001), dropping out is significantly more prevalent among students with disabilities, sexual minority youth, and among ethnic and linguistic minorities living in poverty and attending overcrowded urban schools. In addition, those who come from single-parent households, from families with parents who did not complete high school, or who became teen parents themselves, are also more likely to fail in school (Natriello et al., 1990).

School and Community Interaction

Student characteristics alone are insufficient to explain why students leave school before graduating (Lee & Burkham, 2003). We do know that communities with high concentrations of risk factors often produce children needing greater levels of support. Sampson (2000) argues, "There is a clear connection between healthy child development and neighborhood characteristics" (p. 209). In turn, healthy child development correlates with educational success. According to some researchers, schools that fail to extend extra and intensive supports or do not make learning accommodations for those students living in poorly resourced and violent communities, set students up for failure in many ways.

Accountability Policies

Signed into law by President Bush in 2002, the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act* is designed to improve the academic performance of all public school students. Enacted in part out of concern for the widening achievement gap between student subgroups based on race, ethnicity, disability, limited English proficiency, and income (Primont & Domazlicky, 2006), *NCLB* places increased emphasis on standardized test scores in evaluating student performance. Schools must regularly report and are held accountable for realizing 'adequate yearly progress' (AYP) in raising student achievement. Those schools failing to meet these benchmarks face increasingly punitive sanctions (Civil Rights Project, 2005). By 2014, states must demonstrate that students are achieving 100 percent proficiency in reading and mathematics. Each year, the California Department of Education (CDE) establishes a minimum percentage of students performing at the "proficient" level on state assessments (Warren, 2007). California also calculates a school Academic Performance Index (API), which is similar to a weighted average of student scores on state tests, which includes the Stanford 9 (SAT 9), Spanish Assessment of Basic Education (SABE), and California Standards Test (CST). The API is a single summary measure of school performance and facilitates school-to-school comparisons (Powers, 2003).

Beginning with the 2005–2006 school year, students graduating from California's public high schools are required to take and pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). The exam is intended to ensure that students possess basic math and language arts skills when they graduate. Students

have their first attempt at passing the exam in the 10th grade. Students who fail the exam have up to five additional opportunities to retake any part of the test that they did not pass.

As an accountability measure, the CAHSEE affects the academic focus of high school for many students (Warren, 2005). Many schools have allotted additional funds and developed remedial courses to help students master the skills necessary to pass the CAHSEE.

In September 2005, the Human Resources Research Organization conducted an independent evaluation of the CAHSEE and posted several results. Among their findings were the following:

- 42% of Special Education students had not passed either part of the CAHSEE;
- Latino and African American students had the lowest estimated cumulative passing rate for both sections of the CAHSEE; and,
- 25% of English Language Learners (ELLs) had not passed either part of the CASHEE.

In examining the possible effect of high stakes testing on high school dropout rates, there is a common assumption that such tests are related to increased numbers of students, particularly African Americans and Latinos, dropping out of school (Horn, 2005). Thus, accountability policies designed to improve achievement and motivate schools and students could have unintended detrimental effects.

On the other hand, Warren and Edwards (2005) found that stringent high school graduation requirements actually had little to do with a student's chance of completing high school. They show that cumulative pass rates on high school exit exams across the country seem to have been universally high, and, therefore, such exams pose little obstacle to a majority of students despite socioeconomic status and prior achievement. Nevertheless, Warren and Edwards (2005) are quick to note possible shortcomings of their research.

So long as the CAHSEE test content encourages lower-performing students to work harder to learn the subject area content assessed by the test, then it can be a valuable tool in maintaining a level of academic rigor. However, because results are mixed, more research is necessary on the relationships between states' assessment policies and students' educational outcomes to provide better information about the process. The goal of this research should be to ascertain how district, school, and classroom

policies could be designed to truly improve student aptitude and educational attainment, as well as meet federal academic benchmarks (Muller & Schiller, 2000; National Research Council, 2001). More broadly, test scores can reveal important information necessary to promote better strategies in K-12 education. Some argue, however, that sanctions imposed on` schools on the basis of those scores may be unfair and inappropriate (Horn, 2005).

Framing Dropout Policy

Framing dropout strategies challenges policy makers because the problem defies ready identification. The multiplicity of factors that contribute to a child's dropping out of school means that solutions to the problem will also be multiple. Thus, dropping out can be defined as an administrative problem resulting from the absence of educational alternatives for students who do not fit into traditional school programs, or to the lack of adequate warning systems that let school officials know when students are at risk. Or, it may be framed as a professional problem: the absence of psychological or social services to students, and the lack of adequate training and time for teachers to identify and help students who might be on the path to dropping out. Dropping out may also be framed as a legal problem: inadequate or weak legal sanctions for truancy, lack of enforcement of existing truancy laws, the lack of judicial system resources to respond to the dropout problem, or poor or weak cooperation between legal agencies and schools. A political framing of the problem would have the state abdicate responsibility by declaring it a local problem that schools, districts, and communities must solve on their own. Hence, it would be regarded as a local problem that requires local solutions. If local officials fail to solve the problem to voters' satisfaction, they can be voted out of office and replaced by others who can find satisfactory solutions. The relationships among policy frames and solutions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Framing the Dropout Problem and Solutions

Policy Frame	Problem	Possible Solutions	Policy Instruments
Administrative/ Bureaucratic	Lack of alternative programs or curricula for students who do not fit comfortably into traditional school model; lack of early identification and tracking system to identify as early as possible students at risk of dropping out; lack of processes to integrate new or transfer students into new school; inadequate programs for students who are academically behind.	Alternative education programs and curricula, e.g. CTE, extended high school, dual high school and community college enrollment; student tracking, compliance, and monitoring system; at risk indicators and triggers for intervention; system of rewards and sanctions.	Regulatory—reporting and compliance monitoring; Structural—system changing Fiscal incentives
Professional	Lack of adequate education/career counseling, mental health, and social services; inadequate teacher training to recognize and remedy student behaviors that lead to dropping out; lack of a professional support system for teachers.	Integrated children's services; better training for teachers to identify students potentially at risk; regular opportunities for professional interaction among teachers, counselors, and social service providers; professional development for alternative teaching strategies, curriculum design, assessment and diagnosis.	Capacity building
Legal	Lack of sanctions, oversight, and enforcement of existing truancy laws; weak truancy laws; lack of coordination among law enforcement, social, and educational agencies; inherent limitations of legal solutions—too little, too late.	Increase sanctions; eliminate sanctions in favor of special education model of IEP and due process rights; provide entitlement to charter schools or service providers.	Elaboration of legal rights to educational services
Political	Dropout problem cannot be solved at the state level. Schools, districts and communities are all different and, therefore, must come up with solutions unique to their own situations.	Rely on local voter monitoring of school performance. Provide information to constituents regarding school performance. Give locals flexibility and resources to develop effective dropout prevention programs.	Electoral mandate

Policy solutions to the dropout problem must address the problem's multiple policy frames. Policy makers may look to new programs such as increased instructional time, a student tracking system, or alternative pathways through school. However, new or reconfigured programs are not likely to have much impact on the problem without the necessary professional expertise to implement the programs. The challenge to policy makers is to devise ways in which these policy frames reinforce rather than compete with one another. Each frame is important and each contributes to the overall policy design. The trick is to find the proper balance among them. Relying too heavily on bureaucratic or legal norms and routines creates the risk of rule mindedness and proceeduralism. Over-reliance on political solutions risks unevenness in practice and, in many cases, neglect.

The State Role in Dropout Prevention

As in other areas of education policy, California lacks a comprehensive policy approach to school dropouts. Instead, the state has a combination of policy strategies that have been adopted over time to address various dimensions of the problem. Those strategies tend to be somewhat diffuse and some, rather indirect. They run the range of policy instruments from legal mandates to inducements to capacity building to system changing (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). The most obvious strategies are the legal instruments the state has at its disposal to compel school attendance. Second are various fiscal incentives to school districts to enforce compulsory attendance laws. Third are the fiscal incentives to districts to provide counseling services, and alternative programs, often second-chance opportunities to complete schooling in non-traditional settings. These are generally made available through categorically funded programs. Finally, the state provides technical support—often in tandem with non-governmental agencies and foundations—to assist schools in addressing the problem of student disengagement.

Legal instruments. California law requires everyone between the ages of six and 18 years of age to attend school. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds who have graduated from high school, as well as those who have passed the California High School Proficiency Exam (CHSPE) and have parent permission, are exempted from attendance. The principal enforcement mechanism for compulsory education is the School Attendance Review Board (SARB), created by the legislature in 1974 as an alternative to the juvenile

justice system. Rather than criminalizing truancy, policy makers sought to provide a safety net for students with persistent behavioral and attendance problems. The general intent of the SARB approach is to engage local communities on a broad level. Implicit in the policy is the recognition that truancy is not a problem that schools—or even schools and parents—can solve on their own. The kinds of interventions that may be necessary to keep a child in school may not be available to the school: interventions may require the participation of various social or medical services.[4]

County and local SARBs are voluntary. Local boards comprise representatives of various local youth-serving agencies. Their purpose is to help truant students and their parents or guardians solve school attendance and behavioral problems through the use of available school and community resources. County SARBs are convened at the beginning of each school year by the county superintendent. In counties with no SARBs, local districts may establish SARBs that have the same jurisdiction as county SARBs. In addition to local SARBs, Education Code Section 48325 establishes a state SARB for state-wide policy coordination and personnel training. In many respects, the state SARB board has responsibility to oversee local activities and to make policy recommendations to the Superintendent of Public Instruction regarding dropout prevention.

Chapter 465, *Statutes of 2000* (Senate Bill 1913, McPherson) requires the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO), in consultation with the California District Attorney's Association (CDAA) and the California Department of Education (CDE), to report to the legislature regarding the implementation of penalties for parents who violate state compulsory education laws. In its 2004 report, the LAO found that only seven of 20 surveyed counties collected SARB data (LAO 2004). Among the seven counties collecting and summarizing SARB data, there were 10,963 SARB referrals in 2001-02 and 11,005 in 2002-03. Of the seven counties reporting, three counties—Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Ventura—accounted for 92 percent of the referrals. Little is know about the reasons why the majority of counties do

[4] Compulsory education laws and the SARB process were modified in 2000 by Chapter 465, *Statutes of 2000* (Senate Bill 1913, McPherson). Chapter 465 gave courts the legal authority to order parents who violate compulsory education laws to place their children in schools or educational programs.

not report the number of SARB referrals. LAO notes in its survey that the cause might be attributable to the fact that school districts do not provide counties with the summary data.

The SARB approach to dropout prevention has several flaws. One is administrative, the other conceptual. The administrative shortcomings, addressed in the LAO report, focus on the lack of coordination among local agencies. Among the counties reporting SARB data, some districts and counties oversee a large number of cases. According to LAO:

> Each of these cases requires the coordination of services and follow-up efforts among various agencies. We found that these agencies focus on completing their individual role in the truancy intervention process, but the overall coordination of information is poor. Discussion with SARB personnel, for example, revealed that courts often fail to report the outcomes of truancy cases to school districts in a timely manner. (LAO, 2004; p.5)

LAO further found that courts and school districts lack the personnel to complete the follow-up efforts. In the final analysis, SARBs are typically overwhelmed by their own workload, such that the ability to effectively monitor cases is limited. Local agency administrative capacity is non-existent in making the SARB system an effective way of countering truancy.

On a conceptual level, there are difficulties also. The logic of action behind the SARB policy is that a combination of legal, social, and educational interventions will re-engage students in the schooling process. In some instances, depending on the causes of truancy, such interventions may, indeed, succeed. Given the dropout numbers, however, the SARB process is not successful in reengaging students with schooling. If schooling is deemed irrelevant and disconnected from any reasonable vision of the future that students may hold, it is unlikely that those students will return to school with a new sense of commitment as a consequence of the palliatives proposed by the SARB.

Fiscal incentives. The state has adopted various fiscal incentives to encourage schools to be concerned about dropout prevention. Foremost is calculation of the State Revenue Limit, the principal source of funding to school districts. How much money a district receives is calculated by computing the district's average daily attendance (ADA), rather than enrollment. While funding based on ADA, rather than enrollment, has been the subject of much policy debate, proponents argue that funding based on ADA, creates a powerful incentive for schools to keep children in school. Proponents of ADA-based

funding argue that there are many perverse incentives for schools to push students out of school. State and federal accountability systems are particularly threatening to those schools and districts that enroll the lowest performing students. Schools are under great pressure to show improvement among all students; in response, schools may be tempted to push low-performing students out in order to increase the likelihood of higher tests scores.

Targeted programs. Assembly Bill 825 (Chapter 871, *Statutes of 2004*) and the subsequent Assembly Bill 1136 (Chapter 402, *Statutes of 2005*) created the Pupil Retention Block Grant. Its purpose was to consolidate various programs targeted to youth at risk. Funding for the 2006-07 budget year is $93.7 million. The Pupil Retention Block Grant includes funding for:

- Elementary School Intensive Reading Program
- Intensive Algebra Instruction Academies Program
- Continuation High School Foundation Program
- High-Risk Youth Education and Public Safety Program
- Tenth Grade Counseling
- Opportunity Classes and Programs (district programs only)
- Dropout Prevention and Recovery Programs (SB 65: four programs)
- Early Intervention for School Success
- At-Risk Youth Program (Los Angeles Unified School District)

Technically, the Pupil Retention Block Grant is the only state funding source that targets dropout prevention directly. Other programs such as the various kinds of alternative schools have a mixed purpose, as we discuss in greater detail below. Some schools are punitive—often used to banish students who have behavior problems or are failing academically. Others provide services to students who do not do well in the traditional school setting.

SB65-Dropout Prevention & Recovery Act

In 1985 the Legislature enacted Senate Bill 65 (*Statutes of 1985*, Chapter 142), the Dropout Prevention and Recovery Act. The act rested on the premise that the most effective dropout prevention efforts need to target the earliest possible identification and intervention. One of the programs created by SB65 is the School-Based Pupil Motivation and Maintenance (M&M) Program. The program supports dropout prevention specialists (known as outreach consultants) to work with schools to provide support through the coordination of services (school and larger community) in identifying and meeting the needs

of at-risk youth (CDE, 2000). Special instructional and auxiliary services are also written into local plans in order to meet the needs of ELLs, Title I students, gifted and talented students, and students with special needs. Other program elements of M&M include staff development, increasing parental involvement, and involving the school's School Site Council (SSC) in the evaluation and allocation of the SB65 budget and annual school dropout prevention plans.

Schools implementing M&M programs also integrate School Success Team (SST) meetings as a dropout prevention mechanism. The SST is the chief tool of the SB65 M&M positive intervention strategy (CDE, 2000). Employing a student-centered, multi-disciplinary, case-by-case approach, SST meetings are designed to formulate and follow through on individualized learning plans for students in need, utilizing appropriate internal and external resources for students and their families. Recommendations could include after-school tutoring, mentoring, home visits, or family counseling in the community.

As with any successful school-based intervention, SST success hinges upon a high (and sustained) level of commitment from staff and administration, as team members are sometimes asked to take on responsibilities outside of the scope of their job description. Some of the key issues schools need to address are team membership, the SST referral system, a confidential and regular meeting place, and establishing a timeline and accountability system for following through on tasks. Additionally, a format for evaluating planned interventions is essential. Further, once all the mechanisms have been set up, formal training of all school personnel is crucial to ensure that all parties, including students and parents, fully understand the program.

Alternative Education Schools and Programs. The pressures placed on California's education system to turn out large numbers of qualified graduates have led to increased interest in the role that alternative education plays in helping students complete high school. These alternatives include continuation schools, community day schools, community schools, and independent study.

Alternative schools are designed to create a safety net for those students who are unsuccessful in comprehensive high schools. In general, county community and community day schools are short-term

interventions (usually lasting one semester), while continuation schools are usually designed as long-term placements, particularly for students needing greater intervention, such as those expelled for serious offenses, who have behavioral problems, or who are involved with juvenile law agencies (Warren, 2007). The overall goal of these schools, however, remains clear—to provide the courses students need to graduate from high school.

State law encourages alternative schools to have higher teacher-student ratios that allow for focus on individualized instruction as a way to re-engage students in the learning process as well as to attend to specific student needs. However, according to the Legislative Analyst's Office (2007), many of these alternative school teachers place a high premium on outcomes such as punctuality or attendance over academic content. As a result, many instructors 'pushed students through' by giving them credit for behavior, as opposed to actual learning. Furthermore, because current law affords districts considerable flexibility in designing more meaningful programs to best meet local needs, many programs overlap and duplicate services for the groups of students that they serve. Additionally, there is inconsistency in the types of funding mechanisms used to support these alternative schools. Only community day and community schools receive additional funds to supplement revenue limits (LAO).

Table 2 shows enrollments in alternative schools and programs for the 2005-06 school year by school type. Statewide, a total of 158,299 students enrolled in some type of alternative school. The majority of enrollments are in four types of schools: Alternative, Continuation, County Community, and Juvenile Hall. In the same academic year, an additional 72,709 students (28,115 in K-8 and 44,594 in 9-12) enrolled in independent study programs within regular schools.

Alternative Schools of Choice. In 1975, the California Commission for Reform of Intermediate and Secondary Education, the RISE Commission, proposed major reform of intermediate and secondary education. Among their proposals were alternative schools and programs of choice as incubators of educational innovation: schools that could better serve the individual needs of students as well as find and promote new ways of teaching and learning. Alternative schools of choice include magnet schools,

special schools aimed at certain student populations, schools-within-schools, and schools-without-walls.[5]

Continuation Schools. Continuation schools are designed to meet the educational needs of 16-year-old through 18-year-old students who have not graduated from high school and are at risk for dropping out.[6] The minimum daily attendance requirement for continuation school is 180 minutes, although some schools exceed the minimum. Continuation schools are run by districts, and enrollment in them is voluntary for students who have been suspended or expelled from their regular school. Students who are habitually truant may also be assigned to continuation school by the home school. The instructional settings generally comprise small classes, individualized instruction, or independent study.

Community Day. The specific mission or purpose of Community programs within regular schools and Community Day alternative schools is unclear as they tend to overlap in the types of students they serve and the types of education services they offer. Both school districts and county offices of education may offer these options to K-12 students. Students may volunteer to participate in the programs or may be referred by a SARB, a probation officer, or the home school for those students who have been expelled. Both Community Day Schools and Community programs emphasize small classes and individual instruction. However, Community Day schools may not offer independent study while the Community programs may.

County Community. These alternative schools are administered by county offices of education. As with the Community Day schools, these schools target students who do not do well within the traditional school setting. In addition to serving students who voluntarily opt to attend these schools, they also serve students referred by SARB, by probation officers, and homeless or foster children. The instructional focus of County Community schools is on individualized education programs that emphasize occupations and student guidance. Some county offices of education focus particularly on providing career, vocational, or technical training to students to prepare them for work upon completion of high school.

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[5] See *Education Code* sections 58500-58514.
[6] *Education Code* sections 44865, 46170, 48400-48438 and 51055.

Opportunity Schools. Opportunity schools, classes, and programs are, according to the CDE, established to provide additional support for students who are habitually truant from instruction, irregular in attendance, insubordinate, disorderly while in attendance, or failing academically. While students at all grade levels are eligible for this type of school or program, as Table 2 shows, only 5,725 students enrolled in such schools and programs statewide in 2005-06. This program was moved into the Student Retention Block Grant Program in 2004.

Independent Study. Independent study is described by the CDE as an instructional strategy, not an alternative curriculum. The program allows students to work independently under the supervision of a teacher in order to complete the regular school curriculum, but to do so under different conditions. According to CDE, some students use independent study as a means of accelerating their progress through the regular curriculum, thereby enabling them to graduate early. Others may use it to simply work at their own pace. Students may not be assigned to independent study; the program is entirely voluntary. State law also requires that the quality and quantity of study provided through independent study be equal to that offered in the regular classroom. Finally, students may enroll in independent study courses in conjunction with their regular classroom-based education.

Between 2000-01 and 2005-06, there were significant changes in enrollments in alternative schools. Enrollment in Alternative Schools remained largely unchanged, while enrollments in Juvenile Hall Schools declined by 53 percent. On the other hand, County Community Schools increased by 341 percent and Community Day Schools by 49 percent. There is no clear explanation for these changes. County school administrators generally attribute the change in Juvenile Hall enrollments to a general decrease in the number of juvenile detentions. The sharp increase in County Community School enrollments, on the other hand, is attributed to schools pushing students into these programs in response to accountability pressures.

As Table 2 shows, alternative schools have significantly higher dropout rates than regular comprehensive high schools. In 2005-06, alternative schools enrolled eight percent of grade 9 to 12 students but accounted for 32.5 percent of all dropouts for that cohort. As a result, despite implementation

of a design meant to create safety nets for those unsuccessful in traditional public schools, alternative schools in California represent a place from which many students exit the educational system (Warren, 2007). The numbers raises the question whether alternative schools have become the mechanisms by which to rid mainstream schools of "problem students," those whom school administrators no longer want. The Legislative Analyst Office (2007) suggests that accountability test scores of alternative school students be assigned to the comprehensive high school from which the student came, as a means of holding the regularly assigned high school accountable, no matter where students are sent during the year.

TABLE 2

California High School Enrollment and Dropouts by School Type and Alternative Programs

	2000-01 *Enrollment*		2005-06 *Enrollment*		*Enrollment Change*	2005-06 *Dropouts*	
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**	**%**	**N**	**%**
Total enrollment	**1,735,576**	**100**	**1,974,645**	**100**	**13.8%**	**69,745**	**100**
Regular Schools	**1,577,676**	**90.9**	**1,816,346**	**92.0**	**15.1%**	**46,913**	**67.3**
Charter Schools	27,988	1.8	71,124	3.6	154.1%	11,163	16.0
Alternative Programs in Regular Schools	98,319	5.7	126,114	6.4	28.3%		
Magnet	55,289	3.5	69,443	3.5	25.6%		
Independent Study	22,920	1.4	44,594	2.3	94.6%		
Other	20,110	1.2	12,077	0.6	-39.9%		
Alternative Schools	**157,900**	**9.1**	**158,299**	**8.0**	**0.3%**	**22,700**	**32.5**
Alternative	*35,903*	*2.1*	*36,084*	*1.8*	*0.5%*	*5,213*	*7.5*
County Community	*3,399*	*0.2*	*14,976*	*0.8*	*340.6%*	*1,866*	*2.7*
Community Day	*5,908*	*0.3*	*8,777*	*0.4*	*48.6%*	*1,976*	*2.8*
Continuation	*66,430*	*3.8*	*69,253*	*3.5*	*4.2%*	*12,188*	*17.5*
CYA	*4,752*	*0.3*	*2,258*	*0.1*	*-52.5%*	*0*	*0.0*
Juvenile Hall	*25,394*	*1.5*	*11,251*	*0.6*	*-55.7%*	*280*	*0.4*
Opportunity	*4,260*	*0.2*	*3,277*	*0.2*	*-23.1%*	*874*	*1.3*
Special Education	*11,363*	*0.7*	*11,956*	*0.6*	*5.2%*	*302*	*0.4*
State Special	*491*	*0.0*	*467*	*0.0*	*-4.9%*	*1*	*0.0*
Total Enrollment in Alternative Education	**256,219**	**14.8**	**285,413**	**14.4**	**11.4%**		

SOURCE: Susan Rotermund, *Alternative Education and Dropout Rates in California High Schools*, CDRP Statistical Brief #6 (Santa Barbara, CA: California Dropout Research Project). Retrieved November 2, 2007, from http://lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts/pubs.htm

Clearly, not all the special schools and programs included in Table 2 are targeted to at-risk students. The Alternative Choice Schools, for instance, were created in response to the RISE Commission's

concerns about students' social and academic disengagement from schools, particularly in the middle and high school years. The purpose of creating alternative programs was to create choice within the system. Independent study programs also engage a broad range of students. Some may be failing and at risk of dropping out of school while others may be fully engaged in school but want a more accelerated track to completion. In the final analysis, due to the absence of systematic evaluation, little is known about these programs in terms of their success in providing students who are at risk of dropping out or students who seek alternatives to the regular school setting. Most information about these programs is anecdotal, based on a handful of schools or districts.

In general, alternative schools, including continuation and community schools, should not be regarded as state policy strategies for reducing dropout rates. On the contrary, there is some evidence (LAO, 2007) that schools use alternative education programs as "dumping grounds" for students who display difficulty and vulnerability in relation to school completion. State policy for the API and AYP assigns a student's accountability data (test scores, graduation rates) to a school only when the student attends the school for nearly the entire school year. Thus, for students to be counted in a school's AYP, the student must be enrolled in the school in October and attend the same school for the entire year until such time that the test is taken. If a student leaves or enters during that period, he is excluded from the school's accountability report. Referring students to alternative programs throughout the year creates a way for high schools to avoid responsibility for the progress of low-performing students. As a consequence, some schools and districts may use alternative schools to escape accountability for low-performing students, instead of building in-house alternative programs and learning supports to help students who show significant educational needs.

In addition to the block grant and alternative schools programs, there are various categorical programs that target low-performing minority students who *might be* at risk for dropping out. However, these programs aim at a broader, more encompassing, policy target than those aimed at dropouts. These programs include the Targeted Instructional Block Grant, funded at just under $1 billion per year; Summer School/Supplemental Instruction for students who have not passed the CAHSEE, funded at $312

million per year; Economic Impact Aid funded at $973 million per year; Specialized Secondary Program Grants funded at $6 million per year; and Partnership Academies at $23.5 million per year. What is not known is how these funds are used at the local level and what effect these programs have on reducing dropout rates. As in other policy areas, state strategies to reduce dropouts are scattered among various programs. There is no coherent, comprehensive state policy for addressing the dropout problem that can, in turn, provide guidance and coherence at the local level. Moreover, the allocation of categorical funding is, in many instances, not rationally related to measures of student need (Timar, 2004).

TABLE 3
Summary of State Dropout Intervention Strategies

Policy Frame	Policy/Program	State Expenditure
Administrative/ Bureaucratic	ADA funding: Community Day; County Community; Opportunity Schools Independent Study Continuation High School; High-Risk Youth Education and Safety Program; Opportunity Classes; SB 65: M&M Program	Unknown fiscal impact $4,753 per ADA for Community Day offered by districts; $6,250 per ADA for Community Day offered by county; $3,285 for Community (2004-05). Funded by Student Retention Block Grant: $93.7 m in 06-07.
Professional	Elem. Intensive Reading program; Intensive Algebra Instruction Program; Tenth-grade counseling; Early Intervention for School Success SB 65: M & M Program & SST.	Funded by Student Retention Block Grant
Legal	Truancy laws: SARB	Unknown

Finally, charter schools do not seem to be a solution either. In spite of their putative advantages in offering a smaller, more personal educational climate, overall dropout rates are high. As Table 2 shows, charter school enrollments in the 9-12 grade cohort grew just over 154 percent over five years (2000-01 and 2005-06); 3.6 percent of grade 9-12 students were enrolled in charter schools in the 2005-06 academic year, yet they accounted for 16 percent of the grade 9-12 cohort dropouts. Obviously, charter schools were not created for the purpose of mitigating the dropout problem, however, an argument for charter schools is that they do provide an alternative school setting, one that may be more congenial for students, more personal, and consequently more engaging. One might imagine also that it is simply harder to fall through the cracks in schools where teachers have better knowledge of their students and more personal contact with them.

Issues Related to Intervention Strategies for At-Risk Students

Alternative education programs, as well as intervention and recovery programs, are usually "too little, too late" to have a predictable, beneficial impact. Once students enter the alternative school subsystem, they are often shunted back and forth between the alternative and home school settings. According to the LAO study, *Improving Alternative Education in California,* there is considerable pressure on schools to push low-performing students into alternative schools as a way of evading accountability for them. As noted earlier, students are not counted in a school's API score if they transfer to an alternative school after October of the school year. Thus, in some districts large numbers of students are excluded from testing. While alternative schools are required to test students, state attendance rules eliminate so many students that only 55 percent of alternative schools had enough students to receive an API. Finally, high rates of student mobility in alternative schools make year-to-year comparisons of student progress meaningless.

Once again, the most critical issue related to school dropouts is the fact that so little accurate information is available. Due to the absence of accurate student data, there is no reliable way to know how many students drop out and what happens to those who do. There is no way to know if students actually leave school, whether they move to another district, state, or county, or enroll in an alternative

program. Students may enroll in adult education programs, for instance, or, upon turning 18, attend community college.

The relevance of data to this particular discussion is that the *absence* of data makes it impossible to know how well existing state policy strategies work. We do not know if some districts are doing a better job than others with at-risk students. We know very little about alternative education programs; while most or many are thought to be ineffective, some are thought to be quite effective. What little evidence exists suggests that many programs do not provide quality education experiences for the students enrolled in them. Most often, such programs are remedial and consist of little more than students filling in worksheets to satisfy "seat time" for the program. Most alternative programs have very high rates of absenteeism and dropouts.

Implications for Policy

High school completion for its own sake does not seem to hold much allure for those students who do not intend to attend college and for whom a high school diploma has little significance. Nonetheless, schools are pushed and prodded by state and federal accountability requirements to produce steadily improving test scores in order to avoid punitive sanctions. These are the same schools that tend to lose 50 to 60 percent of their students between the ninth and twelfth grades, (as opposed to affluent school districts that lose perhaps four percent of ninth grade students). Differences among high schools in Alameda County, for instance, are striking. The difference between the number of students enrolled in Oakland Technical High School's ninth-grade class in 2001-02 and enrolled in the twelfth-grade class in 2004-05 is −45 percent. For McClymonds, also in Oakland, it is −61 percent. In nearby Piedmont High School it is −4 percent, while at Mission San Jose High School in Fremont it is −7 percent. One must be cautious in attributing enrollment declines between ninth and twelfth grade exclusively to dropouts. The numbers may double count those students who were retained in middle school, or they may include students who moved or transferred to other schools. However, there is a systemic pattern, as the California Research Bureau's study has shown, suggesting that dropping out is a problem that exists predominantly in schools that serve low-income, minority students.

Studies of low-performing schools show that many lack the capacity to improve teaching and learning (Bitter et al. 2005; Harr et al., 2006; Timar, 2006). The tendency, as noted earlier, is for such schools to place more students into "intervention" or remedial courses. While it is true that students in those courses test at the "below basic" level in language arts and math, remediation—which most often repeats what students failed to learn earlier—does not appear to be a successful strategy. Consequently, solutions to the dropout problem must comprise multiple strategies such as more engaging curricula, particularly for those students who may not be college bound. Strategies must also begin early; evidence points to the fact that student disengagement begins as early as the sixth grade, but becomes more obviously manifested in middle school. By the time students who are at risk of dropping out reach the tenth grade, the path has, in many cases, been established.

A coherent policy approach is needed; one that integrates dropout prevention strategies at state and local levels of government; integrates federal, state, and local resources; and creates seamless curricula among high schools, community colleges, adult education programs, and regional occupation programs. The focus needs to shift from simply getting students through high school to a diploma, to also helping them acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be engaged citizens and productive workers.

Altering the Conventional Starting and Finish Lines

If differences in school preparedness are a primary cause for low rates of school completion as research suggests, then there are two primary mechanisms for improving secondary completion and post-secondary enrollment rates in California schools. One is to provide improved supports and systems at the ends, or tails, of the primary-secondary school continuum.

The first policy option is based on aligning the beginning and end of formal schooling. This option would roll back the start of schooling to ages three or four in order to increase the chances that the vast majority of children enter school on a fairly equal footing. Obviously, moving back the starting line of education is associated with significant costs, although some analysts suggest that such costs will ultimately result in savings in the long-run than current school reform strategies that do not appear to

work for large segments of the target population (Rothstein et al, 2006). While such a massive shift in compulsory age may not be possible given the current fiscal and political climate, it may nonetheless be timely to begin to cost-out what such an investment may look like (including cost-savings). In the short term, policy makers may wish to examine the relative cost and efficacy of the following options:

- Making full-day Kindergarten available to all schools that receive Title I funds.
- Expanding Kindergarten to include *two years* of basic skill building starting at the age of four and moving Head Start back to serve children ages 2 and 3.
- Provide expanded opportunities for Head Start and Early Childhood Education for children and families who have contact with the Child Welfare System.

A second option for improving secondary completion and post-secondary enrollment rates is to significantly alter existing educational pathways by extending the so called "finish line" of 12th grade until students can meet desired standards for post-secondary enrollment or occupational advancement. The goal would be to change that expectancy or "finish line" to 14 or 16 years following Kindergarten in order to : (a) accommodate the needs of low-income students to provide economic support and assistance to themselves and their families once they are legally able to drive and work; (b) boost prospective and actual enrollment rates in post-secondary schooling for low-income, ethnically diverse students; (c) prepare students for productivity in the workforce for jobs that require specialized skill but not an advanced education.

Policy options under this frame include:

- Commissioning evaluations of continuation schools, such as those undertaken for the CAL-SAHF program, that provide an understanding of the costs, processes, benefits, and limitations of alternative schooling.
- Commissioning evaluations of high school/community college partnership programs that are currently being implemented across the state.
- Funding and evaluating pilot programs and partnership efforts between high schools, Regional Occupational Programs, and business to provide high skill, occupational development opportunities for students who pass CAHSEE but do not qualify for post-secondary education.
- Increase standards on CAHSEE to a level commensurate with introductory course work at the community college level; provide enhanced linkages and funding for students who need extra time beyond 12th grade to meet these standards.

Consolidating various categorical programs into the Student Retention Block Grant was a positive step toward granting local entities more flexibility to implement programs that are aligned with local needs and conditions; however, greater flexibility might prove to be necessary. For example, the current maintenance-of-effort requirement for tenth-grade counselors forces schools to divert resources from activities that may provide higher returns. The requirement might be more compelling if policy makers knew, on the basis of evaluations, whether tenth-grade counselors actually had any effect on reducing the dropout rate. Rather than the supply-side strategy now employed by the legislature (here is the money and these are the purposes for which it can be used), it might be more useful to require schools to submit plans for reducing the number of dropouts. Such plans could include clear objectives, strategies for achieving them, implementation of the strategies, resources needed for implementation, and plans for evaluating the effectiveness of the strategies.

Finally, major high school reform should be a clear priority. Reform advocates have proposed various alternatives to the current model. These include alternate pathways through high school as well as curriculum reform that leads to meaningful high school offerings to students who may not be interested in post-secondary education, or who are interested in post-secondary education but need to be in a more engaged learning environment (Barton, 2005; Grubb, 2006; National Research Council, 2004; Sturgis, 2006). A number of studies point to the disengagement of students from school as one of the primary causes of dropping out of school. The good news is that student disengagement is one of the few policy-amenable causes of dropping out. Unlike other causes such as poverty, socio-economic status, and peer values, creating a more engaging path through school is readily achievable.

Curriculum Strategies

Currently, there is much debate within California education policy circles over mandatory college preparatory programs (A to G requirements) as opposed to broad availability of vocational education programs. Advocates of college readiness programs argue that all students must be prepared for college, while the career-technical education advocates argue that all students do not intend to go to college, and those who do not must be given the necessary skills to transition into the workforce. An emerging

approach, advocated by a number of researchers, is to eliminate the dichotomy between the two views of education and, instead, integrate the two (Oakes & Saunders, 2007; Grubb, 2007; Stern, 2007). The "new" approach is to move beyond the debate between academic and vocation schooling to "recognizing that graduates who go directly to work need solid academic skills, and those who go to college will also have careers" (Oakes & Saunders, 2007; p. 2).

The distrust of vocationally-oriented high school programs is based on the "low-track" nature of traditional vocational programs. Historically, poor students and students of color were counseled into vocational programs that were academic "dead ends" as students in those programs had little or no chance of getting into academic postsecondary education programs upon graduation. Critics of the mandatory academic curriculum, on the other hand, argue that while all students may be required to take college preparatory courses, the content and quality of those courses varies widely. Supporting this argument is a recent study by American College Testing (ACT) that found that completion of a college prep curriculum, even with grades of A or B, were not a guarantee of readiness to undertake college-level work (ACT, 2007).

Advocates of the multiple pathways curriculum argue that it eliminates the distinction between academic curricula and Career Technical Education (CTE). According to Oakes and Saunders, a "Multiple Pathways curriculum would have the goal of providing to *all students* [*sic*] highly-valued and essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enable them to function intelligently as adults in an uncertain, tumultuous, technology- and information-based 21st century" (2007; p. 2). A principal advantage of the approach, according to its supporters, is its aim to increase student academic engagement. The integration of CTE and college prep, they propose, "can reduce the likelihood that students will follow an unproductive pattern of courses that are closely associated with dropping out of high school" (Oakes & Saunders, 2007; p. 6). Most importantly, its proponents argue that the approach is likely to narrow or, under the best of circumstances, eliminate the existing chasm between the abstract character of traditional academic programs and the real-world orientation of students. Student

disengagement begins early; consequently, finding ways to engage students should begin in the early grades.

Looking Beyond the Schools

The mixture of various state initiatives addressing school dropouts is recognition that the problem is not entirely within the schools' capacity to address. While schools may adopt strategies to increase their holding power over students by altering curriculum, adopting alternate pathways to high school completion, and the like, such solutions may respond to only a few of the reasons students drop out. Enabling SARBs was one means of engaging the broader community in the effort of keeping young people in school. The SARB approach to dropouts is an effort to bring multiple resources to bear on the problem. The limitation of the SARB approach, in addition to those discussed earlier, is that by the time that intervention is triggered, it may be too late to remedy the problem.

A complicating feature of the dropout problem is that it is a local problem that must be addressed locally. The state can provide support and assistance to counties, local communities, and schools, but program implementation, coordination, and planning must be carried out locally. This, in turn, depends upon the kinds of local resources that are available, the kinds of relationships that exist among agencies serving youth, and the capacities of various agencies to integrate disparate programs into coherent strategies. How well these strategies work is not well known because programs and policies are rarely evaluated; they tend to operate mostly on faith and a presumption of people's good intentions.

Finally, the large numbers of minority student dropouts should give policy makers some indication that the accountability system is not working as intended. Since state and federal accountability measures focus on the achievement gap, narrowing that gap should include retaining the 40 percent of students who drop out. Within the present system of school accountability, schools are squeezed by two contradictory policy forces. One force represents the various state policies and programs to keep students in school through the high school diploma. These include compulsory education laws and mechanisms to enforce them, dropout prevention programs, and alternative education programs. The counter force represents state accountability policies aimed both at students and at schools and districts. As noted

earlier, the two forces often work at cross-purposes. Schools are encouraged to engage students, yet accountability polices may be causing schools to push students out of school or into alternative programs.

From the state perspective, addressing the achievement gap should not mean having to choose between high drop out rates on the one hand, and standards and accountability on the other. What policy makers ought to consider is how to create a more coherent and integrated accountability system. As in most areas of education policy, the accountability system is fragmented, and in some instances the pieces work at cross-purposes. The current system of assessments, for instance, may have significant consequences for schools and districts, but none for students. There is simply no incentive for students to do well on those exams. The CAHSEE does have consequences for students, but is disconnected from the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. Moreover, neither of these tests (CAHSEE or STAR) is connected to admissions to the California community college system, the state university system, or the University of California. While API scores have meaning for schools that fail to make growth targets, the scores themselves have little meaning. Schools are required annually to grow five percent of the difference between their base scores and the target score of 800. The difficulty is in knowing what an increase of 10 or 15 points on the API actually means in terms of student proficiency. Finally, in schools with high rates of mobility—often correlated with low API scores—the student cohort may change significantly. The logic of the accountability system is that the same students (say, within five percent) are being assessed from one year to the next; however, in some schools, student turnover from one year to the next may be as high as 30 percent.[7]

Building on Existing Programs

The most pressing need regarding dropouts is for the state to implement the student data system so that students may be tracked from preschool through postsecondary education. Second, the state should undertake or contract for evaluations of current programs dealing with dropouts. Studies by LAO of alternative programs and SARBs suggest that those programs are not effective in systematically reducing the dropout problem. There is, however, evidence of some successful programs. The state needs

[7] T. Timar et al. State Strategies for Low-performing Schools: California's High Priority Schools Grants Program

to learn more about successful programs and what districts are doing to make them so. There are various strategies for reducing the dropout rate that have been implemented in California and elsewhere. Among them are the following:

- **California Partnership Academies.** These are specialized high schools (often schools within schools) that enroll at-risk students. Career Academies combine specialized, career training (e.g. health, technology, arts) with academically rigorous college prep courses. Academies work with employers in the region to provide internships. There are currently 290 funded programs in California. State funding for the programs for 2005-06 was $20.6 million. Funding is performance based. According to ConnectEd, program participants have higher school completion rates, higher graduation rates/CAHSEE passing rates, and higher postsecondary enrollment rates. Other evaluations, however, have not found significant differences in completion rates and achievement levels between Partnership Academies and regular high school programs.
- **Mentoring/counseling/ombudsman.** The Ford Foundation funded a program that provided counseling/mentoring services to students identified as being at risk for dropping out. Each participating student was assigned a counselor—some as early as in the sixth grade—who stayed with the student until completion of high school or through age 19. It did not matter if the student dropped out, moved to another district state, or to prison. Program participation was by random assignment and showed considerable promise.
- **Accelerated learning options** aim to accelerate students who are academically behind and, at the same time, provide them opportunities to obtain college credit for course work while in high school. The theory in support of this strategy, according to researchers, is that credit-based transition programs offer at-risk students more challenging coursework than the traditional remedial curriculum." Among the accelerated learning options are dual enrollment programs, which allow students to earn high school and college credit simultaneously. Another strategy is the early college and middle college high school, which are a variation on the dual enrollment

program (Chait et al., 2007). Some community colleges and high schools in California have created such programs. Since the programs are quite new, little is know of their efficacy. Nationally, the American Youth Policy Forum reported that evaluations of such programs had found positive outcomes. but the evaluations were not longitudinal nor did they use control groups (Bailey & Karp, 2003).

- **Extended learning time programs** are based on the theory that increased learning time for at-risk students will increase engagement and achievement. Traditional programs include block scheduling, which allows students to spend more time on learning tasks such as projects and hands-on activities. Other programs include after school and summer programs. Extended time may be used for instruction, mentoring, tutoring, health care services, or a combination of these. The focus is often on the transition from middle to high school and from ninth to tenth grade where the risk of dropping out seems to be the greatest. Various studies have found that extended learning time programs have been associated with increased academic achievement, engagement, and attendance. A study conducted by the Education Sector showed that these programs had the potential to improve achievement among high poverty, low-performing students. Summer and ninth-grade programs have, according to researchers, been effective in helping at-risk students catch up academically (Chait et al., 2007; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2006; American Youth Policy Forum, 2006; Silva, 2007).

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) on dropout prevention reviews "secondary school (middle school, junior high school, and high school) as well as community-based interventions designed to help students stay in school and/or complete school" (IES, 2007). The WWC examines a range of programs along three dimensions: staying in school, progressing in school, and completing school. While a number of dropout programs show positive effects in the first two domains, their impact on the third is negligible or non-existent. What this suggests is that there is plenty of room for new ideas and experimentation to find the combination of interventions that will, in the long run,

make a difference. The critical question for state policy makers is what kind of support schools and other service providers—both state and local—require to develop and sustain effective programs.

Conclusion

The dropout problem will not be solved by more categorical programs or additional resources. The problem, as noted earlier, has to do with student disengagement from school. As also noted, the reasons for disengagement are multiple, overlapping, and complex. The issue of academic engagement can be addressed by improving the quality of the schooling experience for students. Some causes of disengagement, however, lie beyond the schools' control. Consequently, students may need a variety of coordinated social and health (both physical and mental) services that are not readily available or are now simply unavailable. When student behavior does trigger such services, it is often too late, as with the SARB interventions. Again, there is little known about how many districts provide such services and what difference such services may make. We know from the research that the key is early identification and support.

The key to an effective state role is to increase district capacity to identify at-risk students early and provide resources (both academic and social) to those students. The state also needs to find ways of improving district and school capacity to provide quality education services to students who have not been well served by the education system. Students who do not intend to go to college have few or no options for alternative education paths. For those students, there is little incentive to finish high school, particularly if they believe they cannot pass the high school exit exam or if they believe that a diploma is irrelevant. The state needs to provide technical assistance to schools that serve large numbers of at-risk students to develop curricula that is academically challenging and rigorous while it also prepares them for careers.

California currently spends substantial sums of money on various forms of dropout prevention programs; on supplemental instruction; on counseling, mentoring and outreach; career education such as the Regional Occupation Centers and Programs; adult education programs; and special programs for English language learners. Districts that serve students who might generally be referred to as "at-risk"

benefit from a large number of categorical programs. The problem for state policy makers is that virtually nothing is known about the success of these various programs and why such programs seem to have so little impact on increasing school completion rates. To be sure, there are success stories, but there is nothing to suggest that any of those programs, either individually or in the aggregate, have a positive effect on student retention. More importantly, as this paper has emphasized throughout this discussion, there is no systematic, reliable data to inform policy makers of either the nature or magnitude of the problem.

Beyond data, it is clear that increasing school completion rates, especially among African American, Hispanic, and Native American students, should be a top priority for state policy makers. There are, however, no ready answers. It is quite clear that adding more programs to the state's dropout policy portfolio is not the answer. The answer lies in integrating existing programs and resources and creating greater accountability for those programs that target primarily at-risk students. Policy makers need to evaluate the role and efficacy of existing alternative education programs to understand better what kinds of state interventions are most helpful to those local officials—school and district administrators, counselors, teachers, other agency officials, social workers, and health care specialists—who are ultimately responsible for reducing the number of school dropouts. Curriculum reform certainly ought to figure prominently in the solution; so should mentoring, preschool, and continuing education.

Given the competition for state revenues, it is all the more important for policy makers to invest in those programs that use funds most efficiently and have the highest rates of success for dollars spent (Belfield & Levin, 2007). To that end, state policy makers should evaluate the costs of various dropout prevention programs in relation to their effectiveness. In the absence of systematic evaluation, it appears that local dropout prevention programs operate idiosyncratically—the result of effort and commitment by individuals—rather than by program design. The question for policy makers is whether there are systematic policy design features of dropout prevention programs that show successful results across a large number of schools.

Currently, the state spends hundreds of millions of dollars annually on programs that have little or no educational value. The Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP) and the High Priority Schools Grants Program (HPSGP) were found by evaluators to produce no significant educational benefits (Bitter, 2005; O'Day, 2003; Harr, 2006; Timar, 2006). In spite of negative evaluations, policy makers funded another cohort of HPSGP schools. Similarly, policy makers created the Quality Education Improvement Act (QEIA) with funding of $2.9 billion without any evidence of educational benefit to warrant the magnitude of the investment. Other programs such as the Targeted Instructional Improvement Grant (TIIG) provide nearly $1 billion to a relatively small number of school districts without any accountability or evidence of how those funds are spent and to what educational effect they are used.

The current educational system does not appear designed, nor able, to make up for the significant and growing achievement gaps between the low-income, ethnically diverse new majority of Californians compared to their middle and upper income (and mostly White) counterparts. Educational achievement and attainment, as well as post-secondary enrollment outcomes, of the fastest growing segment of the state's population are abysmal. It is doubtful that the achievement gap can be narrowed or eliminated without first addressing the significant dropout problem that currently besets the state's education system.

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