



POLICY BRIEF 8

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GIVING A STUDENT VOICE TO CALIFORNIA'S DROPOUT CRISIS

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Highlights:

- ▶ Most ninth graders, regardless of their risk for dropping out, are engaged in school and want to graduate.
- ▶ Students can identify the threats to completing high school; yet, they remain optimistic and eager to have more positive experiences that facilitate their academic achievement.
- ▶ Students are eager to see the relevance of what they are learning; they want teachers to help them understand how their classes will be useful to them later.
- ▶ Teacher-student relationships are a powerful force in determining students' overall experiences of school; the absence of support seems fundamental to the rationale for dropping out.
- ▶ It often takes just one caring adult who believes in them to shift students' motivation to complete high school.
- ▶ Students may not fully understand the training and education required for particular jobs, or the long-term consequences of dropping out.

Recent research suggests that almost one-third of California students will never graduate from high school—and about half of the state's minority students will fail to do so. These dropout rates hold stark implications for the economic and social welfare of the students who fail to graduate and of the state (*see CDRP Policy Brief 1*).

This study investigated why students drop out by asking 133 predominantly Latino California ninth graders in five high schools across the state about the factors they see as motivating them toward or alienating them from finishing high school. The study compared students at-risk of dropping out—those who had failed at least one class or had been absent at least 12 days during the semester (40% of the sample)—with their more resilient peers.

▶ Overall Views of School

Most ninth graders—regardless of risk for dropping out—reported feeling very engaged in school, both socially and academically: three-quarters of students reported liking school generally, and even more (81%) said that education is so important that it is worth putting up with the things about school that they don't like. One student explained,

"Unless you go to school, you end up either pregnant...or you make bad decisions and you get kicked out of school and you...end up struggling through life. I want to break the cycle...that's what motivates me."

Most students were extremely optimistic about their future education: almost two-thirds thought they would finish college (39%) or graduate school (26%). Yet students at-risk for dropping out had lower expectations for their future education, and waiting to graduate translated to several years of lost wages. One student clarified,

"I think a lot of kids just drop out because they think that they don't need the [instructional] materials, so they just try to go for the things they need in the future—money. So they start getting jobs..."

Read the full report at: lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts
View the companion videos at: lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts/videos/

► Relevant Coursework and Preparation for the Future

Most of the studies' ninth graders admitted that certain aspects of high school challenged their motivation to stay in school. While some factors were beyond the purview of schools—such as overwhelming family responsibilities—nearly all could be improved by making coursework more relevant and fostering students' relationships with teachers and other school adults (counselors and coaches).

Students were eager to see the relevance of what they were learning, and wanted materials presented in a way that was meaningful to them. At one school they studied physics by learning how their building was engineered and by making musical instruments.

Not all students, however, thought that their courses could be pertinent to their interests and futures. This sentiment—a desire to have more electives, such as auto repair, art, electronics, or woodshop—was repeated across several schools. One student pointed out that having one of these classes would motivate a student to come to school and pass all of his/her (other) classes. Others noted that some of these elective classes could teach students skills or trades which would be useful to them later.

The current effort to ensure all students' access to college preparatory coursework left some students without interesting or future-relevant classes. As one student pointed out,

"...like some science they teach us...what astronauts do, you know, [imitating teachers]: 'You have to learn this; this is what astronauts do.' What are the chances we're gonna become an astronaut...?"

Yet it was not clear that students always understood the training and education required for particular jobs. Admittedly students were only in ninth grade, but given the low levels of education in many of their families and communities, it is not apparent that this practical information would be readily available to them outside of school. Relationships with teachers may be their primary source of social capital for education and career preparation.

► Social Support

Courses and activities that interested students also offered them the opportunity to have positive interactions with teachers, and garner social support. It often took just one caring adult who believed in them to shift their motivation to complete high school.

For many students, and particularly for Latinos, building on their cultures and values by developing caring relationships of respect and responsibility is the most effective way to teach and support their learning. These caring relationships are the vehicle by which teachers can provide crucial social support to students. One student explained,

"When you have somebody that's actually gonna be there for you and really support you

in all your school educational needs and stuff then...it boosts you up, you feel better about yourself and your education."

Athletic coaches, too, are often able to develop supportive relationships with students that help them in school. One student-athlete recounted,

"...our football coach...we talk a lot. He actually motivates me to do better in school. Like knowing that if I don't get the grades, that I won't play. And he tells me, every day that I see him, to get the good grades...he's like a friend to me."

This finding confirms the results of a statistical study that found participation in sports had a larger effect on whether students graduated than improved test scores did (*see CDRP Policy Brief 5*).

Teacher-student relationships were a powerful force in determining students' overall experiences of school; an absence of support seemed fundamental to the rationale for dropping out.

Students reported feeling misunderstood by teachers and also expressed disillusion with their teachers' lack of capacity to provide the support they needed.

► Families

For many students, their families and the associated responsibilities provided equally compelling motivation for staying in and for dropping out of school. Many families were struggling financially, and as one student said,

“Putting a roof over your head is more important than education.”

While schools cannot provide the sort of financial support these families need, school staff would benefit from gaining a deep understanding of the challenges their students face. Some teachers may not be familiar—let alone trained to work—with their diverse student body. While students can help to educate receptive teachers, teacher preparation needs to include training about how best to make instruction relevant and meaningful to students’ lives, as well as how to bestow extra support during challenging times.

► Peers

Notably, friends were the most often mentioned reason why students liked school and felt connected to it. Several said that if you didn’t have friends at school then there would be no point in going. As one student plainly stated,

“...because there’s...some kids that you see alone, or they might have like two friends, and...they feel like nobody ever wants to talk to them or nobody wants to be friends with them. So like, why come to school...?”

► Earlier and More Consistent and Supportive Intervention

Developing a culture of caring within schools, so that teachers have relationships with students and know when they are having trouble, facilitates the needed support. Students repeatedly suggested the positive impact of having a caring adult intervene when they were struggling.

It is often too late to attempt to establish relationships with

students once their problems have manifested in failing grades or frequent absences—the reasons most often cited for leaving school by California dropouts (see *CDRP Statistical Brief 2*). Students need their teachers to listen and attempt to understand the situation before providing instrumental help within the context of the student’s circumstances. As one student said,

“If someone would take the time when they saw them [failing students] losing interest in school and their grades going down...someone could talk to them and see why, and talk about why that’s happening—maybe it could help them.”

When a teacher knows a student’s strengths and capabilities, that teacher is better able to provide the needed confidence and motivation. Supportive teachers demonstrated it by keeping track of students and getting involved when students were struggling. One student explained,

“Ms. X will come to you and say, ‘You need help—stay in school. I’ll be here after school—I’m here until 4:30, 5:30...’ They’ll tell you what time they leave.”

► School Climate and Safety

In spite of many rules implemented in the name of security, most of the students talked about serious safety issues in their schools and communities, with fighting and gang-related violence prevalent.

“Some do [drop out] because, like, all the shootings, and they get scared and

they get paranoid ... most of them get traumatized, and that’s why they don’t want to come [to school].”

Many students portrayed a school environment that was hard to navigate for safety. Fights were numerous, and even those who were not involved could easily and inadvertently get caught in the cross-fire.

► More School Resources

Students recognized that, in part, their challenges in school were attributable to their schools being short on resources. They acknowledged that better funding for schools could improve their experiences in a multitude of ways, including their interactions with teachers.

Students wanted more time with teachers in smaller groups, and suggested it might improve the quality of their interactions and encourage more students to stay in school. Similarly, funding for additional counselors might improve their accessibility to students and enhance the academic guidance provided.

► Conclusions

Most ninth graders—regardless of their risk for dropping out of school—are engaged in school and want to graduate. Students can easily identify the threats to completing high school, and provide personal stories of how these challenges confront them daily; yet, they remain overwhelmingly optimistic and involved in school, eager to participate and have more positive experiences that facilitate their academic achievement. It is not too late to keep these students in school.

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2. **THE RETURN ON INVESTMENT FOR IMPROVING CALIFORNIA'S HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE** (*August 2007*)
3. **DOES STATE POLICY HELP OR HURT THE DROPOUT PROBLEM IN CALIFORNIA?** (*October 2007*)
4. **CAN COMBINING ACADEMIC AND CAREER-TECHNICAL EDUCATION IMPROVE HIGH SCHOOL OUTCOMES IN CALIFORNIA?** (*November 2007*)
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6. **CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS THAT BEAT THE ODDS IN HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION** (*December 2007*)
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12. School Transitions, Adolescent Development, and the Potential for Reducing Dropout Rates
13. Investigating Middle School Determinants of High School Achievement and Graduation in Three California School Districts
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