From Tuning Out to Dropping Out

Scope of the problem: The severity of the dropout problem varies among schools and school districts. It also reveals itself differently depending on how dropout statistics are determined. There seems to be agreement, however, that nationally at least 30-38% of those students who begin Grade 9 do not graduate 4 years later.

Ways dropout statistics get distorted:

1. **When does the count begin?**
2. **How is dropout determined?**

Tuning out begins early: **Grade 3 Warning Signs**[1]
Grade 4 Warning Signs[2]
Grade 6 Warning Signs
Grade 9 Warning Signs

A large number of dropouts experienced a reading problem at an early age that was either never diagnosed and/or never corrected. The reading problem is compounded if it contributes to students' being over-identified for special education services. Note: This factor may partially explain a number of issues related to males and their educational difficulties, especially African-American males; for example, Cosby and Poussaint report:

- "In some cities, black males have high dropout rates of more than 50 percent."
- "At any given time, as many as one in four of all young black men are in the criminal justice system—in prison or jail, on probation, or on parole."
- "By the time they reach their mid-thirties, six out of ten black high school dropouts have spent time in prison."
- "About one-third of the homeless are black men." (p.9)

[1] McPartland, J.M., and Slavin, R.E. Increasing achievement of at-risk students at each grade level. Policy Perspectives Series. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, July 1990.

[2] See Predicting Success, Preventing Failure: An Investigation of the California High School Exit Exam by Andrew C. Zau and Julian R. Betts

Common Characteristics

Not too surprisingly, we find higher numbers of dropouts:

- Have little or no support at home;
- Are likely to be from a lower social-economic population;
- Are more likely to attend urban schools than suburban or rural schools;
- Are more likely to attend a school with over 750-1000 students than a school with fewer students;
- Are more likely to be male than female;
- Are likely to have been placed on a slower math track either during or soon after Grade 5. Grades 6 and 7 may be critical times for staying "on track" in math. (Note: Parent input or lack of parent input may be a factor in these decisions.) Students tend to be "sealed in" to a math track by Grade 8. Grades for at-risk students tend to get worse beginning in Grade 7.

Being retained in Grade 9 is a number one predictor of becoming a dropout!

It is estimated that at least 5 percent of dropouts are academically gifted!

Based on the Gates report:

1. Dropouts believe that teachers and school administrators favor the "rich kids" as they call them;

2. Most dropouts reported they believe that they could have done the work in high school; however, over 40 percent felt they received little or no encouragement from home or school;

3. Potential dropouts tend to miss school unnecessarily and cut classes;

4. Once they have left school, a large percentage of dropouts realized that had made a mistake; some tried to return, but generally they were told they could not re-enter—often because of scheduling and program limitations.

Dropouts have a great deal of talent for making poor decisions not in their best interests. According to Ruby Payne, when challenged or dealing with potential failure, such as "getting behind" in their school work, without authentic support at school, students, especially those from multi-generational poverty, may resort to self-destructive behaviors, such as "cutting school," using alcohol, participating in sex and using drugs. If true, these students need an extraordinary amount of support services and mentoring.

Actions school personnel might consider:

1. Identify potential dropouts early and begin to remedy problems, such as reading problems, which often can be detected in Grades K-1; also look at students coming into Grade 6 for potential dropouts and possible corrections.

2. Develop a strong mentoring program for potential dropouts; no teacher should be assigned more than four of these students if the teacher is expected to provide daily contact.

3. Try to get parents involved--not many success stories here in some of our schools!

4. Balance the work load for students identified as likely to be at-risk.

5. Balance the work load for teachers who work with these students. (Explain why this is important.)

6. Offer tutorials during school hours.

7. Reduce the amount of time students spend failing courses.

8. Provide quality recovery credit for core classes during school time.

9. Develop schedules and programs that allow students to return to school with any three/six-week period during the school year.

10. "At a minimum, high schools need to set the conditions for 9th grade success by making sure that the curriculum and associated supports help fill gaps in mathematics and reading comprehension.". . ."They [potential dropouts] need an age-appropriate curriculum that enables them to catch up the intermediate skills that high school courses assume that students have." (Neild, R.C. et al, p.31) Note: For curriculum guides consider using the SREB series entitled: "Getting Students Ready for Algebra I," "Getting Students Ready for College-Preparatory/Honors Science," and "Getting Students Ready for College-Preparatory/Honors English." www.sreb.org

11. Match at-risk students with older students who may be willing to mentor and to assist academically if the older students receive a service credit or an elective credit by serving as an academic tutor to younger students.

12. Offer as many core classes as possible delivered in a laboratory, workshop environment where students participate in relevant, meaningful, real-world issues. Students need to become the "worker" at least for part or every class period. They must be given opportunities to become more active and less passive learners!

13. Engage students in the use of technology often.

14. Where feasible, develop middle college programs for at-risk students similar to those in Guilford Co., NC, which give these students a choice of learning environments (e.g. beginning classes at noon in some instances if they work in a fast food place until midnight.); middle colleges also offer some of these students an opportunity to "start over" in a new environment once they have "messed up," as they term it.

15. If middle college environments cannot be provided, implement similar programs in local school districts. Why do all high school classes have to begin at the same time? Can some critical core classes begin at noon? Can some classes be offered in intensive scheduling formats (FUMA model) by completing selected courses in 30 school days? Such scheduling significantly reduces the amount of time some students spend failing! By scheduling a few critical core courses in intensive formats, students who have dropped out and desire to return are more likely to have some needed courses in which they can enroll at various times during the school year. Consider such scheduling at least in Grades 9 and 10 for high failure courses, but try to include at least two electives along with each intensive course offered.

16. Alter grading policies and practices that focus more on "teaching and learning" and less on "sorting and selecting." Capitalize on effort-based grading models that contribute to a growth mind-set where students care about learning and come to experience pay-off to their work. "When they make a mistake or exhibit a deficiency, they correct it (Blackwell, et al., 2007; Nussbaum & Dweck, 2007). For them, effort is a positive thing: It ignites their intelligence and causes it to grow. In the face of failure, these students escalate their efforts and look for new learning strategies. (Dweck, p. 36).

17. Modify/challenge/bypass state and/or local policies that guarantee failure for selected groups of students; for example, eliminate mandated attendance policies, seat time requirements to earn recovery credits, and policies that do not permit re-taking of critical tests.

Compared to girls, boys are:

- **Held back a grade at higher rates: 34% of boys are in grades below their age; 26% of girls are.**

- **More likely to be assigned to special education: 73% of students with learning disabilities are boys; 76% of those emotionally disturbed are boys.**

- **More likely to commit suicide: since 1970, the female rate declined from 4.2 per 100,000 to 3.3 per 100,000, while the male rate rose from 13.5 to 18.5.**

- **Less likely to attend college: From 1967 through 2000, the proportion of female high school graduates enrolled in college rose from 25% to 46%, while the percentage of males decreased from 45% to 41%.**

Source: Tom Mortenson, Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. Reported in USA Today, "Girls get extra school help while boys get Ritalin." USA Today, August 29, 2003, Section A, pg. A-8.

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