

Reduce the high school dropout rate

Decades of research make it clear that dropping out of high school is a very serious issue for students, for the community, for our state, and for the nation. School dropouts only earn half as much annual income as high school graduates; half of our prison populations are dropouts, and half of the heads of households on welfare are high school dropouts. High school dropouts are three times more likely than high school graduates who do not attend college to be welfare recipients.¹ While this does not mean that dropping out of school *causes* these negative outcomes, or that a high school diploma is a complete solution, the data implies that students at risk of dropping out are a high-risk population that warrants specific programmatic interventions aimed at increasing the likelihood of success in high school.

Estimates of the size of the dropout problem vary, depending upon which measure of dropout or school completion is used. Based upon these measures, it is estimated that there are from one in 10 to one in five Pennsylvania students who do not graduate within four years.^{2,3} Regardless of the exact number of dropouts, however, we must all be united in the belief that we need to do better.

PSEA Recommendations

- Fund and encourage evidence-based programs to identify students at risk of dropping out and intervene to reduce the likelihood of dropout. Intervention programs should meet the curricular, logistic, and interpersonal needs of students at risk of dropping out, and include flexible scheduling to accommodate relevant work.
- Develop data systems to track dropout prevention program implementation and program outcomes.
- Encourage school districts to adopt models that preserve comprehensive student legal rights, particularly for students with disabilities, by serving them within the k-12 public system.
- Invest in reducing class size and student:counselor ratios to develop meaningful student relationships with adults in the school.

Keep students in school

Decades of research show us that the dropout rate is the result of student, family, and school factors that collectively disengage students from formal education. The most effective prevention programs address all three areas to re-engage students in learning. The following are several research-based approaches that significantly reduce dropout rates.

- **Invest in early childhood education.** Dropping out of school is a long-term process of disengagement that can be observed as early as elementary school.⁴ In fact, for at least two decades now, research has indicated that, “we intervene too late in the course of a student’s development, [and] that certain parts of the profile of a dropout-prone student may be visible as early as the 3rd grade.”⁵ When students enter school without the required knowledge and skills to succeed, they start the race a lap behind and never catch up. Investments in high-quality early childhood programs that support the emotional, cognitive, and social development of children and provide parent support programs have demonstrated a clear and consistent ability to significantly reduce dropout rates in the later years.⁶ Early childhood and full-day kindergarten programs in the Commonwealth are investments that are critical to reducing high school dropout.
- **Build information systems that can pinpoint at-risk students.** Students who come from low-income families, have low academic skills, have parents who are not high school graduates, have disabilities, speak English as a second language, are children of single parents, are pregnant or parenting teens, have a pattern of disciplinary problems or poor socio-emotional development, have been held back, or who have a history of inconsistent school attendance are all particularly at risk of dropping out.⁷ Prevention programs can be constructed to enrich the school experience for these at-risk students early in their school careers. Districts, however, need a consistent way to find students who would most benefit from prevention programs and to target specific interventions for students with specific needs. Pennsylvania could develop data systems to pinpoint students who can benefit from prevention programming.
- **Build and support student transition programs for the middle years.** Transitioning into and out of middle school can be difficult for many students, and as a result, many students are retained, particularly in the 9th grade.⁸ Ninth-grade retention strongly correlates with dropping out of high school. There are examples across the country of successful transition programs that help “at-risk” students move into and succeed in 9th grade. The Commonwealth would benefit from ongoing funding and program evaluation to improve support for students during critical transition years.
- **Support a strong, individualized curriculum with a career-learning component for all students.** Contrary to popular belief, many students do not leave school because too much is expected of them. Some of the most successful dropout prevention programs focus on providing high-level academic curricula that are connected to the real world through out-of-school experiences such as service learning and hands-on learning in business and industry settings. Unfortunately, the scripted curricula and testing culture found in many schools today do not support the kinds of teaching and learning that we know are most effective at engaging “at-risk” youth. We need to work together to resist the temptation to become test preparation institutions that deliver one-size-fits all scripted

curricula and, instead, maintain our focus on high-quality teaching and learning that may not be easily encapsulated in a multiple choice test question.

- **Ensure that all students have meaningful relationships with adults at school.** Students who leave school prematurely often do so because they feel alienated from others and disconnected from the school experience. One highly effective strategy to reduce dropout rates is to build environments in which all students can benefit from high-quality sustained relationships with school staff. Recent efforts to build small, intimate learning communities are a step in the right direction. Currently, high school teachers may see 150 or more students each day and many counselors may serve 500 or more students, more than twice the number recommended by the American School Counselor Association.⁹
- **Help districts develop and advertise individualized, non-traditional high school options.** Evidence suggests that building the kinds of comprehensive student supports mentioned above will go a long way to substantially reduce the dropout rate in the Commonwealth. However, for students who continue to fall through the cracks, non-traditional school settings should be available. These options may include online and in-person opportunities such as intensive tutoring programs, accelerated graduation programs, credit recovery programs, and community college campus-based programs. Although these programs may be offered in collaboration with several education, workforce development, and social service agencies, it is important to continue to serve as many students as possible through the k-12 public school system. This is particularly important for students with disabilities, who are twice as likely to drop out as students without disabilities.¹⁰ Students with disabilities who drop out of their public high school and attend a dropout re-engagement program sponsored by an entity other than the public school lose many of their rights to free services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

While teachers and support professionals of this Commonwealth want to do whatever they can to help all students succeed in school and in life, they need help. Help comes in the form of comprehensive support systems for students across the k-12 continuum, smaller class sizes, opportunities to enrich curricula and build real-world learning experiences for youth, early learning experiences that help all children arrive at school ready to learn age-appropriate content, and data systems designed to pinpoint those students who need our constant support and encouragement to stay in school.

(01/10)

The Power of a Great Education: PSEA's 20/20 Vision for the Future

¹ Government Accounting Office. (2002). "School Dropouts: Education Could Play a Stronger Role in Identifying and Disseminating Promising Prevention Strategies."

² U.S. Department of Education. (2000). "From Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000," National Center for Education Statistics. NCES 2002-114.

³ Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (2005) "Life as a Teenager in Pennsylvania: Graduation Gap," Youth in Transition Series. Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

⁴ For example, one study of students in grades 1 to 9 found that low test scores and poor report cards from first grade could predict future dropout with surprising accuracy. Research has also demonstrated a significant relationship between reported behavior problems in the early elementary grades and higher dropout rates. See, for example, Alexander, K.L., Entwisle, D.R. and Kabbani, N. (2001). "The Dropout Process in Life Course Perspective: Early Risk Factors at Home and School," Teachers College Record, 103 (5) 760-822.

⁵ Hodgkinson, H.L. (1985). "All One System: Demographics of Education, Kindergarten through Graduate School," Institute for Educational Leadership.

⁶ See, for example, information on the Perry Preschool Project, <http://www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/perrymain.htm> and Karoly, L.A., Kilburn, M.R., and Cannon, J.S.(2005). "Early Childhood Interventions: Proven Results, Future Promise," RAND Corporation.

⁷ From Druian, G. and Butler, J.A. (2001). "Effective Schooling Practices and At-Risk Youth: What the Research Shows," Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Available online at www.nwrel.org.

⁸ Haney, W. et al. (2003) "The Educational Pipeline in the United States, 1970-2000," The National Board on Educational Testing and Policy. This report found that, increasingly, students are being retained in grade 9. In 1968, the number of students in 9th grade was 4 percent greater than the number of students in 8th grade in the previous year. In 2000, the amount of 9th graders was 13 percent more than the amount of 8th graders in the previous year.

⁹ <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?pl=328&sl=460&contentid=460>.

¹⁰ Thurlow, M., Sinclair, M.F. and D.R. Johnson. (2002). "Students with Disabilities who Drop Out of School—Implications for Policy and Practice," Issue Brief: National Center on Secondary Education and Transition. Available online: <http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=425>.