

STRUGGLING TO SUCCEED: WHAT HAPPENED TO SENIORS WHO DID NOT PASS THE CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAM?

Shane Jimerson, Michael Furlong, Jill Sharkey, Erika Felix, Mary Skokut, and James Earhart

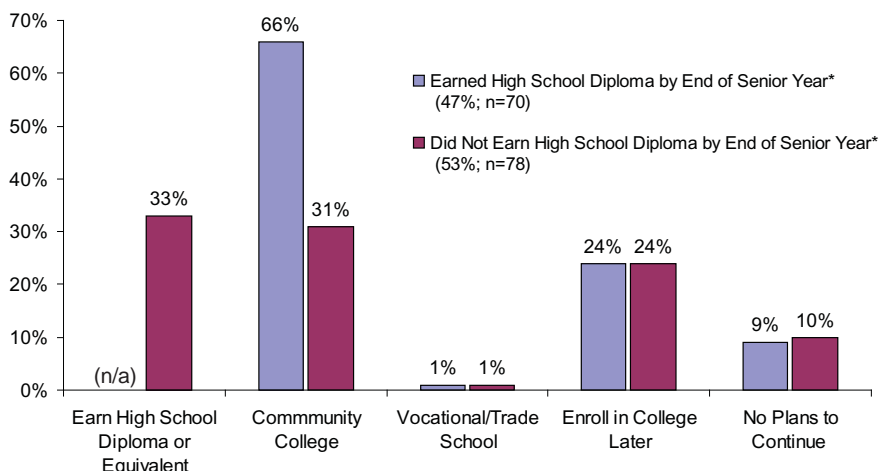
Highlights:

- ▶ More than 70,000 California high school seniors in the 2007 graduating class had not passed the CAHSEE, but chose to remain in school rather than abandon their education.
- ▶ The academically high-risk but persistent students in this study are unique compared to academically high-risk students who drop out.
- ▶ These “persistent strugglers” were disproportionately Latino students from low socioeconomic backgrounds; 79% were classified as English Language Learners—a much higher percentage than in their respective high schools.
- ▶ Despite their academic challenges, these students continued to value education and had hopes of further education.
- ▶ Among non-graduates, 31% went on to community college; another 33% continued working toward passing the CAHSEE and earning their high school diploma, or equivalent.

Since 2006, students in California have been required to pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE)—a test of basic skills in English Language Arts and mathematics—to earn their high school diploma. Most students have either passed the CAHSEE by their senior year or dropped out. *However, more than 70,000 high school seniors in the 2007 graduating class had not passed the CAHSEE, yet chose to remain enrolled in school rather than abandon their education.* A better understanding of these students and their experiences could help improve the state’s graduation rate—particularly in light of the recent increase in the number of dropouts among California’s high school seniors (see CDRP Statistical Brief 9).

This brief summarizes findings from a study of 167 twelfth-graders from the class of 2007, in four California public school districts. Participants were randomly selected from a group of students who did not pass the CAHSEE as of the fall semester of their senior year. These students were unique because they were at “high academic risk” given their poor performance on the CAHSEE, but they were also “persistent” as they were still enrolled in school despite their academic struggles. Participants were surveyed in the spring of their senior year and again the following fall to determine what happened to them.

Study Participants' Plans for Further Education Beyond Their Senior Year



Note: *Includes the summer following senior year

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

► Who Struggled to Pass the CAHSEE?

Students in this study who struggled to pass the CAHSEE, but were still enrolled as high school seniors, differed from their fellow students in several respects. These “persistent strugglers” were disproportionately Latino students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Seventy-nine percent of the participants were classified as English Language Learners—a much higher percentage than reflected in their respective high schools.

In spite of their academic difficulties, these students **remained engaged in school**. The majority reported never or rarely having been tardy, truant, absent, or in trouble for not following school rules. Most reported spending between 1–3 hours on homework each week. The sample of students had an average GPA of 2.33, suggesting that most of these students maintained respectable grades. Yet, more than 80% of these students scored “below basic” or “far below basic” on the California Standards Tests (CST) in math and in English Language Arts.

Further results show that this unique population of academically high-risk but persistent students **continued to value education** and even had hopes of further education. Students generally reported that they felt connected to their schools, participated in at least one extracurricular activity, and valued their education. They also had aspirations of attending college, with slightly more than half planning to

attend college the following year. Most of the students had one or more friends who had dropped out of high school, but they reported that the *majority* of their friends viewed further education as the most important thing to do following high school. Students also reported that their parents generally viewed attending college as an important step to take after high school.

Students’ experiences with the CAHSEE varied. The majority had been involved in activities to help them prepare for the CAHSEE, such as taking special classes, reviewing material, and tutoring. Most students in this sample reported that they were involved in special efforts to help them prepare for the exam, and had access to various people—especially school staff—who could provide information about passing the CAHSEE.

Despite this support, **80% of the academically high-risk but persistent students in this sample did not pass the CAHSEE by the end of their senior year**. Most of the students (74%) did not pass the English Language Arts (ELA) section.

► What Happened to Students Who Did Not Pass the CAHSEE?

In the fall following their senior year of high school, **47% of the sampled students had subsequently passed the CAHSEE** and accrued adequate course credits to receive their diploma. This percentage reflected an increase from the 20% who had received their diploma

by the spring of their senior year, indicating that many students took advantage of additional opportunities to take the CAHSEE during the summer months following their senior year. Of the students who had not received their diploma by the fall follow-up, **72% percent reported being unable to pass the ELA section of the exam**.

Of the students who reported they would not graduate from high school in the initial survey, 77% ended up not graduating and 24% did, indicating that they generally had a realistic appraisal of their prospects of earning a diploma. Among students who reported they would graduate, more than half (55%) went on to receive their diploma by September 2007.

Students who received their diploma overwhelmingly reported involvement in post-secondary education. Sixty-six percent were attending a community college that fall, and an additional 24% reported that they had plans to enroll in further schooling within the upcoming year (*see figure*). Only 9% of the high school graduates said they did not have plans for further schooling.

Students who had *not* received their diploma *also* reported a continued commitment to further education: 13% had re-enrolled in high school the year following their senior year; 19% were pursuing other educational options to earn their diploma, such as adult secondary school programs, independent study, district courses, or tutoring; and 1% were pursuing a high school equivalent. **An addi-**

tional 31% of students who did not receive their high school diploma went on to attend community college, nonetheless. Twenty-five percent of these non-graduates who were attending post-secondary school were also simultaneously working on passing the CAHSEE and earning their high school diploma.

In addition, 24% of non-graduates reported intentions to attend further schooling within the upcoming year. Just 10% of non-graduates reported having no current plans to attend school following their senior year.

► **What Factors Predicted Student Success?**

The study identified which student, family, and educational characteristics predicted various student outcomes—passing the CAHSEE, graduating from high school, and enrolling in postsecondary education. Unexpectedly, a number of factors that traditionally predict high school dropout did *not* predict which students in the current sample graduated from high school. The lack of significant differences between graduates and non-graduates is a meaningful finding within this study and it supports the conclusion that these academically high-risk but persistent students are quite different from students who drop out of school prior to Grade 12.

Yet, academic achievement mattered. Students with higher scores on the English Language Arts section of the CST were significantly more likely to pass the CAHSEE and to graduate from high school than other participants. The number of credits a student

had earned as of spring 2007 was associated with passing the CAHSEE, high school graduation, and post-secondary enrollment. Higher GPA was also significantly associated with passing the CAHSEE and post-secondary enrollment.

English proficiency also predicted passing the CAHSEE. Students whose home language was not English were significantly less likely to pass the CAHSEE. A better understanding of spoken English and Spanish, as well as speaking, reading, and writing in English and Spanish, were also significantly related to passing the CAHSEE.

Finally, students who reported having close friends who dropped out of high school were less likely to graduate.

► **Conclusions**

The current study sheds light on characteristics and outcomes of a unique population of students who, despite knowing they had taken and not passed the CAHSEE multiple times, still enrolled in school for their senior year. These students did not resemble high school dropouts in traditional characteristics. The majority of these students attended class regularly, generally avoided trouble, felt connected to their schools, and held high educational values and hopes for their future. Most of these students were English learners who struggled with their English language skills.

The CAHSEE serves as a measure of accountability that has the potential to raise standards in order to ensure that all students with a high school diploma have certain necessary skills. However, schools

have the responsibility of preparing all students to pass this exam.

Schools can begin by providing early intervention for those who start to struggle with academics at a young age. It is also necessary to reach out to students with limited English language skills by providing ongoing educational resources specifically geared toward helping them gain the English skills necessary to succeed academically.

The state should also support students who continue to persist in their education despite struggling and/or failing to pass the CAHSEE. Support at the district and school levels, adult education programs, and alliances with community colleges are some potential resources to aid these persistent students by providing continued opportunities to pursue their educational goals.

It is essential that policies, processes, and resources are provided to address the needs of students who continue to meaningfully participate in high school during the senior year. These students represent youth who society has a vested interest to support. They are persistent, attempting to cope with life challenges in a positive way, and committed to attain the skills needed to be contributing community members.

The inability to pass the CAHSEE and graduate within normal time limits should not brand these students as educational “failures.” Instead they should be seen as hard-working educational “persisters” who are committed to attaining the skills and education they need to be contributing members of society.

Research Reports and Policy Briefs in Print

1. **THE ECONOMIC LOSSES FROM HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS IN CALIFORNIA** (*August 2007*)
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*)
5. **STUDENT AND SCHOOL PREDICTORS OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION IN CALIFORNIA** (*December 2007*)
6. **CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS THAT BEAT THE ODDS IN HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION** (*December 2007*)
7. **ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS TO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION: AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON** (*January 2008*)
8. **GIVING A STUDENT VOICE TO CALIFORNIA'S DROPOUT CRISIS** (*March 2008*)
9. **BUILDING SYSTEM CAPACITY FOR IMPROVING HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES IN CALIFORNIA** (*April 2008*)
10. **IMPROVING CALIFORNIA'S STUDENT DATA SYSTEMS TO ADDRESS THE DROPOUT CRISIS** (*May 2008*)
11. **STRUGGLING TO SUCCEED: WHAT HAPPENED TO SENIORS WHO DID NOT PASS THE CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAM?** (*June 2008*)

Forthcoming

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
14. A Profile of High School Completion in the Los Angeles Unified School District
15. Why Students Drop Out of School

California Dropout Research Project Staff:

Russell W. Rumberger, Director
Beverly Bavaro, Editor/Web Manager
Susan Rotermund, Research Assistant
Shawndel Malcolm, Business Officer

Policy Committee:

Jean Fuller
David W. Gordon
Marqueece Harris-Dawson
Rowena Lagrosa
Lorraine McDonnell
Gary Orfield
Darrell Steinberg

Funding:

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
The James Irvine Foundation
The Walter S. Johnson Foundation

Contact:

University of California
California Dropout Research Project
4722 South Hall, MC3220
Santa Barbara, CA 93106-3220

Tel: 805-893-2683

Email: dropouts@lmri.ucsb.edu

Project Web Site:

www.lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts

University of California
California Dropout Research Project
4722 South Hall, MC 3220
Santa Barbara, CA 93106-3220

Non-Profit
Organization
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Santa Barbara, CA
Permit No. 104