

THE HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT DILEMMA AND SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

Martha L. Thurlow and David R. Johnson

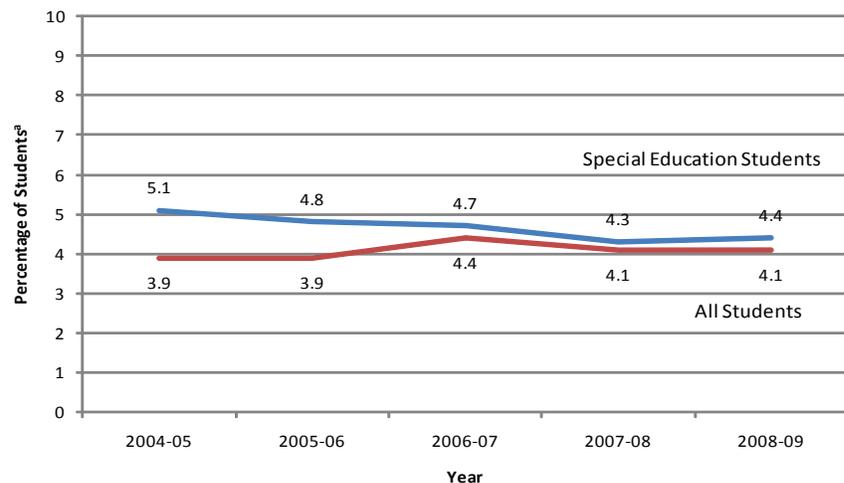
Highlights:

- ▶ **The 2007-08 dropout rate for special education students was 14 percent nationally, and 11 percent in California.**
- ▶ **The personal costs of dropping out among special education students are enormous and can far exceed the challenges encountered by non-special education students who drop out.**
- ▶ **The causes of a student dropping out of school are similar for special education students and non-special education students.**
- ▶ **For the past two decades, special education's focus on dropouts has been addressed primarily through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).**
- ▶ **In general, special education students are less likely to drop out if they spend more time in general education classes, receive tutoring services, and are in schools that maintain high expectations for academic achievement and school completion.**

The severity of the dropout crisis in California and the nation varies widely among student groups. Special education students are one of the most impacted groups. Not only is the incidence of dropping out among special education students high, the social, economic, and personal costs of dropping out are enormous and often far exceed the challenges and problems encountered by non-special education students who drop out.

Students who receive special education services via an Individualized Education Program (IEP) are a diverse group, with disabilities ranging from the most prevalent (learning disabilities, speech language impairments, mental retardation, and emotional disturbance) to the least prevalent (visual impairments, traumatic brain injury, orthopedic impairments, and hearing impairments). Nationally, about 11 percent of students 6-17 years of age (over 6 million students) receive special education services; in California it is about 9 percent. Additionally, a larger percentage of California special education students are English language learners (28.4 percent) than special education students nationally (7.6 percent).

Annual Dropout Rates for Special Education and All Students



^a "Special Education Students" includes those aged 14-21; "All Students" includes those in grades 9-12. NOTE: The definition of "dropout" for this figure is the number of dropouts divided by the number of enrolled students.

Read the full report at: cdrp.ucsb.edu

This Policy Brief examines four topics related to the dropout dilemma for special education students: (a) the definition and incidence of dropouts, (b) the economic and social consequences of dropping out, (c) the causes of dropping out, and (d) possible solutions to the dropout dilemma. To the extent possible, we highlight both the national dropout picture and the situation within California.

► Definition and Incidence of Special Education Dropouts

Historically, the special education community has defined “dropout” differently than how it has been defined for those in general education. In response to federal requirements, states provide information on the number of special education students between 14 to 21 years old who exit special education services, and the reason(s). Up until 2005, the dropout rate using these data was simply the percentage of exiting special education students who formally withdrew from school during the school year. After 2005, the dropout rate calculation was changed to include students who were considered to have moved and were not known to be continuing in an education program.

Including both those students identified as dropping out, and those reaching the maximum age for receiving services (i.e., aging out), the 2007-08 dropout rate for special education students was 14 percent nationally, and 11 percent in California. In all but two of ten states with comparable data for

special education and non-special education students, the dropout rate for special education students was significantly higher than the rate for non-special education students, although rates varied widely by type of disability.

The specific definition of “dropout” in special education has made it difficult to compare special education students with non-special education students (or with all students), thus limiting our state-level and national understanding of the magnitude and scope of the problem.

For students generally, dropping out is typically measured by using either the percentage of students who dropped out during one school year, or the percentage of individuals in a certain age range (e.g., 16-24) who had not completed high school and were not currently enrolled.

Calculations of dropout rates based on enrollment data provide the best way to compare dropout rates for special education students with dropout rates for all students (*including* special education students), even though the special education data are based on students aged 14-21, while data for all students are based on those in grades 9-12, regardless of age. These data (see figure) suggest that the annual dropout rate for special education students was 4.4 percent in 2008-09, compared to 4.1 percent for all students; although differences in dropout rates between special education students and all students have decreased over the last five years.

► Economic and Social Consequences of Dropping Out of School

The social and economic consequences of dropping out are a serious problem, not only for individuals who receive special education services, but also for their families, schools, communities, and society as a whole. Although these problems are similar to those experienced by their peers without disabilities, they seem to be more pronounced for special education students. Unfortunately, there are only limited data available on the social and economic consequences of dropping out specifically for special education students.

The long-term implications on employment for special education dropouts have not been fully examined. We do know that adults with disabilities are only half as likely to be employed as those without disabilities. Among those who are employed, there is also a gap in earnings.

Data indicate that students with disabilities are less likely to be enrolled in public four-year colleges and universities than their peers without disabilities, and are instead more likely to attend either public two-year institutions or other institutions, including for-profit vocational training institutions. Special education students who complete high school are four times as likely to enroll in higher education as special education students who drop out of high school.

Criminal activity and incarceration is higher for dropouts compared to graduates, and a

high percentage of individuals in correctional institutions are those who received special education services while in high school. The estimated prevalence of adolescents with disabilities in the juvenile correction system, for example, ranges from 30 to 70 percent. Special education students who drop out demonstrate more serious criminal justice system involvement as they age compared to special education students who stay in school.

Dropping out of school also increases the likelihood of continued dependence on family members for financial and social support. Care of a family member with disabilities is more costly than care of a family member without disabilities.

► Causes of Dropping Out

Since special education students have only occasionally been the focus of dropout research, our understanding of the specific factors associated with dropping out among these students is limited. Information that is available reveals that students with emotional/behavioral disturbances who drop out tend to be older and more likely to have parents who are unemployed and have less education. Special education students also tend to experience higher levels of absenteeism, school disciplinary problems, difficulties in developing positive relationships with teachers and peers, higher levels of school mobility, low grades, and a history of course failure and limited parent participation.

Again, while these causes of dropping out are not solely associated with special education

students, they are consistently acknowledged as dominant factors. Special education students have been found to be less likely to drop out if they spent more time in general education classes, received tutoring services, and were in schools that maintained high expectations of special education students for academic achievement and school completion. Lower rates of dropout are also associated with a receipt of instruction emphasizing independent living skills and training for competitive employment.

► Solutions

Adequately addressing the challenge of too many students dropping out of school has been a long-time goal in the U.S., one that has been particularly difficult to reach for special education students. Two primary approaches have been taken to address the problem: (1) change school completion options, and (2) implement programs designed to prevent students from dropping out. The former approaches, which have included generating alternative diploma options, such as modified diplomas and special education diplomas, as well as alternative routes to the regular diploma (such as collecting evidence that graduation requirements have been met or passing a different test) may reduce the dropout rate, yet result in students who do not have the knowledge and skills that they need to succeed in postsecondary educational or work environments.

For the past two decades, special education's focus on dropouts has been addressed primarily through the transition

requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). For those special education students viewed as at risk of dropping out, dropout prevention or intervention strategies are determined by the student's IEP team and included in the student's IEP. Yet the variables related to special education dropping out—such as high absenteeism, low grades, high mobility rates, problem behaviors, and limited parental support—generally have not been addressed successfully through IEP planning efforts.

Dropout prevention strategies have been examined primarily for students in general rather than specifically for special education students. Although a review of dropout prevention programs by the U.S. Department of Education What Works Clearinghouse identified relatively few proven programs, four programs were specifically demonstrated through research to be effective for special education students: Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS); Achievement in Dropout Prevention and Excellence (APEX); Check & Connect; and Iowa Behavioral Alliance. Yet these programs have not been adopted in many schools, leaving the dropout problem for special education students largely unchecked.

The current trends toward modest improvements in graduation rates among special education students are insufficient. Increased attention and societal investments in interventions, strategies, and programs that emphasize student engagement and retention, especially for special education students, are critically needed.

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*)
12. **CAN MIDDLE SCHOOL REFORM INCREASE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES?** (*June 2008*)
13. **MIDDLE SCHOOL PREDICTORS OF HIGH SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT IN THREE CALIFORNIA SCHOOL DISTRICTS** (*June 2008*)
14. **WHAT FACTORS PREDICT HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION IN THE LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT?** (*June 2008*)
15. **WHY STUDENTS DROP OUT: A REVIEW OF 25 YEARS OF RESEARCH** (*October 2008*)
16. **HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS AND THE ECONOMIC LOSSES FROM JUVENILE CRIME IN CALIFORNIA** (*September 2009*)
17. **THE CONNECTION BETWEEN HEALTH AND HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT** (*March 2010*)

California Dropout Research Project Staff:

Russell W. Rumberger, Director
Beverly Bavaro, Sr. Editor/Web Manager
Lauren Taylor, Research Assistant

2008 Policy Committee Report:

"Solving California's Dropout Crisis"

Policy Committee:

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

Funding:

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
The James Irvine Foundation

Contact:

California Dropout Research Project
Gevirtz Graduate School of Education
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9490
Tel: 805-893-2683
Email: dropouts@education.ucsb.edu

Project Web Site:

www.cdrp.ucsb.edu

All of the above Research Reports and Policy Briefs, as well as Statistical Briefs, are available at www.cdrp.ucsb.edu

University of California Santa Barbara
California Dropout Research Project
Gevirtz Graduate School of Education
Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9490

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