

## DOES STATE POLICY HELP OR HURT THE DROPOUT PROBLEM IN CALIFORNIA?

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### Highlights:

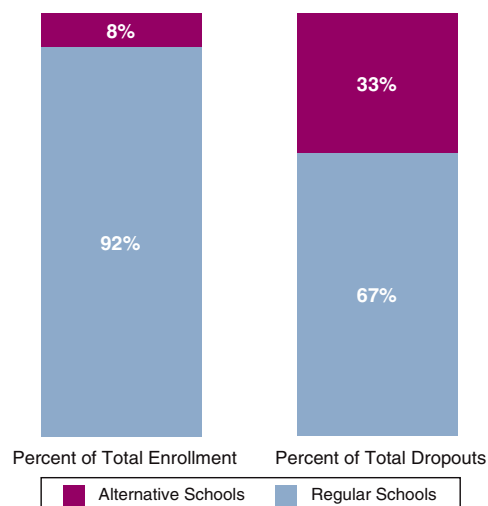
- ▶ California lacks a data system that tracks students, so no one really knows how many students drop out or what happens to those who do.
- ▶ There are currently various policies and programs in place addressing the dropout problem in California, but they appear to have little actual effect.
- ▶ In response to accountability pressures, schools often push students into alternative education schools where dropout rates are at least *two and a half times higher* than the overall statewide dropout rate.
- ▶ Alternative education schools enrolled only eight percent of all California high school students but account for 33 percent of all dropouts (*see figure, this page*).
- ▶ State policy makers should reframe the policy problem: focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools serving large numbers of at-risk students.

Only two out of three high school students in California complete high school on time. The resulting short- and long-term economic losses to individuals and to the state are well documented (see CDRP Policy Brief 1, “*Economic Losses from High School Dropouts in California*”). Clearly the state has a huge stake in addressing the dropout problem; yet current policy efforts fall short. While California has a number of programs and policies that aim to mitigate the dropout problem, the state lacks a coherent, comprehensive policy approach.

### ▶ Framing Dropout Policy

Framing dropout strategies challenges policy makers because the problem defies ready identification. Because multiple factors contribute to dropping out of school, solutions to the problem will also be multiple. Thus, dropping out can be defined as an *administrative problem* resulting from the absence of educational alternatives for students who do not fit into traditional school programs, or to the

**High School Enrollment and Dropouts in California  
Regular and Alternative Schools, 2005-06**



Source: California Department of Education. California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) School Information Form (SIF) [Electronic Version]. Retrieved October 12, 2007 from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/studentdatafiles.asp>.

Read the full report at: [lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts](http://lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts)

lack of adequate warning systems that let school officials know when students are at risk. Or, it may be framed as a *professional problem*: the absence of psychological or social services for students, and the lack of adequate training and time for teachers to identify and help students who might be on the path to dropping out. Dropping out may also be framed as a *legal problem*: inadequate or weak legal sanctions for truancy, lack of enforcement of existing truancy laws, the lack of judicial system resources to respond to the dropout problem, or poor or weak cooperation between legal agencies and schools. A political framing of the problem would have the state abdicate responsibility by declaring it a *local problem* that schools, districts, and communities must solve on their own.

Policy solutions to the dropout problem must address its multiple policy frames. The challenge to policy makers is to devise ways in which these policy frames reinforce rather than compete with one another. Each frame is important and each contributes to the overall policy design. The trick is to find the proper balance among them.

### ► **The State's Role in Dropout Prevention**

Currently, four types of policy strategies or instruments comprise state efforts to reduce the dropout rate:

- **Legal.** Compulsory attendance laws compel children between the ages of six and 18 to attend school. The enforcement mechanism for compulsory education laws are the School Attendance Review Boards (SARBs), created by the legislature in 1974. Instead of criminalizing truancy, the SARB process aims to provide a safety net under students who have behavioral problems and are habitually truant. The Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) found that the SARB process is unevenly implemented throughout the state's counties and school districts. Moreover, as a legal framework for dropout prevention, it is flawed both administratively and conceptually.
- **Fiscal.** The state has adopted various fiscal incentives to encourage schools to be engaged in dropout prevention. Foremost is the calculation of the State Revenue Limit—the main source of funding to schools—which is based on Average Daily Attendance (ADA) rather than enrollment and, as a result, creates an incentive for schools to keep children in school.
- **Targeted programs.** In 2004, the legislature created the Pupil Retention Block Grant to consolidate various programs targeting youth at risk. Among the programs consolidated into the block grant is the *Dropout Prevention and Recovery Act*, which

contains various provisions for coordinating community services to youth, providing special programs for students with special needs, counseling, and increasing parental involvement and staff development. The efficacy of these programs is unknown because they are rarely, if ever, evaluated.

- **Alternative education.** California has created an array of alternative education schools and programs for students who, for whatever reasons, do not do well within the traditional school setting. According to the LAO study, *Improving Alternative Education in California*, there is considerable pressure on schools to push low-performing students into alternative schools as a way of evading accountability for them; yet dropout rates in these schools are at least two and a half times higher than the overall statewide dropout rate. In 2005-06, for example, alternative education schools enrolled only eight percent of all California high school students, but they accounted for 33 percent of all dropouts (*see figure*).

In addition, there are various categorical programs that target low-performing minority students who might be at risk of dropping out. What is not known is how these program funds are used at the local level and what effect they have on reducing drop-

out rates. As in other policy areas, state strategies to reduce dropouts are scattered among various programs. There is no coherent, comprehensive state policy for addressing the dropout problem.

### ► **What the State Can Do**

A coherent policy approach is needed, one that integrates dropout prevention strategies at state and local levels of government; integrates federal, state, and local resources; and creates seamless curricula among high schools, community colleges, adult education programs, and regional occupation programs. The approach should include:

- **Improving the State Data System.** The most pressing need regarding dropouts is for the state to implement the student data system so that students may be tracked from preschool through postsecondary education. Currently, no one really knows how many students drop out or what happens to those who do.
- **Altering the Conventional Starting and Finish Line.** If differences in school preparedness are a primary cause for low rates of school completion, as research suggests, then one strategy is to provide improved supports and systems at the ends, or tails, of the primary-secondary school continuum. This would roll back the start of schooling to ages of three or four, and extend the “finish line” of 12th grade until students can meet desired standards for post-secondary

enrollment or occupational advancement.

- **Broadening Curriculum Strategies.** There is much debate within California education policy circles over mandatory college preparatory programs (California universities' "a-g" admission requirements) as opposed to broad availability of vocational education programs. An emerging approach, advocated by a number of researchers, is to eliminate the dichotomy and, instead, integrate the two into a "multiple pathways" approach.
- **Looking Beyond the Schools.** The mixture of various state initiatives addressing school dropouts is recognition that the problem is not entirely within the schools' capacity to address. The state can provide support and assistance to counties, local communities, and schools, but program implementation, coordination, and planning must be carried out locally.

In addition, the state should undertake or contract for evaluations of current programs dealing with dropouts. Studies by LAO of alternative programs and SARBs suggest that those programs are not effective in systematically reducing the dropout problem. There is, however, evidence of some successful programs, including partnership academies, accelerated learning opportunities, counseling and mentoring programs, and extended learning time programs (see CDRP Research Report 2, “*The Return on Investment for Improving*

*California's High School Graduation Rate*”). The state needs to learn more about successful programs and what districts are doing to make them so.

### ► **Redefining the Problem**

The dropout problem will not be solved by creating more categorical programs or simply providing additional resources. The key to an effective state role is to increase district capacity to identify at-risk students early and to provide the academic and social supports they need. Successful solutions must also look to a variety of social service and community resources.

Ultimately, in order to solve the dropout problem, policy makers must look beyond the dropout problem itself; they must also look to the fundamental process of schooling. It is not enough for students to get a high school diploma if that diploma only validates eighth-grade skills in mathematics and ninth-grade skills in language arts. The “dropout problem” needs to be reframed to ask how schools can better serve large numbers of students who live in neighborhoods with limited resources, who speak little or no English, have parents who are not well educated, and/or are low income.

Policy makers have no direct control over children's lives outside of school; they can, however, exercise considerable control over what happens in school: the kinds of services children receive and the resources available to them.

## 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*)

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