

## CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOLS THAT BEAT THE ODDS IN GRADUATION

Miguel Socias, Lenay Dunn, Thomas Parrish, Mari Muraki, and LaRena Woods

### Highlights:

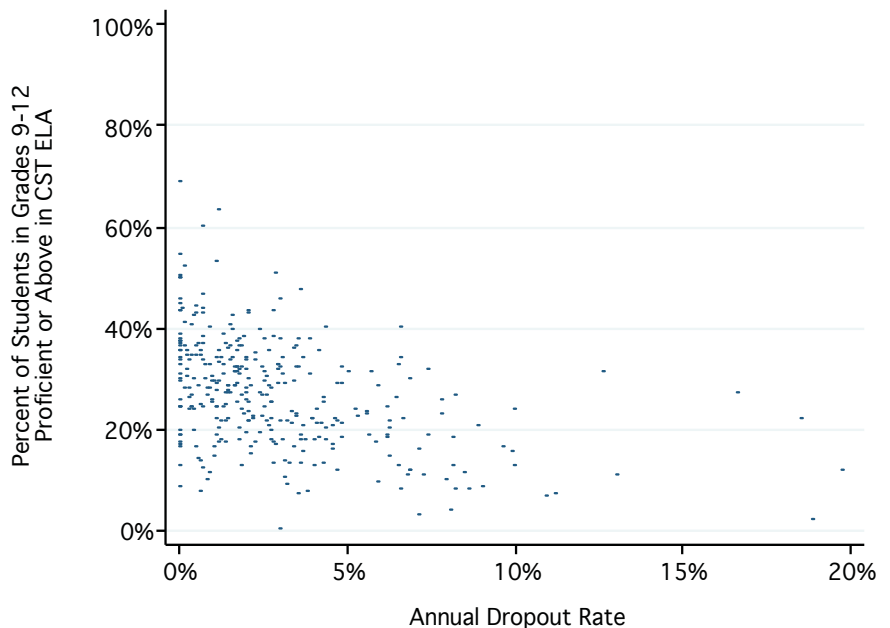
- ▶ Several California high schools are “beating the odds” (BTO) by graduating more students, reducing dropout rates, and achieving higher test scores than schools with similar student populations.
- ▶ Only 22 schools qualified as BTO schools in this study, illustrating how difficult it is for schools to be effective on multiple indicators of school performance.
- ▶ Four strategies emerged: 1) connecting with students; 2) engaging parents and community members to support school efforts; 3) providing interventions and supports to students at risk of dropping out; and 4) creating a culture of accountability and high expectations.
- ▶ Principals cited district support as crucial to their success, which allowed them to exercise discretion over who was hired, and gave them considerable autonomy to introduce and/or alter programs as needed to achieve high standards.

Although the importance of graduating from high school is well documented, there is relatively little research literature on the strategies high schools can use to improve their graduation rates. To address this issue, this study identified 22 California schools that are “beating the odds” (BTO) in terms of graduation rates, dropout rates, and test scores, compared to schools with similar demographics and challenges. After identifying such BTO high schools, interviews were conducted with principals of six of these schools to determine the policies, procedures, and practices their leaders believe have contributed to their demonstrated ability to “beat the odds.”

### ▶ Identifying Beating-the-Odds High Schools

A major challenge is how to identify BTO high schools. California currently lacks a data system capable of computing accurate drop-

**Annual Dropout Rates and Academic Achievement for California High Schools in 2005-06**



NOTE: Regular public high schools (excluding charters) with at least 50% of the students eligible for free and reduced lunch (N=245). CST ELA = California Standards Test, English Language Arts.

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

out and graduation statistics, so this study estimated five dropout rates and four graduation rates using data currently available from the California Department of Education. Given this array, some high schools appear exceptionally effective on one measure, but not on another.

Two rates were selected for use in this study: (1) the annual dropout rate from grades 9-12 (state average = 3.5% in 2005-06), and (2) the “official” graduation rate that California uses for federal accountability purposes (state average = 83.2% in 2005-06). Additionally, we considered schools’ academic achievement, since schools that are effective in improving graduation rates may not be effective in improving student achievement. For example, schools with low dropout rates vary widely in terms of student academic achievement (*see figure*).

To identify California’s BTO high schools, the expected graduation and dropout rates for regular (non-charter) high schools were first estimated for each school year from 2002-03 through 2005-06, controlling for the following characteristics: eligibility for free or reduced price lunch, racial minority, special education designation, gender, and English learner status. A school was identified as BTO if it performed better than expected on the graduation and dropout rates for all four years, had at least 50 percent of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch, and had high test scores compared to schools with similar students.

Based on these criteria, only 22 California high schools emerged as BTO, which illustrates how difficult it is for schools to be effective on multiple indicators of school performance.

#### ► BTO Case Studies

The districts associated with the BTO schools were contacted in an effort to better understand the context in which these schools appeared so strong, and the extent to which success, as indicated by the data, reflect strategies specifically implemented for this purpose. Is the school “beating the odds” because of a well-implemented strategy, or for some other reason, such as having selective admission procedures?

As an example of the latter, one district openly admitted that their schools’ graduation rates were misleading because the schools transfer struggling students to alternative schools. The superintendent noted that these schools were not strategically combating the dropout issue, and for this reason they were not contacted, nor were they included in the list of BTO schools.

Ultimately, six high schools with leaders who could clearly describe the strategies used to realize the unusually high graduation and low dropout rates—given their student demographics—were interviewed and profiled (*see table*).

Although all six principals emphasized that there is no one formula for success, four overarching themes emerged from the interviews:

### 1. Connecting With and Engaging Students

All interviewed schools reported a conscious effort to encourage students to stay engaged in school by providing connections between the student and the school. At Riverdale, students are involved in decisions about which electives the school offers to ensure access to the kinds of classes students want to take. Bassett and Sanger foster mentoring relationships between staff and students through an advisory structure, while Duarte and Valley establish informal connections with each student to provide mentoring and support.

The schools indicated that these personal relationships help teachers know if a student is struggling and in need of interventions.

### 2. Engaging Parents and Community Members to Support School Efforts

Five of the six interviewed schools cited parent and community involvement as a way to encourage low dropout rates. Duarte holds meetings for parents to explain college application and financial aid processes. Selma and Sanger have partnerships with local universities to educate parents about college options. Riverdale and Selma utilize their school websites to keep parents informed of upcoming events and important resources. Three principals emphasized the importance of being active in the broader community through organizations, churches,

### Profiles of BTO Case Study High Schools (2005-06)

High School	District	County	Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch	Minority Students	Total Enrollment	State API Rank, 2006	Similar Schools Rank, 2006	Annual Dropout Rate	Graduation Rate
Bassett	Bassett Unified	Los Angeles	68%	98%	1,444	3	9	1.4%	96.6%
Duarte	Duarte Unified	Los Angeles	54%	85%	1,207	5	10	0.0%	96.7%
Riverdale	Riverdale Joint Unified	Fresno	73%	79%	548	6	10	0.0%	100%
Sanger	Sanger Unified	Fresno	64%	82%	2,224	6	9	0.6%	95.9%
Selma	Selma Unified	Fresno	69%	88%	1,673	6	10	0.6%	93.4%
Valley	Elk Grove Unified	Sacramento	73%	94%	1,940	4	9	3.0%	84.5%

SOURCE: Dataquest. Retrieved December 10, 2007, from <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

or by offering use of the school facility for community events.

### 3. Providing Interventions and Supports to Students At Risk of Dropping Out

All six interviewed schools indicated that they use data, including grades, credit hours, and attendance, to identify students at risk of dropping out, and then offer these students interventions and supports to stay in school. Duarte and Sanger identify struggling 8<sup>th</sup> graders in order to begin targeted interventions with these students as soon as they enter the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Duarte and Selma have counselors dedicated to students at risk of dropping out, while Valley has a full-time career and college counselor. Counselors at all six schools were reported to provide individualized support to students to guide their instructional plan, serve as a liaison between students and teachers, and closely follow student progress.

### 4. Creating a Culture of Accountability and High Expectations

All six schools said that they have worked to create a culture that supports graduation and college attendance. Riverdale, Sanger, and Valley enroll all of their stu-

dents in college preparatory courses, while Duarte, Bassett, and Valley offer Advanced Placement courses for any student. Riverdale and Selma increased their requirements for graduation or participation in the graduation ceremony. Riverdale students must include proof of admission to a post-secondary educational institution, a vocational institute, the military, or evidence of ongoing job interviews to qualify for graduation. Selma recently implemented a four-year attendance policy stating that students must have no more than 10 absences per year, or 40 over four years, to participate in the graduation ceremony.

### ► Conclusions

These themes are consistent with other studies of high schools that have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing dropout rates and improving graduation rates. These studies have identified an array of components found in a number of comprehensive school reform models including early intervention, engagement, challenging courses, and smaller school size as organizational factors influencing students to stay in school. The studies have also found that it is the *combination* of

components that appear to be particularly effective in improving student outcomes, not one or two specific strategies.

District factors also seem to matter. Five of these six schools are in smaller school districts, which likely offer the advantages that smaller, more cohesive communities can bring in supporting children to stay in school. However, the leaders of these schools also attributed their success to factors that could be employed in larger districts. For example, the principals cited district administrations that are dedicated to their needs and give them the ability to exercise discretion over who is hired, and considerable autonomy to introduce and/or alter programs as needed to achieve high standards.

In summary, this study offers useful insights into what can be done to address California's dropout crisis. Specific schools can be found that are beating the odds on these vital outcomes and are creating explicit structures and supports to encourage high graduation rates. These practices can be adopted by other schools and should inform future policy deliberations.

## 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*)

## In Production (*Working Titles*)

- Alternative Pathways to High School Graduation, Further Education, and Workforce Preparation in Other Countries
- Why Students Drop Out of School
- Building District Capacity for Improving High School Graduation Rates in California
- Middle School Reform as a Strategy for Improving California's High School Graduation Rate
- Improving California's Data System for Measuring Dropout and Graduation Rates
- What's Motivating Youths in Differing Schools?
- Follow-up Study of Students Who Did Not Pass the California High School Exit Exam (CASHEE)
- Early Predictors of High School Dropout
- Profiles of High School Dropouts and Graduates in Los Angeles Unified School District

## *California Dropout Research Project Staff:*

**Russell W. Rumberger**, Director  
**Beverly Bavaro**, Editor/Web Manager  
**Briana Villaseñor**, Business Officer  
**Susan Rotermund**, Research Assistant

## *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](mailto:dropouts@lmri.ucsb.edu)

## *Project Web Site:*

[www.lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts](http://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