

Fixing the Dropout Crisis

AN INNOVATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT PUTS NEW FOCUS ON CALIFORNIA'S \$46 BILLION-A-YEAR PROBLEM

By George Yatchisin

- An "average" high school graduate earns \$290,000 more over a lifetime – and pays \$100,000 more in federal, state, and local taxes – than a high school dropout.
- Between 26 percent and 35 percent of all teenagers in California today are high school dropouts.
- One of every three students who dropped out of 10th grade in 2004 was doing nothing four years later — neither going to school nor working.
- The problem costs the state's taxpayers \$46.4 billion annually.

Those are just a few of the findings of the California Dropout Research Project, a groundbreaking study headed by Professor Russell Rumberger of the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education that has produced 38 reports thus far. "We've had lots of great feedback," says Rumberger, "and that's been very satisfying, translating research into these formats anyone can understand."

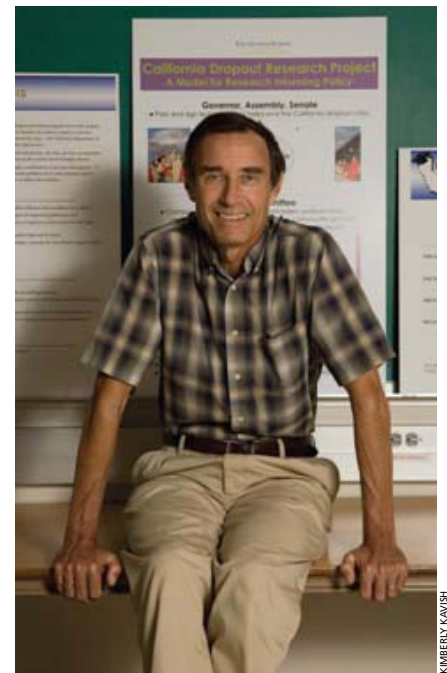
Those formats include four-page policy briefs written for easy consumption by busy journalists or political staffers. Rumberger says he learned just how important it was "to repeat ideas over

multiple forums." He wrote op-ed articles for newspapers, spoke to legislative committees in Sacramento, and lobbied groups like the California Mayors Education Roundtable.

The project's work is guided by a strong policy committee, whose members include Lorraine McDonnell, a UCSB professor of political science, and State Senator Darrell Steinberg, a Sacramento Democrat who chairs the Senate Select Committee on High School Graduation. "Some people told me that if you can get any of your recommendations into a bill, you've accomplished something," says Rumberger. "We helped create two bills."

The project, which is affiliated with the UC Linguistic Minority Research Institute, was funded by some heavy hitters of private philanthropy: the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation.

"The project has done a great job of deepening our understanding of California's high school dropout problem," says Anne Stanton, Youth Program Director of the Irvine Foundation. "By continuing



Russell Rumberger: "The real test is what bills get introduced in the next cycle."

to increase the visibility of our dropout crisis, and producing research that informs and engages policymakers and educators, CDRP is helping the state develop meaningful solutions to address the problem."

The project's final report offers recommendations that the state, districts, and schools should adopt to help solve the crisis (see accompanying box). "It isn't just about changing policy," says Rumberger. "It's really about changing practice, and policy and practice don't always connect."

His greatest hope is that some school districts will volunteer to try new approaches to the problem. "We want to create 'lighthouse districts' to try new innovations," Rumberger explains. "We don't want to go statewide with anything until we've tried it, collected data, and then either developed or changed the ideas."

Rumberger has just received additional funding from the Irvine and Johnson Foundations to support the project for another year. He wants to do more to inform policy makers and the public about the nature of — and potential solutions to — the dropout crisis. One possibility: a statewide summit.

"The real test is what bills get introduced in the next cycle," he says. "I'm hopeful we can get some more things going." ■

WHAT CAN BE DONE? SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

The State should . . .

Collect and report more useful data on dropouts and the state's progress in improving graduation rates. **Develop** high school reform standards and implement them in schools with high dropout rates. **Undertake** middle school reform. **Make** strategic investments in other proven dropout prevention strategies, targeting the most disadvantaged students and schools.

School districts should . . .

Mobilize the community to address the problem. **Adopt** proven strategies to keep students in school and support their successful graduation. **Implement** these strategies in all targeted schools through a process with clearly specified benchmarks and outcomes. **Partner** with outside support organizations to identify strategies and to support and monitor implementation.

Schools should . . .

Create a personalized learning environment for both students and teachers. **Provide** academic and social supports for students. **Provide** rigorous and meaningful instruction. **Create** connections to the real world.

Recommendations excerpted from "Solving California's Dropout Crisis," the Policy Committee Report of the California Dropout Research Project. For more information, visit www.lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts