

For Immediate Release
February 27, 2008

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CALIFORNIA DROPOUT RESEARCH PROJECT ISSUES
BLUEPRINT TO SOLVE DROPOUT CRISIS

Government Officials Echo Need for Action, Announce Steps Toward Reform

SACRAMENTO, Calif. – A prominent group of researchers, policymakers and education leaders issued a bold set of recommendations to improving California’s high school graduation rate.

Chief among them is modifying the accountability system, improving the data system, and building the capacity of schools, districts, and the state to address the problem. California has adopted content standards and an accountability system; however numerous studies of systemic reform show that each level of the educational system lacks the capacity to provide support to the next.

“Coordination among all players—the state, school district and schools—is essential to raising graduation rates.” said Russell W. Rumberger, University of California Santa Barbara professor of education and director of California Dropout Research Project (CDRP), which issued the report. “We need to get serious about solving the dropout crisis and doing so will require a combination of pressure and support from the state, and commitment to implement reform standards in districts and schools where the problem is most severe.”

After 10 months of studying the state’s dropout crisis and deliberating solutions, the CDRP’s Policy Committee, issued a blueprint for action by the state, school districts and schools, saying the problem requires a systemic approach. The entire report is posted on the CDRP Web site at <http://www.lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts/>. Recommendations include:

What the State Should Do

- Fix the “Accountability Progress Reporting,” system at the state and federal levels, including the California Academic Performance Index (API), Alternative School Models Accountability Model (ASAM) and the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirement.
- Collect and report more useful dropout data and the progress for improving graduation rates
- Develop high school reform standards and create “lighthouse” districts
- Undertake middle school reform, similar to high school model
- Make investments in proven dropout prevention strategies and target the most disadvantaged schools and kids
- Re-examine high school graduation requirements

What School Districts Should Do

- Mobilize community to address problem
- Adopt proven prevention strategies
- Implement strategies with benchmarks, timelines and outcomes
- Develop and use data to monitor strategies
- Partner with outside organizations for support and to help identify and monitor strategies

What Schools Should Do

- Create a personalized learning environment for students and teachers
- Provide academic and social support
- Provide rigorous and meaningful instruction
- Create connections to the real world

Government officials on hand to discuss the dropout problem and potential solutions include: State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell, California Secretary of Education David Long, Senator Darrell Steinberg, and Assembly Member Jean Fuller.

"Closing the achievement gap requires a multifaceted approach. Fortunately, the state is on the road to building a critically important data system that will enable us to accurately track dropout and graduation rates," said State Superintendent of Schools Jack O'Connell. "We are launching technology-based programs to help middle schools and alternative schools to model and employ best practices. Even in a year of belt-tightening, we must stay focused on keeping all students engaged in school and achieving to the high standards today's world demands. At the same time, it is also long overdue for us to begin shifting the conversation from how we calculate dropout rates to how we can effectively lower them before even more kids miss out on their deserved shot at a bright future."

California State Legislators agree. "This report shines needed light on a problem we cannot afford to ignore," said State Senator Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on High School Graduation and a member of the CDRO Policy Committee. "Last week I introduced Senate Bill 1532, which would significantly increase expectations for higher graduation rates. It's clear that those expectations have been too low for too long."

Assembly Member Jean Fuller (R-Bakersfield), and, like Steinberg, a member of the CDRP Policy Committee agrees. "I applaud Russ Rumberger for convening a legislative working group that can use the research he has conducted as a map for solving the dropout crisis"

The cost of inaction is great. Each year, 120,000 Californians reach age 20 without a high school diploma costing the state \$46.4 billion dollars over a lifetime. Students who drop out are more likely to have lower incomes, be unemployed, engage in criminal activities, have health problems, and be on welfare.

"The dropout crisis reduces opportunities for far too many of California's youth and threatens our state's economic future," said Anne Stanton, Youth Program Director for The James Irvine Foundation. Indeed, the CDRP report illustrates that, if present trends continue, then 39 percent of California's jobs, by 2020, will require a college education yet only 33 percent will have a college degree. Likewise, California will have twice as many workers without a high school diploma (22 percent) and only 11 percent of the jobs will be available to them.

According to the CDRP report, family background remains the most powerful predictor of student achievement in school. Students from low-income households, students with less educated parents and students not living with both of the parents are all less likely to graduate high school.

"Ultimately, we must face that it will take concerted actions by a variety players to remedy the dropout crisis," said Marshall Smith, director of the education program at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. "Reforming accountability and improving data collection are sound first steps, but success will demand commitment all the way to the community."

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ABOUT THE CALIFORNIA DROPOUT RESEARCH PROJECT

Based at the University of California, Santa Barbara, the California Dropout Research Project began in December 2006 and is scheduled to conclude in September 2008. The purpose of the project is to synthesize existing research and undertake new research to inform policymakers and the public about the nature of – and potential solutions to – California's dropout problem.

CDRP is funded by \$850,000 in grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation. For more information about CDRP, including a copy of the Policy Committee Report as well as a complete library of the Project's research, please visit the CDRP website at:

<http://www.lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts/>.