

What Happened to Dropouts From the High School Class of 2004?

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High school dropouts face a bleak future if they never go back to school, but they have several options to do so: they can earn their diploma by re-enrolling in high school; they can earn an alternative high school credential by passing the General Education Development (GED) exam; or they can enter community college without a high school diploma.

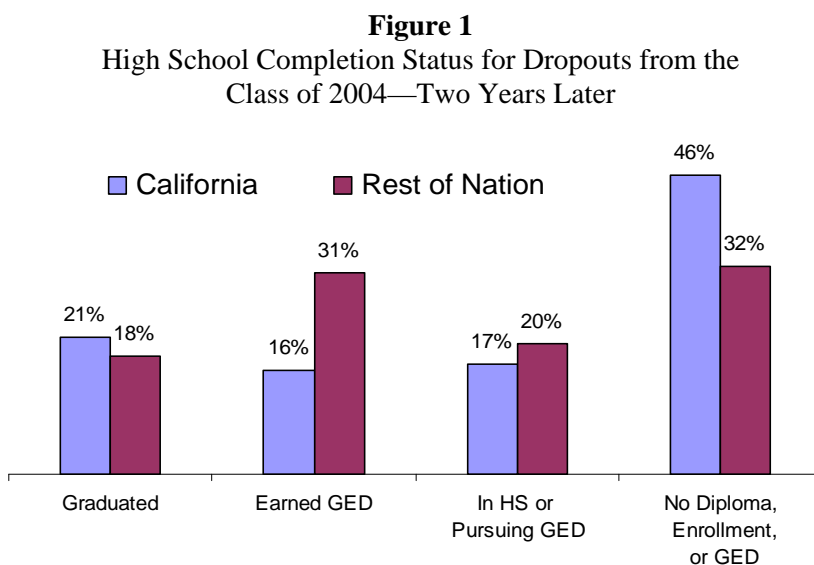
This brief examines what happened to students from the high school graduating class of 2004 who dropped out after tenth grade. We analyzed data from a national study that tracked high school sophomores from 2002 through 2006, two years after their expected graduation. We compared the educational and employment experiences of two groups of students in California and in the rest of the nation—those who dropped out after tenth grade and those who never dropped out. In California, 16% of tenth-graders dropped out; in the rest of the nation, 13% dropped out.

Did Dropouts Ever Finish High School?

Within two years of their scheduled graduation, 21% of high school dropouts in California managed to finish high school and earn a diploma. An additional 16% earned their GED, and 17% were either in school trying to earn their diploma or studying for the GED (Figure 1). Altogether, about one-half of all tenth grade dropouts in California had managed to either

complete high school or were still attempting to do so two years after they were scheduled to graduate; the other half had abandoned their quest to complete high school during that same time period.

In the rest of the nation, high school completion rates were higher because nearly twice as many students earned their GED (30%) compared to students in California (16%).



Source: Education Longitudinal Study 2002 (ELS:2002), National Center for Education Statistics

Did Dropouts Attend College?

Students who had never dropped out of high school were much more likely to attend college than those who did drop out. Only 25% of California’s dropouts ever attended college, and two years after their expected graduation date only 9% were still enrolled. In contrast, three-quarters of all California students who never dropped out attended college within two years of graduating, and 60% of those students remained enrolled two years later (Table 1). California and the rest of the nation share similar patterns.

Table 1
Percentage of Students in the Class of 2004 Enrolled in Post-Secondary Education, 2006

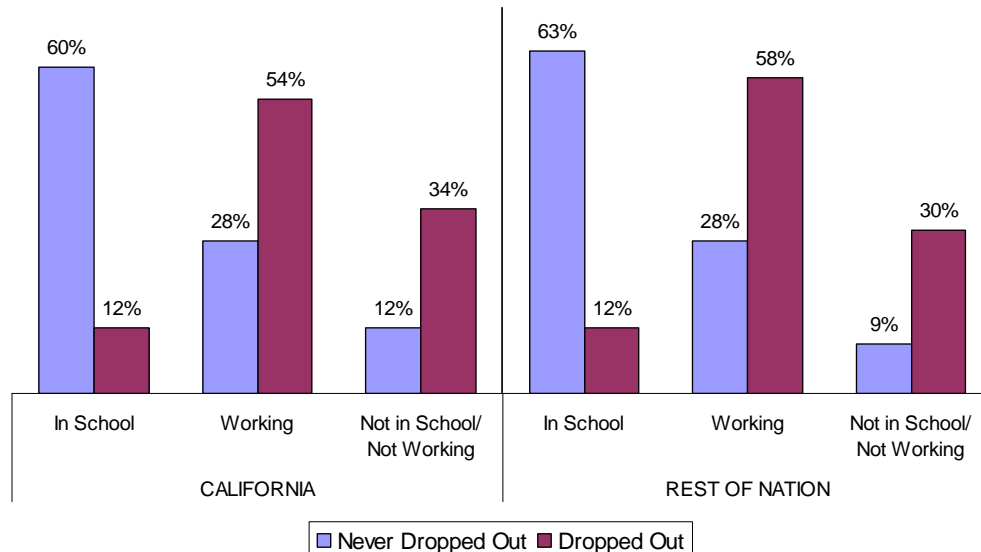
	CALIFORNIA				REST OF NATION			
	Enrolled	Earned Certificate	Enrolled Then Left	Never Enrolled	Enrolled	Earned Certificate	Enrolled Then Left	Never Enrolled
Never Dropped Out	60%	2%	13%	25%	62%	2%	14%	22%
Dropped Out	9%	1%	14%	76%	11%	2%	10%	77%

Source: Education Longitudinal Study 2002 (ELS:2002); National Center for Education Statistics

What are Dropouts Doing Two Years Later?

One alternative to going to school is going to work. Workers not only earn a salary, they also learn job skills that may help develop their human capital and improve their future job prospects. Yet, two years after their scheduled graduation, over one-third of all dropouts in California were neither going to school (college or high school) nor working (Figure 2). This is slightly higher than in the rest of the nation, where 30% of dropouts were not working or going to school. These young people are most at risk for a bleak economic future because they are neither investing in formal schooling, nor investing in informal learning while on the job.

Figure 2
School and Work Status for Students in the Class of 2004—Two Years Later



Note: “In School” includes students who are enrolled in a post-secondary institution or still enrolled in high school.
Source: Education Longitudinal Study 2002 (ELS:2002); National Center for Education Statistics