

Why Students Drop Out of High School Comparisons from Three National Surveys

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Research has shown that students who drop out of school do so for a variety of reasons. This statistical brief uses student survey data from three national studies to explore the issue from the perspective of the dropouts themselves, both in California and across the nation. Students who took part in these surveys were asked to indicate the factors that contributed to their decision to leave school.

The first study is the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002), a nationally representative survey of high school sophomores who were enrolled in public and private high schools in 2002. A comparison of reasons cited by dropouts nationally and in California shows that many of the factors contributing to decisions to drop out are similar, but not always (*Table 1*). For example, *Missed too many school days* tops both lists. *Failing school* and *Could not keep up with schoolwork* also were chosen by similar numbers of dropouts in California and nationally. Other reasons, such as *Thought it would be easier to get GED* and *Didn't like school*, show a different pattern, with dropouts nationally citing these reasons more frequently than their counterparts in California. California dropouts were more likely to cite *Got a job* as a factor contributing to their decision to drop out.

Table 1
TOP TEN REASONS 10th GRADERS DROPPED OUT: 2002-2004 (%)
Sorted by National (N=663)

	<i>National</i>	<i>California</i>
1. Missed too many school days	44	46
2. Thought it would be easier to get GED	41	23
3. Getting poor grades/failing school	38	42
4. Did not like school	37	19
5. Could not keep up with schoolwork	32	35
6. Got a job	28	38
7. Was pregnant*	28	22
8. Thought couldn't complete course requirements	26	24
9. Could not get along with teachers	25	23
10. Could not work at same time	22	22

*Females Only

Source: Education Longitudinal Study, 2002 (ELS:2002)

Table 2
TOP FIVE REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT: AGES 16-25 (%)
Statistics from *The Silent Epidemic (N=456)*

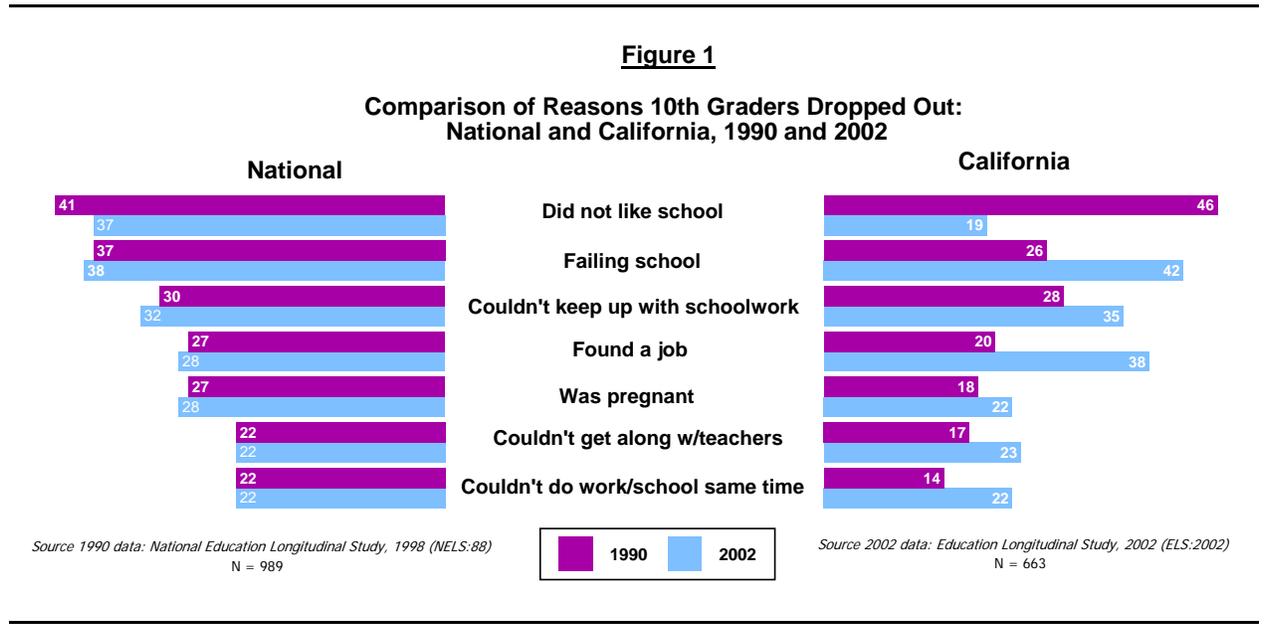
	<i>National</i>
1. Classes were not interesting	47
2. Missed too many school days	43
3. Spent time with people not interested in school	42
4. Too much freedom/not enough rules in life	38
5. Was failing school	35

Source: Bridgeland, J., Dilulio, J. & Morison, D. (2006). *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Washington DC: Civic Enterprises

The second study is *The Silent Epidemic*, which was conducted by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The study was based on telephone surveys and focus group interviews with self-identified dropouts across the country, ages 16-25. Comparison of data from *The Silent Epidemic* and the previous study (ELS:2002) reveals similar reasons for students dropping out of school (*Table 2*).

Approximately half of the dropouts in both studies cited *Missed too many school days* as a key factor in their decision to leave school. Slightly more than a third of the students in both studies indicated that *Was failing school* was another important reason for dropping out.

The third study is the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), which is similar in format to the ELS:2002 study, except that it began with students who were 8th graders in 1988. Here we focus on students from the NELS:88 study who were enrolled as 10th graders in 1990, as compared to the students from the ELS:2002 study who were enrolled as 10th graders in 2002. A comparison of dropout data from these two longitudinal studies shows that, nationally, dropouts' reasons for leaving school have remained remarkably consistent over the past 12 years (*Figure 1*). Approximately 40% of 10th grade students nationally cited *Did not like school* and *Was failing school* as reasons for dropping out, both in 1990 and 2002.



In California, however, dropouts' reasons for leaving school have changed considerably between 1990 and 2002. Although these estimates are based on small sample sizes, it appears that twice as many California dropouts selected *Did not like school* as a reason in 1990 than did in 2002. The opposite is true for such reasons as *Failing school* and *Found a job*, with nearly twice as many dropouts in 2002 citing these reasons, as compared to dropouts in 1992.

Overall, the dropout data cited in this brief show that students' reasons for dropping out are similar, both across studies and over time, at least at the national level. In California, the reasons appear to have changed, although the estimates are based on small samples. Nonetheless, in the most recent survey, California students were more likely to report that they left school because they were failing, which could be related to the more rigorous standards they are facing.