



Center *for* Public Policy Priorities

900 Lydia Street, Austin, Texas

PH: 512.320.0222 FAX: 512.320.0227

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Celebrate Graduates, Help the Dropouts

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This month hundreds of thousands of Texas teens will graduate from high school. Some will go on to four-year colleges. Some will enroll in community colleges or vocational schools. Others will enter the job market. Often overlooked are the tens of thousands of teens who will drop out before earning their diplomas.

According to the Texas Education Association (TEA), more than 11,000 Texas teens drop out between entering high school and graduating four years later. This is a conservative estimate: other education organizations place that number at more than 137,000 students. Although the drop out rate has actually improved over the past few years, the situation is still so troubling that state experts have declared Texas in the midst of a “dropout crisis.”

A high drop out rate is more than just shameful for Texas. It hurts dropouts’ economic and social prospects and damages the state’s economy.

In 2005, high school dropouts earned about \$7,200 less than high school graduates and about \$28,000 less than college graduates, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Not only that, but dropouts cost the state millions of dollars. For example, according to our analysis, if every 16-19 year old who is not in school and does not have a high school diploma simply graduated, Texas’ combined earnings could increase by \$3 billion in income in just four years.

Dropouts also have a greater need for government assistance. According to a national study by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 40% of 16-24 year olds lacking a high school diploma received some type of government assistance in 2001. In addition, a dropout is more than eight times as likely to be incarcerated as a high school graduate.

No group of students is immune from dropping out, but Hispanics, African-Americans, males, and students who live in urban or suburban areas are at a higher risk.

According to the TEA, Hispanics and African-Americans in the class of 2004-2005 were more than three times as likely as White students to drop out of school.

This gap also exists between males and females. For the Class of 2005, 4.7% of males dropped out versus 3.9% of females.

In addition, students living in Texas’ large cities drop out at higher rates than the rest of the state. Students living in urban and suburban counties are twice as likely to drop out as students

living in small suburban communities, and nearly twenty times as likely as students in rural Texas.

Students drop out for a variety of reasons: low grades, behavioral problems, lack of school involvement, pregnancy, transfers, and difficulty transitioning to ninth grade. The amount of parental involvement and communication between home and school also play large roles in determining whether a student will drop out of school.

So what can Texas do to lower the drop out rate?

We can start by ensuring that funding is fair and equitable for all schools so that all students can have a quality education.

In addition, we must find ways to engage all students in learning so that they feel that they are valued members of the school community. This means we need to increase parental involvement and give teachers proper support and training to prepare all students to meet academic goals.

This month, let's celebrate the graduation of so many of our promising youth. But let's also make a commitment to helping more students graduate. Dropping out of school is a dead end—both for teens and for Texas.

Frances Deviney is the Director of Texas KIDS COUNT and a senior research associate at the Center for Public Policy Priorities in Austin.