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Texas Kids Count report finds problems with dropouts estimation

Regardless of methodology, Texas' dropout situation among worst in US

The problem of school-age children dropping out of school is a serious one in Texas. School dropouts generate enormous social costs. Individuals who lack a high school diploma are more likely to experience poverty, unemployment, teenage parenthood, and become involved with criminal activity.ⁱ The poverty rate among high school dropouts is estimated at 31 percent — 10 times that of college graduates.ⁱⁱ On average, dropouts earn less than those with more education.ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, a recent report by Communities in Schools indicates that 89 percent of Texas prison inmates did not complete high school.^{iv} Overall, dropping out of school is one of the best predictors of a low level of accomplishment as adults. In our rapidly changing economy, dropouts are not adequately prepared to enter a more technologically oriented workforce. The extent of the dropout problem has been difficult to measure in the past. In the last few years, however, there have been increasing efforts to address this informational gap.

used to measure it are both important and controversial. Although there are a variety of organizations measuring the dropout rate using different methodologies, there is little consensus about the actual numbers of students dropping out. Some of the different methodologies for counting dropouts are discussed in the full report, followed by a brief discussion of some of the reasons kids drop out and some ideas for dropout prevention. The report also includes a description of a model dropout prevention program and county-by-county dropout statistics. The full report is available by contacting our office, or by visiting our web site at <http://www.cppp.org>.

TEXAS HAS A LARGE NUMBER OF DROPOUTS.

The official state dropout statistics compiled by the Texas Education Agency (the agency officially responsible for compiling dropout statistics), place the dropout rate during the 1996-1997 school year at 1.6 percent, or approximately 148 students per school day. In total TEA reports that 26,901 students in the 7th through the 12th grades dropped out of school during the 1996-97 school year.^{vii} Using this annual drop out rate, TEA estimates that 9.1 percent of all kids between 7th and 12th grade drop out. Of those who drop out, 29.4 percent were White, 17.6 percent were African American, 51.5 percent were Hispanic, and 1.5 percent were of another ethnic origin. Larger portions of the Hispanics and African American student populations drop out compared to their White counterparts.

Is the Dropout Rate Declining?

The estimated longitudinal dropout rate reported by the Texas Education Agency has consistently declined over the last several years. However, this decline is due in part to changes in the way dropouts have been counted, making comparisons over time inaccurate. Texas has made significant changes in the methods for collecting and verifying these data as well as changes in the dropout definition itself. These changes are partially responsible for the reported decline in the number of dropouts.^{viii} In

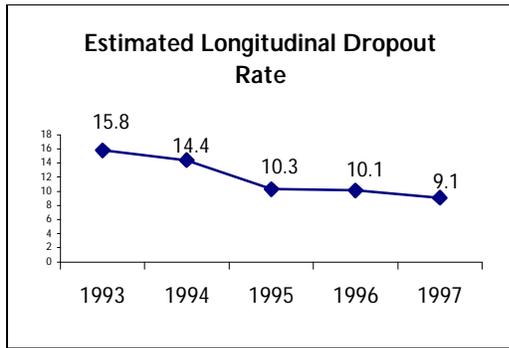
National Average Annual Earnings by Level of Educational Attainment

| | |
|------------------------|----------|
| No High School Diploma | \$16,124 |
| High School Diploma | \$22,895 |
| Bachelor's Degree | \$40,478 |
| Advanced Degree | \$63,229 |
| Source: U.S. Census | |

Texas has one of the highest dropout rates in the nation — only two states have a higher percentage of students who drop out of high school (Arizona and Nevada).^v The national Kids Count Project estimates that 13 percent of all Texas' 16-19 year olds are not enrolled in school and not high school graduates.^{vi} Dropping out is not only bad for the teen, the family, and the community as a whole, but is also an indication of need for improvement in our schools.

Because the dropout rate is such a significant measure of child well-being and school performance, the methods

the past, dropout rates have been significantly affected by migration of children in and out of a county and the fact that some children skip grades or are held back. TEA has improved its ability to track down students who have left a school but not requested a transcript. Efforts



to find these students have significantly reduced the number of students reported as dropouts.^{ix}

Changes in the definition of a dropout have reduced comparability of dropout statistics over time. Starting in the 1993-94 school year, seniors who failed exit-level TAAS tests, but passed all other graduation requirements, are excluded from the dropout count.^x If the student does not pass the test in the future, the individual will not receive a high school diploma, yet he or she will not be counted as a dropout.

All of these recovery efforts and definitional changes serve to lower the apparent numbers of dropouts, but don't do anything to decrease the actual numbers of students who leave school.^{xi} There is currently no monitoring system in place to verify dropout information provided by individual schools thereby assuring the integrity of statewide dropout data.^{xii}

Attrition Rate

Another method of calculating dropout rates provides an alternative to the current TEA calculations. The Intercultural Development and Research Association (IDRA) conducts an annual comparison of the 9th grade enrollment with 12th grade enrollment four years later,

which allows for a determination of the number of students lost during their high school years.^{xiii}

This attrition analysis, conducted by the Intercultural Development and Research Association (IDRA), provides a very grim picture regarding the dropout problem in Texas.^{xiv} Contrary to TEA figures, the attrition analysis shows increasingly high numbers of students dropping out.^{xv} According to IDRA's attrition calculations, 42 percent of students were lost from public school enrollment between the 1994-95 and 1997-98 school years.^{xvi} Since this analysis only looks at 9th-12th grades, it does not even include the estimated 4,000 students who dropped out in the 7th and 8th grades in 1993-94.^{xvii}

According to IDRA, many children have gone missing from our public school system. There is currently no reliable method to account for the whereabouts of these lost students. Some of these students may have entered private programs or moved to another state, but the methodology used by IDRA has no way of determining how many. Some of these missing students may eventually pass the General Education Development tests (GED); however, there is little evidence that this certificate provides the same opportunities as a high school diploma.^{xviii}

Need for Accurate Dropout Statistics

It is becoming increasingly important to have a clearer understanding of what is happening to the large number of students who are leaving the public school system. A system should be developed that accounts for each student who leaves school (including those in the lower grades) so that policymakers know how many are going into private programs or getting their GED, how many are migrating out of the state, and how many are dropping out and why. School officials should be held accountable for accurate reporting of the students who leave their schools. Only when we understand the true scope of the problem can appropriate solutions become apparent.

This report is part of a series called *Measuring Up: The State of Texas Education* produced by the Texas Kids Count Project. This and other education reports will be published both on our web site (<http://www.cppp.org/kidscount>) and in hard copy form. Please call or email us to request copies: (512) 320-0222 hornmuth@cppp.org

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THE POLICY PAGE

Endnotes

- ⁱ National Research Council Panel on High-Risk Youth (1993). *Losing Generations: Adolescents in High-Risk Settings*. National Academy Press, Washington, D.C.
- Jennifer Manlove (1998) *The Influence of High School Dropout and School Disengagement on the Risk of School-Age Pregnancy*. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (Vol, 8, No. 2).
- ⁱⁱ Kids Count Data Book 1998. Annie E. Casey Foundation. Baltimore, MD.
- ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Census Bureau. *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1998*.
- ^{iv} Communities in Schools Central Texas, Inc. *The Path to Success*
- ^v Kids Count Data Book 1998. Annie E. Casey Foundation. Baltimore, MD.
- ^{vi} Kids Count Data Book 1998. Annie E. Casey Foundation. Baltimore, MD. This is an average of data from 1994 to 1996.
- ^{vii} Texas Education Agency Web Site <http://www.tea.state.tx.us>
- ^{viii} Hormuth, Pam (1998). Unpublished paper. *A Review of State Education Data Collection and Reporting*. Prepared for the Poverty and Race Research Action Council.
- ^{ix} TEA Web site <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/reports/1997/pg22text.html>
- ^x Texas Education Agency web site: <http://ice.tea.state.tx.us/research/dropout95/trends.html>.
- ^{xi} IDRA Newsletter January 1999. *Missing: Texas Youth— Dropout and Attrition Rates in Texas Public High Schools*.
- ^{xii} Ibid
- ^{xiii} Johnson, Roy, M.A. (1998). *The State of School Dropouts in Texas Public High Schools*. IDRA Newsletter. <http://www.idra.org/Newsltr/1998/Oct/Roy.htm>
- ^{xiv} IDRA has developed a technique for estimating the number of students lost from Texas public schools as a result of attrition. The formula for computing the longitudinal attrition rates consists of taking grade level enrollment for a base year and comparing these figures to grade level enrollment in subsequent (or end) year, with the assumption that a decline in the number of students enrolled constitutes the attrition rate for the school or district and that the cohort attrition rate is closely related to the annual dropout rate. IDRA's cohort longitudinal attrition analyses allow for increases and decreases in a district's enrollment figures since district enrollment may vary from school year to school year.
- ^{xv} IDRA Newsletter. <http://www.idra.org/Newsltr/1997/Oct/Roy.htm>
- ^{xvi} Johnson, Roy, M.A. (1998). "The State of School Dropouts in Texas Public High Schools." IDRA Newsletter. <http://www.idra.org/Newsltr/1998/Oct/Roy.htm>
- ^{xvii} Snapshot '95. Texas Education Agency
- ^{xviii} Johnson, Roy, M.A. (1998). "The State of School Dropouts in Texas Public High Schools." IDRA Newsletter. <http://www.idra.org/Newsltr/1998/Oct/Roy.htm>
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