The Road to Dropping Out

Minority Students & Academic Factors Correlated with Failure to Complete High School



Children's Defense Fund

June 2004

High school graduation rates are substantially lower for minority groups than they are for non-minorities. According to a report by the Harvard Civil Rights Project and the Urban Institute, only 50% of black students, 51% of Native American students, and 53% of Hispanic students graduated from high school in 2001.

The U.S. General Accounting Office recently found that there are many socio-economic and school-based factors highly associated with dropping out of school. Students from low-income, single-parent, less educated families dropout at a much higher rate than other students.[i] The academic factors associated with dropping out are school failure, being over-age for a grade/grade retention and high rates of absenteeism and discipline.[ii] If one looks at academic data collected by the US Department of Education, it is no surprise that dropout rates are as high as they are and that they are particularly high for students of color. For each of these four main academic predictors of dropping out, students of color are over-represented.

SCHOOL FAILURE

- Of all the nation's fourth graders, 41 percent of Whites are reading at grade level compared to 15 percent of Latinos and 13 percent of Blacks.[iii]

- In math, 37 percent of White eighth graders perform at grade level compared to 12 percent of Latinos and 7 percent of Blacks.[iv]

- In writing, only 15 percent of those fourth graders eligible for free and reduced priced lunch could write at grade level compared to 42 percent of those who are not eligible.[v]

GRADE RETENTION

- Most recent data show that, nationally, 11.2 percent of all students were retained for at least one grade in grades K-12. However, the numbers are much higher for minority students. Whereas 9.3 percent of White students had ever been retained, 18 percent of Native American, 17.5 percent of Black and 13.2 percent of Hispanic students had been retained at least once.

- In its survey of existing research, the National Research Council found that "simply repeating a grade does not generally improve achievement" and that it can actually result in negative academic outcomes for those retained compared to those with similar academic problems who are not retained. Among those negative outcomes is a significantly increased dropout rate.[vi]
- A recent longitudinal study of the Baltimore Public School found that:
  - 71 percent of students who were retained once dropped out;
  - 80 percent of students who were retained more than once dropped out; and,
  - 94 percent of those who were retained both in elementary and in middle school dropped out.[vii]

HIGH RATES OF ABSENTEEISM

Persistence and success in school also are impacted by absences. Absences are caused by multiple factors and much needs to be done to reverse some disturbing trends.

- In eighth grade, 26 percent of Latino, 22 percent of Black and 34 percent of Native American students were found to have been absent for an estimated one out of seven days or more per school year compared to 19 percent of White students. [viii]

DISCIPLINE

There is significant disproportionality in terms of race and ethnicity in discipline as well, raising questions as to the fairness of disciplinary policies in some schools and the impact of such policies on minority groups.

- According the U.S. Department of Education, 14.6 percent of White students had ever been suspended or expelled in grades seven through12 compared to 38.2 percent of Native Americans, 35.1 percent of Blacks and 19.6 percent of Latinos.

---

[i] United States General Accounting Office. *School Dropouts: Education Could Play a Stronger Role in Identifying and Disseminating Promising Prevention Strategies.* GAO-02-240. Washington, DC: February, 2002. p. 3.

[ii] United States General Accounting Office. *School Dropouts: Education Could Play a Stronger Role in Identifying and Disseminating Promising Prevention Strategies.* GAO-02-240. Washington, DC: February, 2002. p. 15-16.

[iii] US Department of Education. National Center for Educational Statistics. National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2003. Washington, DC. http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/

[iv] US Department of Education. National Center for Educational Statistics. National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2003. Washington, DC. http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/

[v] US Department of Education. National Center for Educational Statistics. National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2003. Washington, DC. http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/

[vi] Heubert, Jay P. and Hauser, Robert M. Eds. *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion and Graduation.* Board on Testing and Assessment. Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. National Research Council. National Academy Press. Washington, DC: 1999. p. 129.

[vii] Alexander, Karl. Entwisle, Doris. Kabbani, Nader. *The Dropout process in Life Course Perspective: Early Risk Factors at Home and at School. Teacher's College Record* Volume 103, Number 5. October 2001. Teachers College. Columbia University. New York. p. 775.

[viii] Calculations by CDF based on data from US Department of Education. National Center on Education Statistics as cited in *Status and Trends in the Education of Blacks.* September, 2003.