

Missing Persons: Understanding and Addressing High School Dropouts in North Carolina

by Trip Stallings



Executive Summary

North Carolina's dropout rate has become the source of controversy. Are the high on-time graduation rates reported by the state a few years ago indicative of how many actually receive a high school diploma? Or is the real number closer to the findings of a number of major studies of the dropout problem nationally, which tend to place North Carolina in the bottom 10 among states? The answer appears to lie somewhere in between, but lost in the discussion is a sad truth. Too many North Carolinians drop out of school, and the trend is toward dropouts completing fewer grades before quitting.

Part of the confusion around the issue lies in the various ways in which dropout statistics are tracked, generated, and reported. The four most common dropout and dropout-related statistics are the event rate, the status rate, the completion rate, and the cohort rate. The **event rate** is the ratio of dropout events (occurrences of dropout) to the total student population in a given period of time (usually a full year). Theoretically, a student could drop out, re-enroll the next year, and drop out again, thus recording two dropout events. As a result, relying purely on event rates could overestimate the total number of dropouts. The **status rate** looks at the percentage of students who leave school within a given range of years. For example, the state's entering senior class of 81,935 in 2005–06 is about 20 percent smaller than the 102,615 students who entered eighth grade in 2001–02. From this, one could infer an estimated dropout status rate of around 20 percent. Another major counting method is the **completion rate**, which looks at people of a certain age and asks what percentage has completed high school. One of the most commonly measured age ranges is the 18 to 24-year-old age range. The United States Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimates that between 1999 and 2001, North Carolina's high school completion rate for this age group was 84.7 percent. Finally, there is the **cohort rate**, which follows a particular group of students as they enter and progress through

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a span of grades. If a student within the group, or cohort, moved out of the school system, that student would still be tracked. Tracking the cohort rate is in many ways considered the most accurate way to track dropouts because it follows the actions of individual students. In 2006, the four-year cohort graduation rate in North Carolina for all students was 68.1 percent.

A few years ago, a good deal of controversy was generated by dropout statistics—two on-time graduation rates—the state reported to the U.S. Department of Education to comply with the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act requirements. North Carolina reported the percentage of high school graduates who earned a diploma in four years or less; dropouts were not included in the calculation. Because most students who graduate do so on time, the percentage reported in compliance with NCLB legislation was very high: the figure was 92.4 percent in 2001–02, and for 2002–03, the figure was an even healthier-looking 97 percent, the highest reported rate in the nation. The calculation used to generate this figure technically did meet the letter of the NCLB reporting law, but it was somewhat misleading. Not surprisingly, several groups called North Carolina to task on using such a figure, but in attempting to make their cases, they, too, may have overstated the point in the opposite direction.

A key issue in the debate is how the parties choose to use the **on-time graduation rate**. Studies showing up to a third of the nation's high school students as high school dropouts typically count students who do not finish high school in the prescribed four years as dropouts, even if they finish later. One such study found North Carolina's graduation rate to be only 61.2 percent in 2000. By contrast, the National Center for Education Statistics estimates that North Carolina's high school completion rate, including those who graduate on time and those who do not, approaches 85 percent for persons ages 18–24.

In 2007, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction began to phase out its use of the on-time graduation rate in favor of a cohort rate that shows the percentage of the freshmen class who actually graduate four years later. This percentage takes into account dropouts, but it does not remove all ambiguity from the statistics. Things like student mobility and migration issues continue to be roadblocks to accurately tracking all dropouts.

Thus, knowing the precise number of high school dropouts in North Carolina is difficult, if not impossible, given the current tracking ability of the state. Yet no one is arguing that the state does not have a significant dropout problem. The largest number of dropouts leave school between the 9th and 10th grades—after the first year of high school. In 2005–06, 9th grade dropouts accounted for around 33 percent of all dropouts and more than 34 percent of all high school dropouts. But, the most frequent dropout age is

17, followed by 18. Neither of these is a traditional 9th grade age, suggesting that students are having a harder time clearing the 9th grade hurdle and adjusting to high school.

In North Carolina, Native Americans have the highest dropout rates, followed in rank order by Latinos, African Americans, whites, and persons of Asian descent. No matter the race or ethnicity, boys are more likely to drop out than girls. The ratio of male dropouts to females has held steady at about 3:2 over the last seven years.

Students drop out for a host of reasons, many of them overlapping. But these reasons cluster into two broad categories: external family and environmental reasons, or “pull” factors that tend to pull a student away from school, and “push” factors, or school experiences that tend to push a student out of school. Pull factors could include issues such as pregnancy or the perceived need to become a family breadwinner. Push factors include issues around behavior or academic performance, relevancy of the school curriculum, a school’s willingness to accept and accommodate students, and societal signaling devices such as the state’s compulsory attendance law, which allows a student to drop out legally after age 16.

But while it’s easy to identify issues that might contribute to student decisions to drop out, it’s more difficult to identify actual students who do so. Even the best models for identifying students at risk of dropping out pinpoint less than half of students who ultimately will actually quit school. Who will drop out is hard to predict, and experts say a variety of programs are needed to capture a sizable portion of these students and encourage them to stay in the classroom until they earn a high school diploma.

Efforts already are being made on a broad front. One of the most extensive statewide efforts to reduce the number of students who drop out is the **Communities in Schools (CIS)** network, which operates 37 programs across the state and attempts to address the broad-ranging issues that push or pull students out of school, beginning in the early grades and working through high school. CIS encourages and supports the development of personal one-on-one relationships for students with adults, safe school and home environments, the acquisition of marketable skills, opportunities for students to participate in community service, and improving the physical, mental, and emotional health of all students. Yet another approach is **dropout prevention counseling**, used by several school systems, including the Durham County Schools. The program includes efforts to locate students who fail to report to school, home and neighborhood visits to encourage better school attendance and performance, and efforts to re-enroll recent dropouts or connect them with services they need to have a greater chance to be successful such as General Educational Development (GED) or Job

Corps programs. Students who have been suspended 10 or more days and who exhibit additional dropout risk factors are assigned a child and family support team.

*Some school systems promote extracurricular activities aimed at students at risk of dropping out. One such program is **BRIDGE, or Building Relationships to Initiate Diversity, Growth, and Enrichment**, an initiative of U.S. Lacrosse. The program originated in the mid-1980s when the City of Baltimore was seeking ways to prevent teenage delinquency. It has since spread to places like New Hanover County, where more than 350 male and female students participate countywide. Participants are recruited from all walks of life, participating not only in organized sports but in enrichment activities such as community volunteering. Unlike many school-sanctioned events, students are allowed to participate even if they get low grades, and they receive academic tutoring and support to help bring their grades up.*

*Other programs for North Carolina students at risk of dropping out include **alternative schools**, where students who cannot have their needs met in the regular classroom can continue their education, and **Eckerd Therapeutic Camps**, which provide outdoor behavior modification treatment for almost 1,000 troubled North Carolina students a year.*

*Programs not specifically designed for dropout prevention but thought to help with the problem include middle college, the smaller schools initiative, and curriculum changes such as block scheduling. **Learn and Earn Early College** and **Middle College** programs are high school programs housed at local community colleges and universities that expose students to a broader array of job skills than the typical high school student. These programs provide students the opportunity to earn an associates degree or industry certification along with a high school degree, with the Early College program allowing students to achieve this in only five years. Normally, graduation from high school requires four years while an associate's degree requires an additional two years. Another approach thought to help keep students enrolled and engaged in their studies is the **small schools** movement, aided by substantial support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation of Seattle, Washington. This may help to address the sense of anonymity many high school students feel, particularly those who are not successful academic performers. As for **block scheduling**, the approach on its surface seems little more than a different way to divide the class day. But under block scheduling, students take four classes each semester rather than six classes lasting an entire year. Experts say the benefit for struggling students is that those who fail a class have more frequent opportunities to make it up as opposed to enrolling in summer school or repeating a grade.*

*A final area where the state attempts to address the dropout problem is through **restrictions on driver's licenses**. Since August 1998, students have been required to show adequate progress in school in order to attain and keep a driver's license. Unlicensed teens are prohibited from applying for a license for 90 days, and two-time offenders must wait an additional six months to apply. Licensed teens also can have their license revoked if they are unable to maintain adequate academic progress or if they drop out of school.*

These programs and structural changes have the potential to enhance the chances that struggling students will stay in school. Other changes hold potential to help the state to understand with greater precision the magnitude of the dropout problem. These include the long anticipated statewide rollout of N.C. WISE (Windows of Information on Student Education). This new student information software package is currently operating in about one-third of the state's 115 school systems. N.C. WISE enables the state to give each student a unique identifying number and solves the current problem schools have with identifying students by Social Security number. For many years, the greatest block to generating accurate data on dropouts has been the inability to track all students who move across state lines or even between school systems.

What more needs to be done? The Center offers six recommendations with the intent of establishing the dropout problem as a statewide priority and making greater progress toward eliminating the problem. These recommendations are: (1) The state should expand its effort to provide the true picture of the dropout problem by reporting multiple high school completion totals and rates annually in addition to the current dropout event rate, with coherent explanations of each. (2) The N.C. Department of Public Instruction should improve its data collection system to enhance the way local school systems, schools, social workers, and guidance counselors report reasons for students dropping out of school. (3) The N.C. General Assembly's Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee should study the impact of raising the compulsory school attendance age to 18 and as part of a policy of encouraging as many students as possible to complete high school. (4) The N.C. Department of Public Instruction should consider revising and updating its school curricula by adding more real-world elements such as service learning, internships, and career exploration with an eye toward increasing relevance and increasing the number of students who stay in school. (5) The N.C. General Assembly should require the N.C. Department of Public Instruction to formally evaluate all existing dropout prevention programs and policies and appropriate funds for this evaluation. (6) Once the N.C. Department of Public Instruction completes its research, it should require each local school system to develop a dropout-prevention plan that addresses the unique needs of its school population and incorporates resources already available in the community.

Over the past several years, North Carolina's official annual dropout rate for grades seven through 12 has declined, though at an uneven pace, from 4.34 percent in the 1999–00 school year to a low of 3.23 percent in 2004–05, before rising slightly to 3.46 percent in 2005–06, and the total number of annual dropouts has fallen by around 7 percent (see Table 1). Many of the state's individual schools systems, or Local Education Agencies (LEAs), have been able to boast even more impressive local numbers (see Table 2). This news is especially heartening given that the state's overall secondary school population has *increased* over that same period by about 98,000 students, a gain that would have given the state some degree of leeway toward explaining static or even increasing dropout numbers.

Good news indeed. And yet, considered from another perspective, the same numbers verge on the tragic. The total number of official high school dropout events¹ between 1999 and 2006 is a sobering 152,582—about three times the number of secondary students in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg district, the state's largest school system. In the Annie E. Casey Foundation's most recent *Kids Count* report, North Carolina was cited as ranking 37th worst in the nation.² "It's just unacceptable to have this number of dropouts," says Marvin Pittman, Director of Middle Grades Education for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI). "Even though we are doing well, it's still too many students," says Pittman.³ Therein lies the paradox of the dropout problem in North Carolina.

Understanding the full scope of the dropout problem is no easy task when declining rates stand side-by-side with such staggering totals. Added to the difficulty is the fact that many who study the dropout issue have called into question the accuracy of the state's official dropout rate and the methodology used to calculate that rate and other related figures (such as the state graduation rate). Beyond questions of counting, there is also the dual challenge of first understanding and then addressing the complex and overlapping forces that compel students to drop out.

Becoming discouraged by the complexity of the issue, however, is not an option. The social costs of not addressing the problem are overwhelming. The unemployment rate for dropouts is more than 30 percent higher than it is for people with a high school diploma,⁴ and dropouts also tend to earn roughly 30 percent less than their diploma-holding peers.⁵ Consequently, dropouts are much more likely to require public assistance, and they are more likely to end up in prison.⁶ One estimate puts the social cost *per class of dropouts* nationwide for all of these interventions and losses at over \$200 billion over their lifetimes.⁷ As state Senator Stan Bingham (R-Davidson) observes, "Kids who drop out of school . . . are going to be a tremendous cost to this state." Finally, with state and federal school accountability standards reaching unprecedented levels and with the growing need for a better-educated work force that can handle the challenges of a rapidly evolving global economy, it is more critical now than ever before to determine what more the state can do to attack the dropout problem.

Making those determinations requires answers to these key questions: First, how does North Carolina track and measure dropout rates, and should the state adjust its methodology? Second, which students drop out, and why do they drop out? Third, how are North Carolina and local school districts attempting to reduce the number of dropouts? Fourth, what works in reducing dropout totals, and how do we know? And fifth, where do we go from here?

Editor's Note: Trip Stallings is a doctoral student in education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He previously has written for Insight about the federal "No Child Left Behind" school accountability law and how it dovetails with the state accountability standards known as the ABCs of public education. In 2004–05, Stallings returned to the high school classroom for a year. During this period, the Center asked him to keep a notebook on the high school dropout problem. His "school snapshots" interspersed throughout this article are taken from observations he made while teaching in the North Carolina public schools. Photographs are by Karen Tam. (Kids pictured are not dropouts.)

1. How Does North Carolina Track and Measure Dropout Rates?

School Snapshot:⁸ In my 2004–05 high school classes, 27 students did not finish the year. Of those 27, 14 were officially recorded as dropouts (one out of every nine of my 126 students, a dropout event rate of 11 percent). Of the remaining 13, one was given credit for finishing the year and was assumed to be returning in the fall, one opted for home schooling, six transferred to other schools in our district, and the last five indicated to their guidance counselors that they were transferring to out-of-district or out-of-state schools. Even though the schools to which these five transferred requested student information folders (had they not, these students also would have been counted as dropouts), there is neither a procedure nor time for guidance counselors to follow up on whether each of these students actually re-enrolled. Whether the home schooled student will complete any classes at home—much less earn a high school diploma—is also unclear. Of my 27 missing students, 14 dropped out and seven re-enrolled; the status of the other six remains uncertain.

Approaches to Counting Dropouts: Event, Status, Completion, and Cohort Rates

One of the most challenging barriers to understanding the dropout rate in North Carolina is deciphering the various ways in which dropout statistics are tracked, generated, and reported. Much of this difficulty is a result of the perplexing variety of counting methods. The four most common dropout and dropout-related statistics are the *event rate*, the *status rate*, the *completion rate*, and the *cohort rate*.⁹



Table 1: North Carolina Statewide Dropout Totals and Rates, Grades 7 through 12, 1999–2006

School Year	Total	Rate
1999–2000	24,611	4.34%
2000–2001	22,387	3.86%
2001–2002	21,046	3.52%
2002–2003	19,384	3.23%
2003–2004	20,817	3.29%
2004–2005	20,944	3.23%
2005–2006	22,943	3.46%

Source: N.C. Department of Public Instruction (2007). Annual Report on Dropout Events and Rates. February 2007, Table 3.

N.C. Department of Public Instruction (2006). Dropout Prevention & Reporting.

School Improvement Division. Accessed on March 1, 2006, from http://www.ncpublicschools.org/school_improvement/effective/dropout/.

EVENT RATE

The event rate is a measure of the total number of occurrences of students dropping out of school *in a given time period and for a given group of students*. The standard time period is one year (including the academic year and one summer), and the groups most frequently analyzed are either 7th through 12th graders (secondary school students) or 9th through 12th graders (high school students). The term “dropout event” is significant because it leads to what is known as double-counting. When a state counts dropout *events* instead of individual students identified as dropouts, a student who drops out during one school year, re-enrolls during the next school year, and then drops out again is not counted as one dropout. Instead, two separate dropout *events* are recorded. As a result, relying purely on event rates could overestimate the total number of dropouts.

North Carolina officially reports annual dropout event rates, and, for the 2005–06 school year, that rate was 3.46 percent, or 22,943 students, in grades seven through 12. In dropout parlance, the event rate is the “speed” with which

dropping out occurs (that is, the percentage of students *each year* who drop out). Yet, if one looks at the size of the entering 12th grade class in 2005–06 (81,935 students) and compares this figure to its size in 2001–02 when most of the same students were 8th graders (102,615 students),¹⁰ there appears to be a change in size of about 21,000 students for this group alone over a five-year period, or just over 20 percent. This discrepancy represents the difference between the event rate and the second method of counting, the status rate.

STATUS RATE

The status rate represents the percentage of students who drop out of school at any time during a given *range* of years (for example, between their 8th grade and 12th grade years). Thus, Edgecombe County may report accurately a dropout *event rate* of 7.30 percent (181 students) *for grades seven through 12 for the 2005–06 school year* and still have experienced an estimated dropout *status rate* of around 24 percent (from 604 enrolled 8th graders in 2001–02 to 457 enrolled 12th graders in 2005–06, or 147 students total) of all students in the graduating class of 2006.¹¹ Neither the event rate nor the status rate is necessarily wrong; each just represents a different way of accounting for dropouts, which may lead to confusion for people unfamiliar with the differences.

COMPLETION RATE

The third major counting method is the completion rate, which takes people in a certain age range and asks what percentage has completed high school. Because it counts diploma-earners and not dropouts, the completion rate is actually a graduation

statistic and not a true dropout statistic, but it is often cited alongside dropout rates (Table 3). One of the most commonly measured age ranges is the 18- to 24-year-old age range. The United States Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimates that between 1999 and 2001, North Carolina’s high school completion rate for this age group was 84.7 percent.¹² The inverse (15.3 percent) is called a non-completers rate, but it is not technically a dropout rate either, since some of those non-completers might still be working on diplomas.

COHORT RATE

A fourth and final counting method is the cohort rate. The cohort rate, which is also a graduation and not a dropout rate, follows a particular group of students as they enter a certain grade (for example, 7th grade) at the same time and then progress through a span of grades. A student may drop out or move out of the school system, but that particular student is still tracked. Unlike calculations of the status rate, a cohort rate is not bound by a specific school or district population. In many ways, the cohort rate is the most accurate assessment of the dropout phenomenon because it follows individual students who all started a certain grade at the same time. Every other measure is a victim of the effects of student migration, retention, and incarceration on the size of grade-level populations.

According to Ken Gattis, who supervises dropout data collection for N.C. DPI, “The cohort rate accounts for each student by subtracting out those students who transfer out (and therefore cannot complete school in the school or district of interest) and by adding into the cohort students who transfer in. If a student transfers from Wake County to Durham County, he is subtracted out of a Wake County cohort and added into a Durham County cohort; however, he’s still in the state’s cohort for that year. Durham will then track the student’s progress. If a student transfers out of state from Wake County, the student is subtracted from Wake County’s and the state’s cohort. No one in North Carolina will track the progress of this student.”

Table 2. North Carolina’s Lowest and Highest Local Education Agency Dropout Event Rates, Grades 9-12, 2005–06 School Year

<i>10 LEAs with Lowest Dropout Rates</i>			<i>10 LEAs with Highest Dropout Rates</i>		
	Rate	Total		Rate	Total
1. Chapel Hill-Carrboro	1.59	57	115. Vance	8.26	217
2. Newton Conover City	2.28	21	114. Northampton	8.00	87
3. Alleghany	2.69	13	113. Lee	7.80	230
4. Mount Airy City	2.83	18	112. Perquimans	7.75	47
5. Hyde	3.16	7	111. Tyrrell	7.56	17
6. Dare	3.28	54	110. Robeson	7.46	548
7. Guilford	3.41	766	109. Lenoir	7.43	246
8. Edenton/Chowan	3.54	29	108. Edgecombe	7.30	181
9. Cumberland	3.64	618	107. Nash-Rocky Mount	7.07	411
10. Gates	3.69	26	106. Roanoke Rapids City	7.04	68

Source: N.C. Department of Public Instruction (2007). Annual Report on Dropout Events and Rates. Report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee. These rates exclude charter school students and students who were expelled. LEA=Local Education Agency.

The price for this level of accuracy, however, is high. Because the cohort rate relies on exact information about individual students, the tracking necessary to keep up with every student in a given class is very difficult and costly. According to the N.C. Department of Public Instruction, in 2006, the 4-year cohort graduation rate in North Carolina for all students was 68.1 percent (based on 70,484 graduates and a class size of 103,441). It is important to note that this rate is based on on-time graduation and not eventual graduation figures, which will not be known until the state can factor in all late gradulators.

Many researchers tend to agree that there is not a single, definitive, “best” dropout statistic, mainly because each statistic reveals something that the others cannot.¹³ For example, the status rate may indicate how many students over a given time period drop out of school, but it does not indicate in which grades they are most frequently dropping out. An event rate is a much more useful tool for answering this “when” question, but it is unable to capture the total. Neither statistic can describe accurately the graduation status of a certain age group—only the completion and cohort rates can handle this task. It is clear, however, that a state’s or district’s decision about the way in which it reports dropouts can have a major impact on how dropout rates and the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs are perceived by the public.

How North Carolina Counts

North Carolina has made an official *annual event rate* dropout count every year since 1985, but the methodology has evolved quite a lot since that first statewide count. The count started as only an *estimate* of the total annual number of dropouts statewide, but, since the 1988–89 school year, the count has reflected an effort to determine the exact number of students who drop out each year. For the 1991–92 school year, the state adopted the federal dropout guideline known as the duplicate count (described above), and in 1998, the state also started to count as dropouts those students who leave school before graduation to enroll in community college programs, including those who leave to earn a General Education Development (GED) certificate. State Sen. Walter Dalton (D-Rutherford) says this may

actually serve to overestimate the dropout problem in North Carolina. Referring to the community college system as “the state’s largest high school,” Dalton says, “A great community college system and an accessible community college system may work against us in the dropout situation.”

The state now follows the dropout definition used by the National Center for Education Statistics (see “The National Center for Education Statistics Definition of Dropout,” p. 84). The official state dropout rate for a given school year is then calculated by dividing the number of school-year dropouts by an average of the total number of public secondary school students in the state (including dropouts) from the school year of record and the following school year.¹⁴

Missing the Count

While the state has pursued greater precision in its official count, the accuracy of the final number is still somewhat murky. Dropout counts generally are hampered by several methodological and philosophical gray areas, each of which has significant ramifications not only for generating dropout statistics themselves but also for determining funding and evaluating program success. In some of these gray areas—such as the state’s counting policies for GED earners and for students who complete alternative or equivalency programs—the state appears to have made good decisions; in others—such as valuing on-time graduation and overcoming the challenges posed by student mobility—there is still room for improvement.

*But she won't drop out her
parents a'look at her funny*

...

*She's so precious with the peer
pressure*

—KANYE WEST

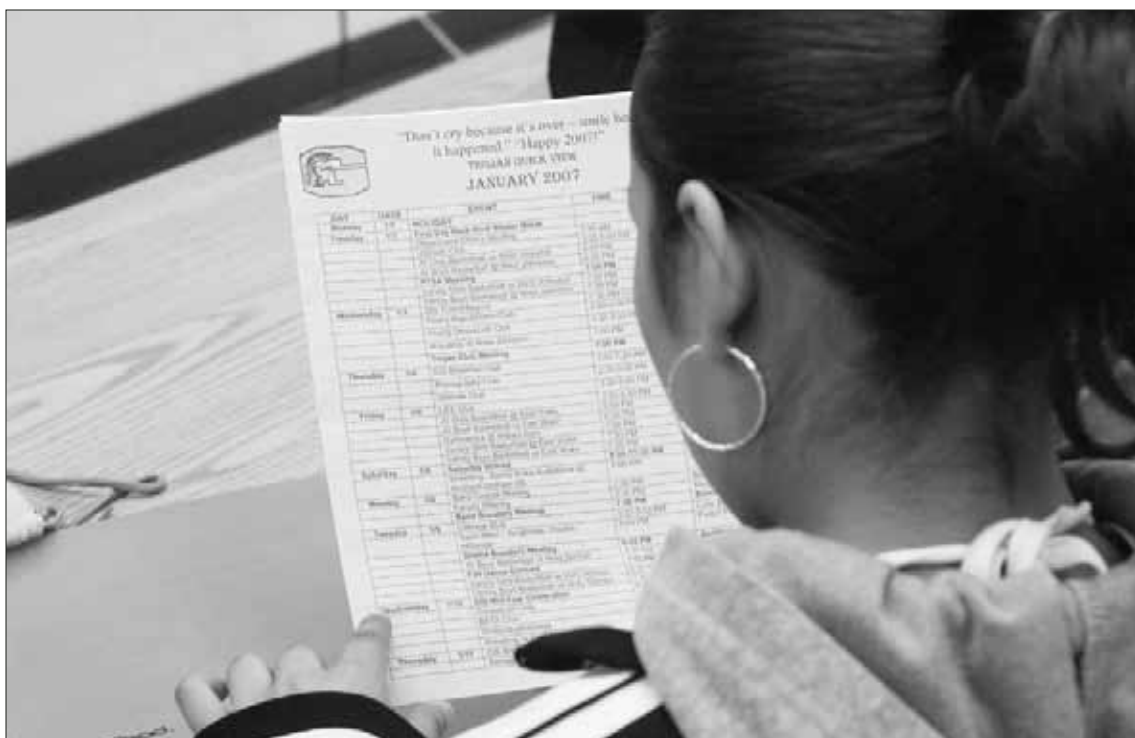
“ALL FALLS DOWN”

THE GENERAL EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (GED) CERTIFICATE

The GED is a test that students who do not complete high school can take to indicate that they have achieved mastery of a set of basic skills equivalent to the skills of students who have earned a high school diploma. The number of GED completers is on the rise, but should the state count those completers as high school graduates or as high school dropouts? Some national groups (like the conservative Heritage Foundation) argue that equivalency is similar enough to high school completion that GED earners should not be counted as dropouts; others (like Educational Testing Services)¹⁵ imply the opposite in their dropout calculations.

This is one area in which the state appears to have made a sound statistical decision. As noted earlier, since 1998 North Carolina has counted students who leave school to earn a GED as dropouts, and there are good reasons to continue to do so. First of all, if one of the purposes of counting dropouts is to assess how well our secondary schools are contributing to the education of our children, then GED earners—who leave high school and complete their work elsewhere—should not be included in that pool. Furthermore, as researchers Stephen Cameron and James Heckman note, in many ways GED recipients are “statistically indistinguishable from high school dropouts.”¹⁶ On average, GED recipients earn less than high school graduates,¹⁷ are less likely to be employed, are only half as likely to earn an associate’s degree, and are one-fifth as likely to earn a bachelor’s degree.¹⁸

Another compelling reason to include GED earners in the dropout count is the implied (and growing) incentive that GED availability gives to students to drop out in the first place. Why stay in high school for several years when one can take a single test to demonstrate high school skill proficiency? Nationally, the increased availability of the GED has been linked to a decrease in the high school completion rate: only about 7 percent of all GED earners in the late 1990s were teenagers, but some estimates suggest that those teenagers represented almost one-third of all total dropouts.¹⁹



In 1990, only 6.3 percent of all North Carolina GED recipients were between the ages of 16 and 17, but that number increased to 23.5 percent in 2000.²⁰

ALTERNATIVE OR EQUIVALENT DEGREES

The second counting problem involves a small but significant group of students who complete high school, but who do not earn a traditional diploma. For its Common Core of Data (CCD) surveys, the National Center for Education Statistics officially counts “high school completers” rather than high school graduates. That is, any official recognition of completion from a state counts as a graduation event, in large part because some states declare all completers as graduates, even though other states (like North Carolina) may award a separate, non-diploma “certificate of attendance.”²¹

Should North Carolina do the same? NCES found that 666 North Carolina students completed high school and earned something other than a traditional high school diploma in 2000–01.²² Statistically, this is a small number that does not dramatically affect the overall state graduation rates, but it is the equivalent of one small high school a year. According to Belinda Black, DPI’s Program Administrator for Curriculum and School Reform, the state has to report these students as dropouts in federal documents because they do not meet the federal definition of a graduate (someone who has earned an official high school diploma), but for internal state counts, they are counted as “completers.”²³ Like its decision to exclude GED completers, the state’s policy of including non-diploma completers as graduates also appears to be valid.

Many of these students are special-case completers who, even though they did not meet the technical requirements for a North Carolina diploma, dutifully attended school and met the requirements of their alternative programs. In two other gray areas of measurement, however, recent state policies are much less defensible.

The National Center for Education Statistics Definition of Dropout

A dropout is a student who:

- was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year, which is the reporting year;
- was not enrolled on Day 20 of the current school year;
- has not graduated from high school or completed a state or district approved educational program and does not meet any of the following reporting exclusions:
 1. transferred to another public school district, private school, home school or state/district approved educational program,
 2. temporarily absent due to suspension or school approved illness, or
 3. death.

Source: Dropout Data Report, 2003–04, p. iii

ON-TIME GRADUATION

Perhaps the most questionable dropout-related statistic provided by the state in recent years has been the graduation rate officially reported to the United States Department of Education in compliance with *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) requirements. In the past, North Carolina has reported the percentage of *graduates* who earned a degree *within four years or less*. In other words, the state did not include dropouts in this calculation, instead reporting only the proportion of all *graduates* who *graduated on time*. Because most students who graduate do so on time, the state’s figures reported in compliance with NCLB regulations sometimes have been very high: the figure was 92.4 percent in 2001, and for 2002–03, the figure was an even healthier-looking 97 percent, the highest reported rate in the nation.²⁴

The calculation used to generate this figure technically did meet the letter of the NCLB reporting law, but it was somewhat misleading. Not surprisingly, several groups took North Carolina to task for using such a figure, but in attempting to make their cases, they, too, may have overstated the point in the opposite direction. In both cases—North Carolina’s optimistic NCLB numbers and critics’ pessimistic calculations—the key issue is the use (or misuse) of the on-time graduation rate.

The on-time graduation rate is, as the name implies, the measure of the proportion of students who graduate within four years of entering high school. Some recent reports that estimate a national dropout *status rate* of almost one-third of all high school students are usually based on the inverse of the on-time graduation rate (that is, on the percentage of students who either do not graduate at all or who do not graduate on time) and do *not* count students who complete high school *after* the traditional four years.²⁵ For example, one report that used on-time graduation figures indicated that North Carolina’s graduation rate was only 61.2 percent in 2000.²⁶ By contrast, as mentioned earlier, estimates by NCES suggest that North Carolina’s completion rate, which includes on-time graduates and those who graduate after the traditional four years, is almost 85 percent (see Table 3 for a comparison of these and other graduation rate figures).²⁷ The on-time graduation rate, then, can be misleading in two ways—it can be used to both over-represent and under-represent the actual graduation population, depending on how students who do not graduate within the traditional four years are treated. If they are not considered at all, the on-time graduation rate can make the percentage of students who graduate appear very high. If they are considered to be non-completers, even if they eventually do receive a diploma, they can make the percentage of students who graduate appear low. For this reason alone, there seems to be little reason to report this particular rate unless the reporting agency also provides some context for the figure.

DPI is in the process now of addressing this problem in a different way. For the 2005–06 school year, the state has calculated a *cohort* graduation rate for the first time—a rate that is affected by dropouts because it indicates the percentage of students from the 2002–03 9th grade class who graduated in 2006. According to the DPI, in 2006, the four-year cohort graduation rate in North Carolina for all students was 68.1 percent (based on 70,484 graduates and a class size of 103,441). For the first year, this new cohort graduation rate will be reported alongside the originally-reported rate,²⁸ but eventually, the original rate will be abandoned in favor of the new rate. Belinda Black, DPI’s Program Administrator for Curriculum and School Reform, notes that there may even be a third rate reported in federal documents in 2006—the federal Department of Education’s Average Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR). The Department of Education describes this rate as the number of high school graduates receiving a regular diploma in a given year divided by the average of the number of students enrolled in 8th grade five years earlier, 9th grade four years earlier, and 10th grade three years earlier.

STUDENT MOBILITY

Another source of counting inaccuracy in the state is a direct product of the frequent mobility of the school-aged population, a characteristic that educators like Eddie Gray, a 30-year teaching veteran at Garner High School in Wake County, think may be on the rise. “It seems like we have a more transitory population in school now,” says

*Well, we busted out of class—had to get away from
those fools*

*We learned more from a three-minute record baby
than we ever learned in school.*

—BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

“NO SURRENDER”

Gray. “We even have kids transferring in with three weeks to go in the year, and that never used to happen.” The trend is especially prevalent among minority students and students of lower-income families. In fact, a 1994 United States General Accounting Office report estimated that about one-quarter of all Hispanic and African-American students had changed schools three or more times by the third grade, almost twice the rate of Caucasian students.²⁹ The first part of the problem is the complex issue of tracking students who transfer to other LEAs. The state’s *Dropout Data Collecting and Reporting Procedures Manual* is clear about how a school should determine a departing student’s status (dropout, withdrawal, or transfer). By state policy, a student can be counted as a transfer instead of a dropout if the school to which the student is transferring makes a formal request for information from the original school. Susan Alden, a Durham guidance counselor, knows all too well how difficult tracking can be.

Table 3. Same Year, Different Rates: Comparing Different Dropout and High School Completion Rate Measures Across States, 2000–01

	Event	Four-Year High School Completion			Age-Range Completion
State	NCES Dropout Event Rate, 2000–01	NCES Completion Rate, 2000–01 ¹	NBETPP Completion Rate, 2000–01 ²	NCLB State-Reported Graduation Rate, 2000–01	NCES Status Completion Rate, 18- to 24-Year-Olds, 1999–2001
Alabama	4.1%	80.0%	65%	--- ³	82.0%
Alaska	8.2%	75.2%	71%	84.5%	90.9%
Arizona	10.9%	68.3%	65%	70.8%	77.6%
Arkansas	5.3%	79.1%	73%	85.1%	86.7%
California	---	---	78%	86.9%	85.1%
Colorado	---	---	75%	81.8%	82.4%
Connecticut	3.0%	86.6%	80%	87.3%	93.6%
Delaware	4.2%	81.6%	70%	83.1%	90.8%
D.C.	---	---	---	63.5%	88.2%
Florida	4.4%	---	63%	64.7%	83.8%
Georgia	7.2%	71.1%	68%	62.0%	84.7%
Hawaii	5.7%	77.7%	73%	78.9%	91.3%
Idaho	5.6%	76.9%	80%	77.1%	88.3%
Illinois	6.0%	75.8%	78%	85.2%	88.4%
Indiana	---	---	73%	91.0%	89.4%
Iowa	2.7%	89.2%	87%	89.4%	92.4%
Kansas	3.2%	---	79%	85.1%	88.2%
Kentucky	4.6%	79.9%	74%	80.7%	87.4%
Louisiana	8.3%	65.0%	68%	---	82.6%
Maine	3.1%	86.5%	70%	86.1%	93.6%
Maryland	4.1%	83.2%	84%	84.7%	84.9%
Massachusetts	3.4%	86.3%	80%	---	91.4%
Michigan	---	---	79%	86.0%	88.1%
Minnesota	4.0%	82.5%	86%	87.9%	93.1%
Mississippi	4.6%	77.3%	61%	72.0%	84.3%
Missouri	4.2%	81.0%	78%	82.5%	90.4%
Montana	4.2%	82.1%	81%	84.1%	92.4%
Nebraska	4.0%	83.9%	84%	84.0%	90.8%
Nevada	5.2%	73.5%	72%	63.7%	79.6%

“[T]he counselor-to-student ratio is usually about 1:400. We give that responsibility to the next school so that we can focus on the 400 who are left.”

Gattis, who collects dropout data for DPI, adds: “Another factor is that students may drop out in one school, later enroll in another school, and then drop out at the second school. It’s possible that a number of students get reported twice, by different schools, even though dropout events are only supposed to occur once in each year. We have a system in place for schools to try and catch these, but when the schools don’t catch the duplicate, over-reporting of dropouts occurs.”

Accurate dropout tracking is difficult at best when a student changes school systems. The challenge is magnified when students cross state lines or into other countries.

Table 3. *Continued*

	Event	Four-Year High School Completion			Age-Range Completion
State	NCES Dropout Event Rate, 2000–01	NCES Completion Rate, 2000–01 ¹	NBETPP Completion Rate, 2000–01 ²	NCLB State-Reported Graduation Rate, 2000–01	NCES Status Completion Rate, 18- to 24-Year-Olds, 1999–2001
New Hampshire	5.4%	---	77%	84.5%	86.6%
New Jersey	2.8%	88.0%	90%	88.7%	89.3%
New Mexico	5.3%	74.4%	70%	76.6%	85.0%
New York	3.8%	81.6%	72%	75.0%	86.8%
North Carolina	6.3%⁴	--- ⁵	69%	92.4%⁶	84.7%
North Dakota	2.2%	90.1%	85%	90.6%	96.8%
Ohio	3.9%	81.0%	79%	82.8%	87.0%
Oklahoma	5.2%	79.2%	75%	68.8%	86.0%
Oregon	5.3%	76.4%	70%	79.5%	86.3%
Pennsylvania	3.6%	84.0%	84%	86.4%	89.8%
Rhode Island	5.0%	79.8%	78%	71.4%	85.5%
South Carolina	3.3%	---	62%	77.6%	84.5%
South Dakota	3.9%	84.6%	78%	97.0%	91.6%
Tennessee	4.3%	79.5%	63%	75.7%	86.6%
Texas	4.2%	---	75%	82.8%	79.9%
Utah	3.7%	82.6%	84%	86.1%	88.9%
Vermont	4.7%	81.9%	80%	82.0%	86.6%
Virginia	3.5%	83.8%	82%	84.7%	88.2%
Washington	---	---	76%	79.0%	88.3%
West Virginia	4.2%	83.4%	76%	---	88.5%
Wisconsin	2.3%	90.0%	90%	90.8%	90.3%
Wyoming	6.4%	76.5%	73%	77.2%	87.3%

¹ Percent of 9th grade students who earned a high school diploma or other high school completion certificate within four years.

² 8th grade graduates who graduated from high school four years later.

³ — = rate not available or not reported

⁴ The 2000–01 9–12 event dropout rate reported by NC DPI was 5.71%.

⁵ At the time this data was compiled, North Carolina did not report enough data for NCES to generate a four-year completion rate.

⁶ For NCLB reporting, North Carolina reported the percent of graduates who graduated within four years.

*Education is not the filling of a pail,
But the lighting of a fire.*

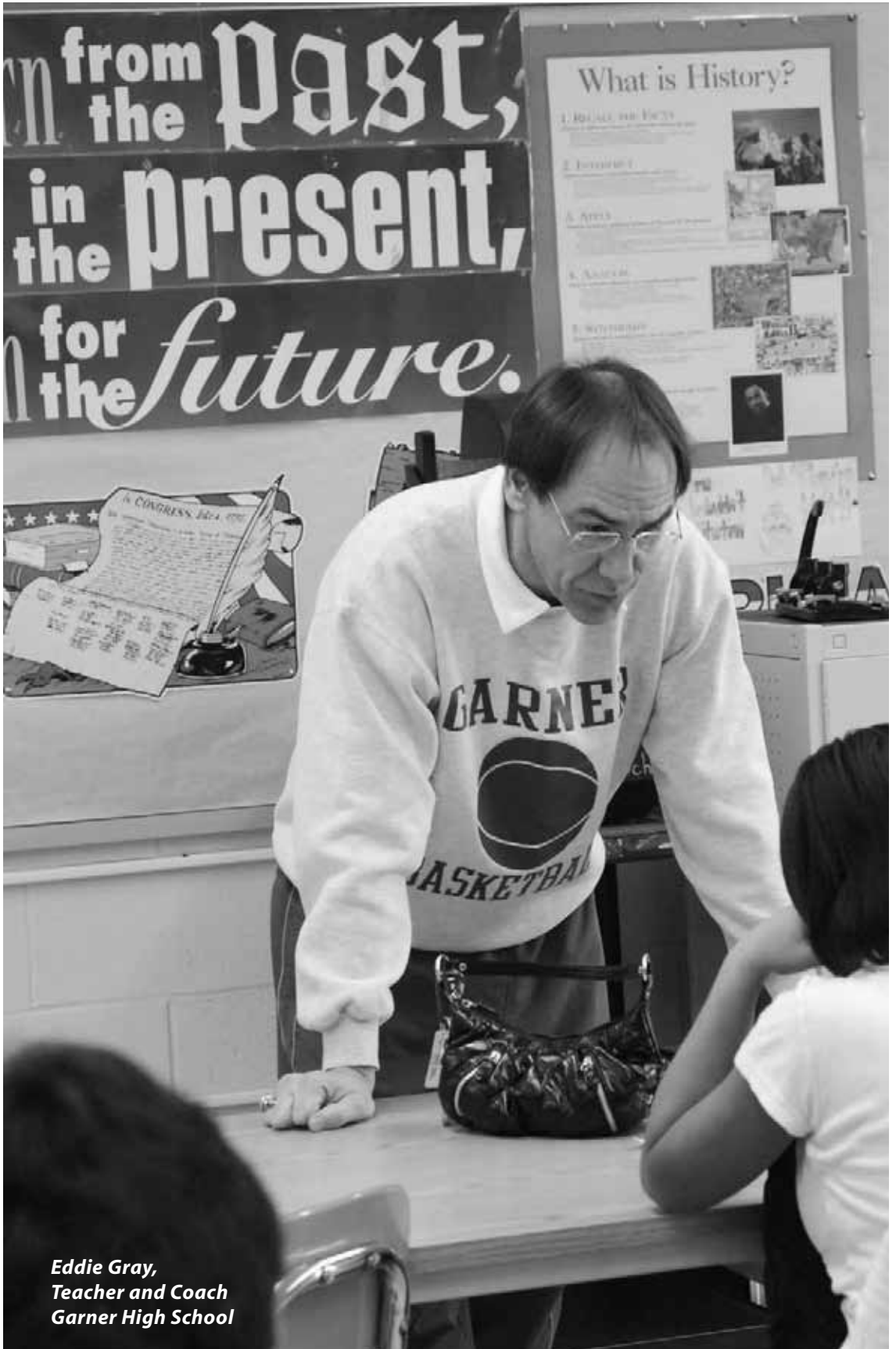
—WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

A second mobility-related roadblock to generating a true dropout rate is that students who leave school to return to a home country (for instance, students born in Mexico) are not counted as dropouts when the school has reasonable documentation that the move took place. Belinda Black says that this policy was put in place to make the state's counting policies more consistent with federal reporting guidelines, which do not hold school systems accountable for students who move back to their home country. There is, however, no guarantee that these students actually re-enroll in schools in their home countries, nor is there currently any reliable or efficient way to find out. In a state that is experiencing a sharp increase in the number of foreign-born students, emigration could add significantly to the underestimation of the actual dropout rate. North Carolina's Hispanic/Latino population increased by 394 percent from 1990 to 2000 and its Asian population grew by 128 percent, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. Growth in these populations has accelerated since the 2000 Census.

The third mobility variable is the effect that changes in a region's population size have on dropout statistics. Students move into a school district, causing grade level numbers to grow, and students move out of a school for reasons other than dropping out, causing grade level numbers to shrink. When this in-and-out movement is balanced (that is, when there is no net change in a school's population), there is no mathematical effect on the dropout rate. However, when there is greater natural movement out of a school district than into it, the dropout rate can become exaggerated, because the rate is calculated based on total attendance figures. Conversely, more student movement into rather than out of a system may soften dropout figures.

For example, in Thomasville City Schools during the 2004–05 school year, 29 students in the 9–12th grades were recorded as dropouts at a calculated *event* rate of 4.01 percent. In 2005–06, the same number of students dropped out, but the rate was lower (3.76 percent), probably due to a net increase in the *overall* school population. Similarly, Cabarrus County saw an increase in the *total number* of dropout events in the 9–12th grades from 2004–05 to 2005–06 (375 to 382), but the calculated dropout rate was actually a fraction lower (5.24 to 5.03). The reverse phenomenon happens too. In 2004–05, Whiteville City Schools lost 39 students who dropped out in grades nine through 12 at a calculated rate of 4.76 percent; the county lost one fewer student (38) during the 2005–06 school year, but this time with a fractionally higher calculated rate of 4.79 percent.³⁰ This effect is dampened somewhat because the state calculates dropout rates based on an average of the total student population for the year of record and the following year to accommodate for population shifts, but even with that concession, discrepancies like the ones above still occur.

Is all of this just mathematical nit-picking? After all, none of these mobility curveballs represent large changes, and individually they lead to only a minor increase or decrease in a school system's dropout rates, but they do point up the need for better tracking and the importance for politicians and the media to report the state-provided raw numbers as well as rates. Policymakers who focus money and programs on geographic areas or LEAs based on the rise and fall of the reported dropout *rate* only may be misallocating funding and giving attention to school districts that may or may not have the worst problem. LEAs with high dropout rates but also with a high rate of growth might have a larger numerical dropout problem than their rates (kept lower by a growing district population) imply. LEAs with lower dropout totals but also with negative growth rates may be the benefactors of extra funding based on exaggerated dropout rate figures.



Eddie Gray,
Teacher and Coach
Garner High School

2. Which Students Drop Out and Why?

School Snapshot: “You know who she is, don’t you?” asked one of my co-workers. “That’s the girl who was shot in the chest last year and missed the last two months of school. She failed because she was unable to come to school regularly.” And here she was, back in the game, trying again. She started off well enough, which is to say she did enough to pass, but she was very quiet and not particularly strong academically. And then one day, without warning, she just stopped coming to school. After 10 days, she was withdrawn automatically by policy, and she did not return to reinstate herself. She was 16 and was not legally required to do so. I asked one of the students about her, and she said, “It’s her injury. She never really got over it. Plus, it still hurts her and she doesn’t feel like coming some days.”

Formalizing and instituting a consistent, accurate, and equitable counting, reporting, and tracking system for calculating dropout rates and totals is crucial, but it is only the first part of the problem. Once schools clearly identify *how many* dropouts there are, what remains are the more important tasks of figuring out *who* our dropouts are, *why* they drop out, and *what* can be done to prevent them from doing so.

Table 4.
N.C. Dropout Event
Rates, 2005–06

Grade	Total	Percent*
7	123	0.5%
8	542	2.4%
9	7,576	33.2%
10	5,946	26.0%
11	5,190	22.7%
12	3,461	15.2%
7–12 Total	22,838	—
9–12 Total	22,173	—

* Percent of all dropout events grades seven through 12

<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/reports.htm>.

Source: Education Statistics Access System (ESAS), Financial and Business Services, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2006.

Who Drops Out in North Carolina?
Sorting the Numbers³¹

Since the rollout of the ABCs accountability system in 1997, the N.C. Department of Public Instruction has rapidly expanded and improved the availability of data that enables the student population to be examined by such variables as age, gender, and race. Fortunately, dropout data are no exception, and they provide a window on the dropout population.

WHEN DO STUDENTS DROP OUT?

No matter how one counts dropouts, the highest numbers of dropout events by far in North Carolina occur between the 9th and 10th grades—during and after the first year of high school. While this pattern also has been true across the country for years and is getting worse, in one study North Carolina’s dropout rate for this grade level was the sixth worst in the nation.³² In 2005–06, 9th grade dropouts accounted for around 33 percent of dropouts in grades seven through 12, and for more than 34 percent of all high school dropouts (see Tables 4 and 5).³³ Tellingly, the most common dropout age is 17, followed by 18, neither of which is a traditional 9th grade age (9th grade students are usually 14 or 15 years old). In other words, the highest number of dropouts are 9th graders, but the highest concentration of dropouts are *not* of 9th grade age.

A fair number of the state’s dropouts are likely to be dropping out after repeating (or attempting to repeat) a grade, most commonly the 9th grade. In fact, only about 14 percent of all 9th graders who drop out are under the age of 16.³⁴ For many educators, the problem of over-age 9th graders is not surprising. “Now, it’s like kids are having a harder time getting out of 9th grade,” says Susan Alden, a Durham guidance counselor. “And, I think with stricter [state] standards for them to get promoted, we do have a few kids who are older when they first come to us. We have 16-year-olds who are 9th graders for the first time, and it doesn’t take much failure to push them over the edge.”

Table 5. Dropout Totals by Race and Grade, 2005–06

Grade	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Native American	Multi-racial	White	All Races
7	1	54	13	1	6	48	123
8	6	195	78	7	11	245	542
9	72	3,028	909	202	141	3,224	7,576
10	57	2,076	580	149	101	2,983	5,946
11	63	1,593	407	96	95	2,936	5,190
12	44	942	201	53	61	2,160	3,461
7-12 Total	243	7,888	2,188	508	415	11,596	22,838
9-12 Total	236	7,639	2,097	500	398	11,303	22,173

<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/reports.htm>

Source: Education Statistics Access System (ESAS), Financial and Business Services, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2006.

WHAT DO DROPOUT RATES LOOK LIKE ACROSS RACE AND GENDER?

The dropout problem is not evenly distributed across race or gender, either. Jay Greene's 2002 study³⁵ for the Manhattan Institute estimated graduation rates at three levels: national, state, and district. In his study, the national graduation rate was 71 percent, with a 78 percent graduation rate for white students, a 56 percent rate for African-American students, and a 54 percent rate for Latinos. As dramatically different as those numbers are, they tell an even more devastating story when compared to his results for North Carolina, which ranked 42nd out of 50 states and the District of Columbia in the study. According to Greene's calculations, North Carolina's *graduation rate* was 65 percent, with sub-group rates of 68 percent for white students, 55



The ultimate goal of the educational system is to shift to the individual the burden of pursuing his own education.

—JOHN GARDNER
SELF-RENEWAL

Table 6. Ethnic Representation of Dropouts by Grade, 2005–06

Grade	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Native American	Multi-racial	White
7	0.8%	43.9%	10.6%	0.8%	4.9%	39.0%
8	1.1%	36.0%	14.4%	1.3%	2.0%	45.2%
9	1.0%	40.0%	12.0%	2.7%	1.9%	42.6%
10	1.0%	34.9%	9.8%	2.5%	1.7%	50.2%
11	1.2%	30.7%	7.8%	1.8%	1.8%	56.6%
12	1.3%	27.2%	5.8%	1.5%	1.8%	62.4%
7–12 Total	1.1%	34.5%	9.6%	2.2%	1.8%	50.8%
9–12 Total	1.1%	34.5%	9.5%	2.3%	1.8%	51.0%

<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/reports.htm>

Source: Education Statistics Access System (ESAS), Financial and Business Services, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2006.

percent for African-American students, and only 38 percent for Latino students.³⁶ Another modified cohort approach used in a study for the United States Department of Education estimates 2000–01 *dropout rates* in North Carolina at 11.7 percent for Native American students, 10.6 percent for Hispanic students, 7.6 percent for African-American students, 5.4 percent for white students, and 4.6 percent for Asian students.³⁷

The state's 2005–06 dropout event rates mirror these results in many ways, with the highest 9–12 dropout rate occurring among Hispanic and Native American students (8.69 and 8.37 percent, respectively), followed by African-American students (5.63 percent).³⁸ Dropping out also does not occur at the same rate among ethnic groups from grade to grade. In grades seven and eight, dropouts are more likely to be minorities than white students. Between 53 percent and 59 percent of all dropouts in the state in grades seven and eight from 1999 to 2006 were minorities. In 2005–06, minorities represented more than three-fifths of all 7th grade dropouts and well over half of all 8th grade dropouts (see Table 6). However, when one study clustered 8th grade dropouts by socio-economic status, the differences in the dropout rate across ethnicities almost vanished.³⁹ In other words, different dropout rates across ethnicities may have less to do with the ethnicity itself than with the socio-economic conditions those ethnicities typically face.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the dropout rate is different for males and females, with the male dropout rate higher overall and for each ethnicity.⁴⁰ The percent of male-to-female dropouts has held steady over the last six years at a ratio of about 3:2 (see Table 7).

*Either the United States will
destroy ignorance or ignorance
will destroy the United States.*

—W.E.B. DuBois

THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK, 1903

Why Do Students Drop Out?

Students at all ages and from all racial groups in North Carolina are dropping out, but why? The answer is often multi-dimensional, and it is different for almost every demographic group of students. Most counselors and researchers agree that dropping out is not a static event. “[D]ropping out [of school] is a long-term process of disengagement that occurs over time and begins in the earliest grades,” and it often involves multiple factors.⁴¹ As one researcher described it:

If a student has family or community responsibilities that can’t wait or can’t be forgotten until 3:00; if he or she doesn’t enter school speaking standard English or has a disability; if his or her community, values, and heritage are [different] from those represented in the faculty, the texts, and the curriculum at large; if a high school degree seems to be of questionable value; or if the world around him or her is filled with social fractures along race/ethnic, class, and gender lines, public education as currently practiced fails.⁴²

There are countless reasons why a student might choose to drop out, but it is possible to group these reasons into two broad categories. These are external family and environmental characteristics, or “pull” factors (factors that pull a student out of school), and school experiences, or “push” factors (factors that push a student away from school).⁴³

FAMILY AND ENVIRONMENTAL “PULL” FACTORS

Environmental variables are strong social “pull” factors that often originate somewhere other than the school. These “pull” factors may include situations such as high absenteeism due to family demands and unforeseen stressful life events (like unexpected pregnancy or the need to become a family’s primary wage-earner).⁴⁴ Eighteen-year-old Yessica, who is now enrolled in a high school completion program at a community college, dropped out because of another common “pull” factor. “I got pregnant, and I had a baby, and I couldn’t spend all my time in school.” In addition, parental behaviors can act as “pull” factors and influence students. Recent studies suggest that when parents form close relationships with their children, monitor their children’s activities, provide them with emotional support, and encourage them to make independent decisions, students are less likely to drop out of school.⁴⁵

The absence of these characteristics may contribute to the “pull” some dropouts feel. As Guretta, who left high school in the ninth grade, puts it, “Home wasn’t a good place.” Qwatisha, who also did not finish high school, adds, “I had people who were there for me, but nobody to really push me.”

Joseph Capps, a science teacher at Harnett Central High School in Harnett County, thinks part of the reason some parents show less concern about their children’s school progress may be increased strain on parents as a result of

**Table 7. Dropouts by Gender,^a
Grade 9–12, 1999–2006**

				Total
1999–00	Male	58.3%	13,637	23,377
	Female	41.7%	9,740	
2000–01	Male	58.5%	12,261	20,971
	Female	41.5%	8,710	
2001–02	Male	58.7%	11,840	20,175
	Female	41.3%	8,335	
2002–03	Male	59.1%	11,193	18,948
	Female	40.9%	7,755	
2003–04	Male	58.7%	11,767	20,031
	Female	41.3%	8,264	
2004–05	Male	59.2%	11,939	20,175
	Female	40.8%	8,236	
2005–06	Male	59.9%	13,280	22,180
	Female	40.1%	8,900	

the disappearance of the traditional nuclear family unit. “I have very few parents who are able to commit time to caring about what is going on in school. My students tell me that there is so much more stress on their families, and parents have so many new worries that they don’t have time to be parents.”

SCHOOL “PUSH” FACTORS

There are several questions schools can ask of themselves to assess the degree to which they might be directly or indirectly encouraging students to drop out by “pushing” them out of school. Is the curriculum relevant to the students’ lives? Are teachers accessible and accommodating? What school policies are contributing to the problem? In many cases, DPI’s Pittman notes, “[d]ropout is tied to suspensions, expulsions, and academic performance. . . . They are all interrelated.”

“Push” factors can include student-centered characteristics such as poor grades, disruptive behavior, feelings of alienation or discomfort in a school setting, grade retention, and school climate. Push factors also can include school-wide characteristics such as lack of support for students who struggle academically, inadequate school resource allocation (for example, for equitable pupil/teacher ratios), and school structure (for example, school size and location).⁴⁶ Qwatisha, now enrolled in a completion program in which she feels more comfortable, experienced many of these “push” factors firsthand. “It took me longer to catch on when someone explained something to me,” she says. She adds that she felt uncomfortable because not only did other students complain about having to wait for her, but so, too, did some of her teachers. “It embarrassed me to ask and made me not want to speak up. Some teachers would say, ‘Didn’t I just explain this?’” Coronda, who is now enrolled in the same program, agrees. “You need more teachers who care [about their students],” she says. “The teachers, the principals, the staff need to be more involved with their students. If teachers are more involved with their students, that means the students will work harder.”





*The secret of
education lies in
respecting the
pupil.*

—RALPH WALDO
EMERSON

Or, push factors can be statewide rather than school specific, such as North Carolina's compulsory attendance law, which allows a student to drop out legally after age 16. As Garner High's Gray suggests, another factor may be the steady decrease in the average experience level of the state's teachers. "When I started at Garner, teachers stayed here for a lifetime, and you rarely had a teacher who was absent," Gray says. "I think that kind of dedication has an impact on reducing dropout." Three additional "push" factors North Carolina should watch closely are suspension and grade retention policies, possible negative side-effects of the state's high-stakes testing program (the ABCs of Education), and the limited relevancy of some of the curricula behind those tests.

Long-Term Suspensions and Grade Retention

Two longstanding and unresolved problems that most researchers and educators agree do affect dropouts are the related issues of long-term suspensions and grade retention. In some cases, acknowledges Pittman, long-term suspensions for certain actions (such as fighting and possession or distribution of drugs) based on so-called "zero-tolerance" discipline policies make sense. On the other hand, other applications of the policy—however well-intended—might contribute more to students dropping out than to a safer school environment. Pittman cites one case in which the State Advisory Council on Indian Education raised a concern about out-of-school suspensions for smoking. A higher-than-average percentage of Native American students smoke, according to the Council, and smoking in some LEAs is a zero-tolerance issue. These students, when caught, immediately face out-of-school suspensions, but, as indicated by the high percentage of Native American students who drop out (8.37 percent of North Carolina's total Native American student population in 2005–06—more than one out of every 12), many of these students may need very little incentive to drop out. Assigning students to suspension rather than some other sanction for smoking thus may cause more problems than it solves.

Potentially more devastating for some students than long-term suspension is grade retention. Is repeating a grade ultimately





academically beneficial or harmful for students? The hoped-for benefit of retention is that students will gain the academic skills they did not master the first time around, but it comes at the risk of increased student disengagement from school and the awkwardness and frustration of being older than one's classmates.⁴⁷ Indeed, most evidence indicates that retention does not prevent students from dropping out. One study estimates, for example, that between 70 percent and 80 percent of all retained 9th graders eventually drop out anyway,⁴⁸ and another calculated that one grade retention increased the risk of dropping out by between 40 percent and 50 percent, with the increase in risk rising to 90 percent when a student is retained more than once.⁴⁹ And yet, as some defenders of grade retention might argue, it is possible that, without retention, an even *greater* percentage of these students might have dropped out. And, passing a student who has not mastered the material on to the next grade undermines a sense of responsibility for educating students who are more difficult to teach.

HIGH-STAKES TESTING

The advent of minimum competency testing in the 1970s, the academic standards movement of the 1980s, and, most recently, the new emphasis on achievement tests also may be adding to the exodus from schools.⁵⁰ Student discouragement because of test results might be one factor in a student's decision to drop out, and another factor might be pressure from school administrators to leave school early.

School performances on end-of-grade (grades three through eight) and end-of-course (high school grades) tests have become central factors in both state and national evaluations of schools and school districts. In many cases, bonuses or sanctions for a school or even for an entire district can hinge on overall student performance or the performance of one particular sub-group (like students with special needs). Consequently, there is a growing incentive for schools to work around the requirement to test all students. Because the federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation requires testing at least 95 percent of all students who are in attendance at a school (95 percent

overall and in each sub-group), encouraging a borderline student to drop out before testing happens is, sadly, one option a school official faced with sanctions might consider.⁵¹

However, the gradual decline in dropout events in North Carolina since the advent of the ABCs (1996–97) might argue otherwise, and there is no direct evidence of such events happening in North Carolina. “Testing is designed to help identify the areas of weakness in students so additional efforts can be expended in these areas,” says Phil Kirk, a former chairman of the State Board of Education and an advocate for the state’s accountability program. “Testing actually is of more benefit to the less talented students (who may drop out) than it is for the gifted.” Because several states (including Texas, Alabama, and New York) recently have dealt with instances of students being encouraged to quit school in order to improve overall test scores,⁵² a degree of vigilance may be in order. Kirk says the State Board of Education has been proactive in this regard. “The State Board, at my insistence, put the dropout rate as part of the accountability model so students would not be pushed out of school to make the test results higher.”

RELEVANCY OF THE CURRICULUM

John Reimer, an alternative school counselor in Caldwell County and president of the North Carolina Dropout Prevention Association, sees another way in which the growing emphasis on testing may be pushing students out of school. Rather than lifting all boats, he argues, the rising tide of basic skills and testing has led to the neglect of several other critical areas for student growth, such as pragmatic life lessons and problem-solving skills. “[We need] to bring the concentration back to kids and learning the skills they need outside of school. . . . For example, kids don’t know how to balance checkbooks, how to make decisions, how to work as a team, [or even] what cooperation is.” Time that might be dedicated to that kind of learning is now being used instead for more test preparation, which may in turn render school more meaningless to students already on the edge, he says. “In the last three school years, it has been pretty common throughout the state for schools to spend at least 25 days of the school year reviewing for tests.”

Reimer is not alone in his criticism of the content of the state’s curriculum. Jackie, who left school during 10th grade, notes, “Once I went to the 10th grade, my interest [in school] dropped. Everything got boring, so I left, even though my grades were pretty decent.” Sen. Stan Bingham offers another perspective. “I hear the same things [from dropouts] that I heard myself say when I was 16 and I wanted to quit school, and that is ‘I am and have been and continue to be interested in machinery . . . I’m not interested in literature and poetry.’ A lot of boys have an interest in automobiles and things they can put their hands on . . . but we don’t have anything [in schools] . . . that makes a student feel adequate in any way if he has those interests. You study history, you study calculus . . . but is it always possible to convince a young man that he will use calculus?”

Gray, a social studies teacher, thinks the curriculum still is not flexible enough to reach all students—and never has been. “Schools in general throughout history haven’t met the needs of every single person,” says Gray. “We have always had this mindset that everybody is supposed to go to college, and that’s just not accurate.”

Kirk, the former State Board of Education chair, pointing to recent reforms, disagrees that the curriculum only serves college bound students. “Vocational and technical courses are making a comeback in quality and quantity,” says Kirk. “The curriculum is not designed for everyone to go to college. The State Board of Education spent considerable time developing four pathways for graduation.”





For Bingham, the *pleasure* of learning is a key factor in reducing the dropout rate, but one that is often missing in the school experiences of some students. “If we can keep these kids in school, I don’t [care] what they learn. If they learn about designing marbles or they learn about spaceships—whatever topics would stimulate some interest in them—we will have succeeded tremendously in getting these kids through those tough ages of 16 to 19. It’s amazing what a student can do if he gets to study something he likes.”

*I cannot teach
anybody
anything,
I can only make
them think.*
—SOCRATES

REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT ACROSS RACE, GRADE, AND GENDER

Dropout rates in North Carolina for each race, grade level, and gender are quite different, and, as it turns out, so are their reasons for dropping out. The N.C. Department of Public Instruction has been collecting data on this question for several years. Located on the Financial and Business Services section of the department’s webpage is a link to the North Carolina Education Statistics Access System (ESAS), which is a database containing substantial amounts of quantitative and qualitative data, including dropout data.⁵³ Not only are dropout numbers by race, grade level, gender, and school district since the 1998–99 school year available, but so, too, are primary *reasons* provided by dropouts and their counselors for why students drop out. Although anecdotal data of this sort are not as reliable as more quantitative data, these data still can provide insight into why students drop out.⁵⁴

Differences Among Races

While most students who drop out reportedly leave for school-related reasons as opposed to family or personal reasons (especially because of attendance problems), school-related reasons for dropping out were much less common for Asian and Hispanic students at 76.3 percent and 74.9 percent, respectively, in 2005–06 (see Table 8). Instead, Asian and Hispanic dropouts were more likely to cite work-related “pull” reasons (12.4 percent and 13.5 percent) than were other groups. These and

Table 8. Reasons Cited for High School^a Dropout by Race, 2005–06

	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Native American	Multi-Racial	White	All Races
Number of dropouts	236	7,639	2,097	500	398	11,303	22,173
Percent for which reason cited for dropout	78.8%	88.9%	81.1%	93.8%	94.0%	93.4%	90.5%
Moved, school status unknown (no reason cited)	21.2%	11.1%	18.9%	6.2%	6.0%	6.6%	9.5%
Of known dropout status, % whose reason for dropout^b was for:							
<i>School-Related Reasons^c</i>	76.3%	85.4%	74.9%	85.5%	85.8%	84.0%	83.7%
Academic problems	4.8%	7.7%	5.8%	4.7%	7.5%	7.3%	7.2%
Attendance (school)	3.2%	4.0%	3.4%	1.5%	4.5%	4.5%	4.2%
Attendance (general)	51.1%	51.1%	55.0%	67.2%	52.4%	51.7%	52.1%
Community college enrollment w/ no h. s. diploma	10.8%	11.6%	6.8%	8.7%	14.4%	15.8%	13.4%
Discipline problem	2.7%	4.1%	1.4%	1.7%	2.7%	2.1%	2.7%
Failure to return after long-term suspension	3.8%	6.9%	2.5%	1.7%	4.3%	2.5%	4.0%
<i>Work-Related Reasons</i>	12.4%	3.9%	13.5%	4.7%	4.0%	4.6%	5.2%
Attendance (work)	0.5%	0.3%	0.5%	0.4%	0.3%	0.5%	0.4%
Employment necessary	0.5%	0.2%	1.2%	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%
Choice of work over school	11.3%	3.4%	11.8%	4.3%	3.5%	3.8%	4.4%
<i>Family or Personal Reasons</i>	10.2%	7.9%	10.9%	9.0%	8.6%	10.3%	9.5%
Attendance (family)	0.5%	0.4%	0.5%	0.2%	1.3%	0.6%	0.5%
Attendance (personal)	5.4%	3.6%	3.9%	1.7%	3.2%	5.1%	4.4%
Need to care for children	0.5%	0.9%	1.5%	1.1%	0.3%	0.5%	0.7%
Health problems	0.5%	0.2%	0.5%	0.4%	0.0%	1.0%	0.7%
Unstable home environment	1.1%	0.9%	0.4%	3.0%	0.8%	1.0%	0.9%
Marriage	0.5%	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%	0.2%
Pregnancy	0.5%	1.1%	1.9%	1.1%	1.6%	1.2%	1.2%
Runaway	1.1%	0.9%	1.2%	1.5%	1.1%	0.7%	0.8%
<i>Crime-Related Reasons</i>	1.1%	2.8%	0.6%	0.9%	1.6%	1.1%	1.6%
Suspected substance abuse	0.0%	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.5%	0.3%	0.2%
Incarcerated in adult facility	1.1%	2.7%	0.4%	0.6%	1.1%	0.8%	1.4%

^a Grades 9–12

^b Reasons for dropout are solicited from students when possible, but when not possible, they are provided by data managers and/or dropout prevention counselors. Dropout Data Report, N.C. DPI, p. 18

^c Major (bold-faced) category groupings are the author's and are not those of N.C. DPI.

Table 9. Reasons Cited for High School^a Dropout by Grade, 2005–06

	7	8	9	10	11	12	7–12 Total	9–12 Total
Number of dropouts	123	542	7,576	5,946	5,190	3,461	22,838	22,173
Percent for which reason cited for dropout	80.5%	64.0%	88.3%	90.6%	92.1%	93.1%	89.9%	90.5%
Moved, school status unknown (no reason cited)	19.5%	36.0%	11.7%	9.4%	7.9%	6.9%	10.1%	9.5%
Of known dropout status, % whose reason for dropout^b was for:								
<i>School-Related Reasons^c</i>	74.0%	51.1%	75.1%	74.7%	76.7%	77.8%	75.2%	75.8%
Academic problems	5.7%	2.4%	5.8%	6.3%	7.1%	7.7%	6.4%	6.5%
Attendance (school)	3.3%	2.4%	4.1%	3.6%	3.2%	4.3%	3.7%	3.8%
Attendance (general)	46.3%	32.8%	48.9%	46.6%	45.8%	46.6%	46.9%	47.2%
Community college enroll- ment w/ no h. s. diploma	3.3%	3.3%	7.9%	12.1%	16.0%	15.7%	11.9%	12.1%
Discipline problem	7.3%	2.6%	2.9%	2.8%	2.2%	1.4%	2.5%	2.5%
Failure to return after long-term suspension	8.1%	7.6%	5.5%	3.3%	2.4%	2.1%	3.8%	3.7%
<i>Work-Related Reasons</i>	0.0%	4.1%	4.1%	5.3%	4.9%	4.8%	4.7%	4.7%
Attendance (work)	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.4%	0.6%	0.5%	0.4%	0.4%
Employment necessary	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.4%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%
Choice of work over school	0.0%	4.1%	3.6%	4.5%	4.0%	4.0%	4.0%	4.0%
<i>Family or Personal Reasons</i>	6.5%	8.5%	7.6%	9.1%	9.1%	9.0%	8.6%	8.6%
Attendance (family)	0.0%	0.7%	0.4%	0.5%	0.5%	0.3%	0.5%	0.5%
Attendance (personal)	1.6%	1.3%	3.2%	4.6%	4.1%	4.7%	3.9%	4.0%
Need to care for children	0.0%	0.7%	0.5%	0.7%	0.7%	0.9%	0.7%	0.7%
Health problems	0.0%	0.2%	0.4%	0.6%	0.8%	0.8%	0.6%	0.6%
Unstable home environment	1.6%	1.3%	1.0%	0.6%	1.0%	0.7%	0.9%	0.8%
Marriage	0.0%	0.4%	0.1%	0.3%	0.2%	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%
Pregnancy	0.8%	1.7%	1.0%	1.1%	1.2%	1.2%	1.1%	1.1%
Runaway	2.4%	2.2%	1.0%	0.8%	0.6%	0.3%	0.8%	0.7%
<i>Crime-Related Reasons</i>	0.0%	0.4%	1.5%	1.5%	1.4%	1.4%	1.4%	1.5%
Suspected substance abuse	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.2%	0.3%	0.3%	0.2%	0.2%
Incarcerated in adult facility	0.0%	0.4%	1.4%	1.3%	1.1%	1.1%	1.2%	1.3%

^a Grades 9–12

^b Reasons for dropout are solicited from students when possible, but when not possible, they are provided by data managers and/or dropout prevention counselors. Dropout Data Report, N.C. DPI, p. 18

^c Major (bold-faced) category groupings are the author's and are not those of N.C. DPI.



other patterns have fluctuated over the previous several academic years, with the most notable change for the 2005–06 school year being the sharp drop-off in the proportion of family and personal reasons cited by all groups (from a high of 18.5 percent in 2002–03 to a low of 9.5 percent in 2005–06). Though rarely cited for any racial group, crime-related reasons (either incarcerated in an adult prison or suspected substance abuse) for dropping out have been consistently highest for African Americans (peaking at 3.1 percent of reasons given in both the 2001–02 and the 2002–03 school years).

Differences Across Grades

A major difference in the reasons cited for leaving school across grade levels is the frequency with which middle school (grades seven and eight) and high school (grades nine through 12) dropouts cited school-related reasons (around 50 percent of the time for grades seven and eight with a noticeable spike for 7th graders in 2005–06 versus well over 70 percent of the time for grades 9–12). While this difference is due in part to the availability of alternative community college programs to high school students, high school dropouts also have been much more likely than middle school students to cite academic and attendance problems (see Table 9). However, of all of the comparisons possible with the anecdotal dropout data, those between middle and high school are the most questionable. For one thing, since most dropouts occur between grades nine and 12 (around 97 percent in 2005–06), there are statistical risks associated with drawing conclusions about differences between the middle and high school groups. Another confounding factor may be the different ways in which middle and high school guidance counselors and students interpret (and subsequently report) reasons for dropping out. Finally, as indicated in Table 9, a high percentage of middle school dropout events were not coded due to uncertain school enrollment status after a move (about 30 percent, compared to only 9.5 percent at the high school level in 2005–06).

Differences Between Genders

For both genders, as with most races and grade levels, the most commonly cited reason for dropping out is attendance and not, as some might suppose, academic problems (see Table 10). Whether for work, family, or personal reasons, attendance was cited by 60.3 percent of the male respondents and 63.7 percent of the female

**Table 10. Reasons Cited for High School^a
Dropout by Gender, 2005–06**

	Male	Female	Total
Number of dropouts	13,276	8,897	22,173
Percent for which reason cited for dropout	91.1%	89.7%	90.5%
Moved, school status unknown (no reason cited)	8.9%	10.3%	9.5%
Of known dropout status, % whose reason for dropout^b was for:			
<i>School-Related Reasons^c</i>	85.1%	81.6%	83.7%
Academic problems	7.7%	6.5%	7.2%
Attendance (school)	4.0%	4.5%	4.2%
Attendance (general)	51.3%	53.3%	52.1%
Community college enrollment w/ no h. s. diploma	12.8%	14.4%	13.4%
Discipline problem	3.8%	1.2%	2.7%
Failure to return after long-term suspension	5.5%	1.8%	4.0%
<i>Work-Related Reasons</i>	6.4%	3.4%	5.2%
Attendance (work)	0.6%	0.2%	0.4%
Employment necessary	0.4%	0.3%	0.3%
Choice of work over school	5.5%	2.9%	4.4%
<i>Family or Personal Reasons</i>	6.1%	14.6%	9.5%
(Family/Personal Reasons Minus Pregnancy)	6.1%	11.5%	8.3%
Attendance (family)	0.4%	0.6%	0.5%
Attendance (personal)	4.0%	5.1%	4.4%
Need to care for children	0.1%	1.7%	0.7%
Health problems	0.4%	1.1%	0.7%
Unstable home environment	0.7%	1.3%	0.9%
Marriage	0.0%	0.5%	0.2%
Pregnancy	0.0%	3.0%	1.2%
Runaway	0.5%	1.3%	0.8%
<i>Crime-Related Reasons</i>	2.4%	0.4%	1.6%
Suspected substance abuse	0.3%	0.1%	0.2%
Incarcerated in adult facility	2.1%	0.3%	1.4%

^a Grades 9–12

^b Reasons for dropout are solicited from students when possible, but when not possible, they are provided by data managers and/or dropout prevention counselors. Dropout Data Report, N.C. DPI, p. 18

^c Major (bold-faced) category groupings are the author's and are not those of N.C. DPI.

respondents in 2005–06. That compares to 7.7 percent of males and 6.5 percent of females for whom academic problems were cited as their reason for dropping out. The most noticeable difference between male and female responses is the weight that female dropouts give to family-related reasons. Even when pregnancy is factored out, females still cited family-related reasons for dropping out 17.6 percent of the time in 2004–05, far outdistancing males at 11.6 percent. Discipline (whether because of the discipline problem itself or reluctance to return to school after a suspension) was a much more common reason cited by males who dropped out than for females (9.4 percent versus 3.1 percent in 2003–04).

3. How the State and Local School Districts Are Attempting To Reduce Dropouts and What Works in Reducing Dropout Totals

School Snapshot: Larry slept through most of my 6th period class—not because he was bored (well, at least no more bored than anyone else) but because he was tired. He worked full shifts at a fast food restaurant after school, and yet he still managed to turn in decent work to me. He made it through half of the school year before he decided that he just couldn’t afford to stay in school any more. He was two years over-age, stuck in a 10th grade class, and at least two full years away from graduating. Every hour he worked at school was one less hour that he could be working in the “real” world. At age 18 and with few prospects for college, high school was becoming a waste of time. He did not have a bad attitude; he just saw clearly that his future was not necessarily going to improve by sticking it out in school writing essays about Lord of the Flies or taking multiple choice tests about American history. Larry needed something else. He needed curriculum options at school and someone who could help him balance school and work.





*Ray Samuels,
Freshman Seminar Teacher
Enloe High School*

Moving from Numbers to Actions

The most important message the numbers deliver is that effective dropout prevention will require much more than a single, one-size-fits-all solution. For this reason, says Elizabeth Glennie, Director of the North Carolina Education Research Data Center and a researcher at the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University, “You’ve got to tailor dropout prevention programs to the needs of specific kids.”

The challenge is a daunting one, and the face of dropout is anything but simple—it affects all races, ages, and genders, and it affects them differently and in complex ways. And yet, despite some fluctuation, dropout events have remained below the level set in 1999 (see Table 1). Part of the reason for the decline is that local school districts have been implementing innovative solutions to the problem. While the numbers of dropouts still remind us that no district has found the perfect combination of interventions to deliver the knock-out punch to the dropout problem, some of these approaches—both new and tried-and-true—may bear fruit on a more regular basis in the long run.

CURRENT PROGRAMS, INTERVENTIONS, AND POLICIES IN NORTH CAROLINA

Most programs fit into one of three categories: **supplemental services for at-risk students**; **alternative education programs**; and **school restructuring efforts**. Here are some examples of available programs and efforts already under way in the state.

SUPPLEMENTAL SERVICES FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

Communities in Schools

High school teacher Gray believes students could use more support at the school level. “I think one of the reasons students drop out now is that they don’t have any advocates at the school,” says Gray. One of the most extensive statewide efforts to address this deficiency and reduce the number of dropouts is the Communities in Schools (CIS) network, which operates 37 programs across the state and is seeking funding for 10 more. CIS helps communities develop collaborative strategies for improving the manner in which existing community programs and agencies serve students and their families. One of the guiding principles of CIS is awareness of the multiple stresses both in and out of school—the “push” and “pull” factors described above—that can influence a student’s decision to drop out. In addition, CIS encourages and supports the development of personal one-on-one relationships for students with adults, safe school and home environments, the acquisition of marketable skills, opportunities for students to participate in community service, and improving the physical, mental, and emotional health of all students. As Qwatisha notes, it is that kind of personal relationship that in the end could foster an inner desire to stay in school. “It makes you feel good to see that someone really does care,” says Qwatisha. Guretta adds, “That’s all we need—a little one-on-one time.”

Linda Harrill, president of Communities in Schools of North Carolina, says one key to successful reduction of the dropout problem that CIS embraces is the provision of services across the entire sweep of a student’s school experience, not just in high school. Many of the more than 400 schools in which CIS works are elementary and middle schools, because “[working] in high school is like crisis intervention, like building a dam when the water’s already coming over it, but what we need to do is build more dams upstream.” At the same time, Harrill adds that CIS is also active in developing innovative high school programs, such as the

*Upon the subject of education,
not presuming to dictate any
plan or system respecting it,
I can only say that I view it as
the most important subject
which we as a people may be
engaged in. That everyone may
receive at least a moderate
education appears to be an
objective of vital importance.*

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN

ThinkCOLLEGE program, which helps students complete college applications. “We are trying to increase the number of outside opportunities for kids to think about college who might not have thought about it before.” CIS already has helped more than 200 students from the Charlotte area enroll in college, most of whom were awarded scholarships. Many of these students are first-generation high school graduates, and all are first-generation college students.

Formal evaluations of CIS are encouraging as well. A 1996 Urban Institute study revealed that the annual dropout rate for CIS participants was around 7 percent, which, while higher than typical overall state rates, was very low for the population CIS serves. Also, high absenteeism, a major dropout factor in North Carolina, was reduced for almost 70 percent of the participants with chronic absence problems. The report found evidence of overall academic improvement as well, including improved grade-point averages for almost 80 percent of all participants who entered the program with an average below 1.0.⁵⁵ Additionally, more recent CIS self-evaluations indicate that attendance, behavior, and suspensions all declined for more than 80 percent of all participants, and nearly 90 percent demonstrated improvement in academic achievement, with almost 70 percent of participants going on to some form of post-secondary education. Most tellingly, 98 percent of participants remained in school.⁵⁶

Dropout Prevention Counseling

Every Local Education Agency (LEA) is required to designate one employee as its Dropout Prevention Coordinator, but personnel with this title are responsible only for

gathering and submitting dropout numbers to the state every October. Several LEAs, however, have used the flexibility of their state-provided school counselor and at-risk student funding allotments to support positions designated specifically for dropout prevention counseling.⁵⁷

Durham’s multi-layered package of counseling services for students at risk for dropping out is a good example of the kinds of counseling approaches LEAs across the state are taking. Each high school counselor in Durham is responsible for working with some of his or her school’s population of students at risk for dropping out.⁵⁸ Some of the training these counselors receive includes suicide intervention training and emotional response training.

Each fall, social workers and guidance counselors in Durham work together to locate missing students who should have reported to school but have not yet done so. Social workers make home and neighborhood visits, too, and the school system will make similar efforts every quarter. In addition, Durham hosts “Transitions to Opportunities Days” programs throughout the year, during which the system attempts to re-enroll recent dropouts. While the mission is to get these students to come



back to school, representatives from other organizations like Job Corps and Durham Technical Community College's GED program are also on hand.

In 2004–05, Durham introduced a new wrinkle to its dropout prevention efforts when it adopted the System of Care approach to intervention, a process that the Durham County Mental Health Unit uses to help children with mental health issues. System of Care works by bringing together people in the community who form teams to aid families. Durham adapted it specifically for students who have been suspended 10 or more days and who exhibit additional dropout risk factors. Each student has a child and family team made up of significant adults in a student's life who make plans for the student. "This is a real paradigm shift for a lot of our counselors," says Elizabeth Feifs, Durham's former executive director for Student Services. "The counselors are used to seeing kids who come to them, but now counselors will seek out students at risk. These are not the kids who typically go to the counselors on their own."

Extracurricular Offerings

Gray, a long-time basketball coach, believes that extracurricular activities may be the key to retaining some students, but he is frustrated that guidelines sometimes prevent the students who need them most from participating. "Getting more kids involved in extracurricular activities would be another way to keep them here, but at the same time, we are trying to maintain these high academic standards, and then students end up being ineligible for programs that might keep them in school, that might hook them." To counter this dilemma, some

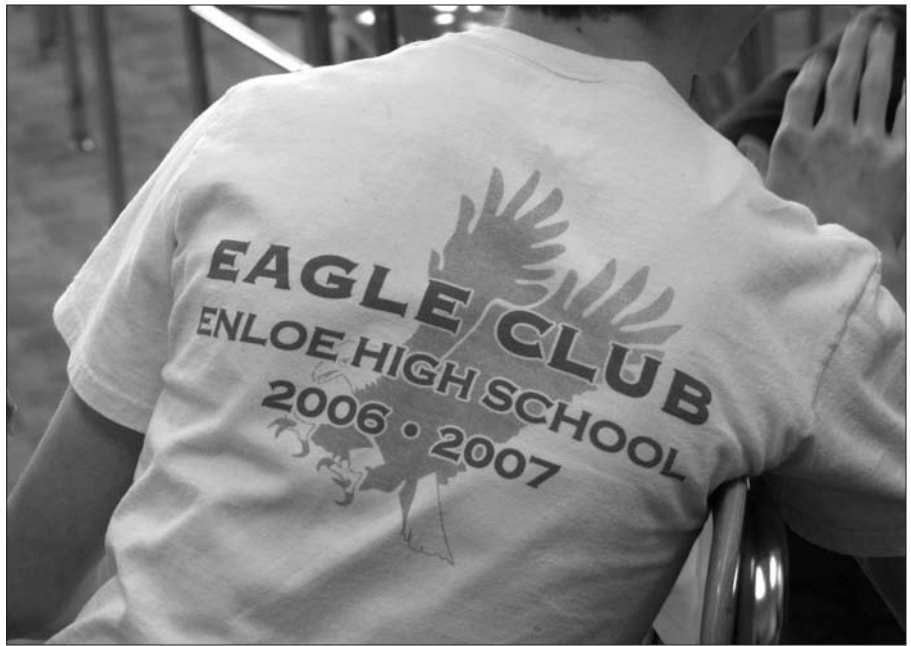
LEAs promote special extracurricular offerings designed specifically to reach at-risk students. One of the most extensive efforts is in New Hanover County, where the school system provides a wide menu of non-traditional school opportunities, some of which help with dropout prevention. One such program is the New Hanover County Schools BRIDGE Lacrosse Program. BRIDGE—*B*uilding *R*elationships to *I*nitiate *D*iversity, *G*rowth, and *E*nrichment—is an initia-

tive of U.S. Lacrosse (the sport's national governing body) that originated in the mid-1980s when Baltimore was looking for ways to reduce teen delinquency in the inner city. The idea has since spread to places like New Hanover County. "We identify and recruit kids who come from all walks of life, not just your [traditional] athlete, and basically we get them involved in the sport of lacrosse as well as in learning life skills, tutoring, and in being a part of a team," says Don Oesterbo, an experiential learning coordinator for New Hanover Schools. Teams also participate in enrichment activities such as outdoor challenge courses that help the students to learn how to work together, service-learning projects, and diversity dialogues.

BRIDGE started as a small effort focused on middle school boys in 1991, but by 2004–05, there were more than 350 male and female participants county-wide. Part of the program's appeal may be that, unlike so many other school-sanctioned sports, BRIDGE does not eliminate students because of low grades. Those students are instead allowed to participate and are simultaneously provided with the help they need to bring their grades up. Wins and losses are not the main focus, according to Oesterbo. "Our main goal is to provide positive youth development through lacrosse, enrichment programs, and tutoring at least once a week," he says.

New Hanover also offers several experiential learning programs to promote positive youth development. Some of these programs identify kids in the 4th and 5th grades





who already are showing the behaviors or classroom struggles that indicate disconnection from school. These programs focus on life skills such as behavior management, healthy lifestyles, and teamwork.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Alternative Schools

Alternative schools are now in operation in almost 40 percent of school districts across the country. In the Southeast, about 80 percent of all LEAs offer at least one alternative school. Overall, these schools serve only 1.3 percent of the school population, but around one-third of them are filled to capacity.⁵⁹

In North Carolina, the alternative school population jumped 31 percent between 1996 and 2000.⁶⁰ In this state, an alternative school is any public school that “addresses the needs of students which typically cannot be met in a regular school, even with special education programs; provides nontraditional education curriculum and instruction; serves as an adjunct to a regular school or is independently organized; and falls outside of the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education,” according to the N.C. Department of Public Instruction. Students are often referred to alternative schools for many of the same reasons that lead to dropping out, like behavior problems or special personal issues (such as pregnancy) that might otherwise prevent completion of schooling.

Unfortunately, the success of alternative schools at retaining students who would otherwise have dropped out is not yet fully studied,⁶¹ and determining program effectiveness will be difficult because of the vastly different structures among these schools. In addition, the National Center for Education Statistics reports that fully 16 percent of all staff assigned to alternative schools are assigned involuntarily, the highest such rate among all types of schools nationally.⁶² Generating staff commitment and an atmosphere of community are hard to achieve when the staff itself does not want to be there.

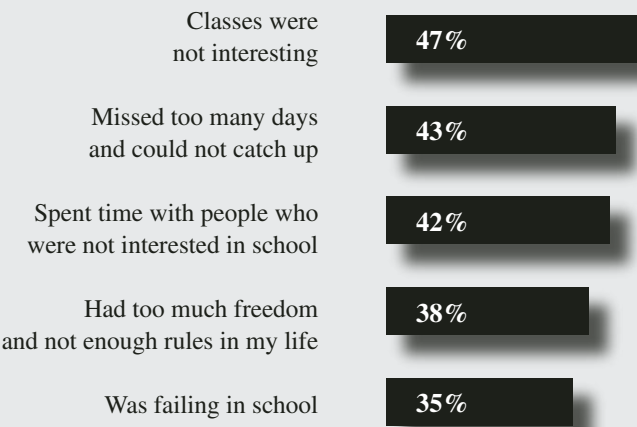
Eckerd Therapeutic Camps

While many school systems offer alternative school options, there also are several state-approved third-party programs. Some of the most well-established in the state are operated by Eckerd Youth Alternatives (EYA) of Clearwater, Florida, which has supported a variety of intervention programs for at-risk youth since 1968. EYA operates seven Eckerd Therapeutic Camps in North Carolina, each with a regional draw, that provide outdoor therapeutic treatment for almost 1,000 students a year.⁶³ These programs are formally recognized by the N.C. Department of Public Instruction as alternative education settings, and participants are not counted as dropouts.⁶⁴ In fact, during the 2002–03 school year, Eckerd served more than 400 students in North Carolina whose enrollment was fully funded by the state. Most of those students were behind in school by more than one year, and more than half of them had criminal records. Nearly 77 percent of these participants completed the program, and their average stay was just under eleven months. Among program completers, reading and math gains were modest—1.3 and 0.9 grade levels, respectively—but they were strong relative to traditional-school achievement gains for the students the program serves. In follow-ups with program completers, almost 80 percent were still enrolled in school and an additional 8 percent were gainfully employed a year after leaving the program.⁶⁵

Futures for Kids Program

Another program with ambitions to provide services statewide is the Futures for Kids program. In collaboration with more than 30 North Carolina business and industry leaders, the program attempts to inform students about opportunities that await them if they complete school. “Studies show that one of the primary reasons students do not complete high school is a lack of career direction and perceived opportunities” says Susan Milliken, a business development representative in the (continues)

**Top Five Reasons Dropouts Identify as
Majors Factors for Leaving School**



Source: John M. Bridgeland, John J. DiIulio, Jr. and Karen Burke Morison, “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts,” Civic Enterprise in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Washington, D.C., March 2006, p. 3.

program's Raleigh office.⁶⁶ Through videos, on-line career interest assessments, and other tools, the program attempts to match students with future opportunities in the workplace.

A study by Civic Enterprises, a Washington, D.C., public policy think tank, supports the notion that students who drop out lack direction and focus. That study found boredom and lack of motivation to be greater contributors to students' decision to drop out of school than fear of academic failure.⁶⁷ Indeed, 70 percent of students who dropped out expressed confidence they could have done the work needed to graduate if they had put in the necessary effort. Students cited opportunities for real world learning that would make the classroom more relevant, including internships and service learning, as a primary improvement that could be made to encourage them to stay in school.⁶⁸ (See "Why They Quit," pp. 110–111, for more on this study.)

Middle College Programs

Several LEAs across the state are experimenting with Middle College programs, which are high school programs housed at local colleges and universities. For potential dropouts, these programs provide exposure to a wider variety of vocational courses, opportunities to earn college credits before graduation, and flexible schedules that may help alleviate some of the "push" and "pull" pressure to leave school that these students often feel. With enough initiative and support, students in these programs can even earn associate's degrees or industry certification along with their high school diplomas.

While dropout prevention is not an exclusive focus of these programs, their alternate settings and schedules make them ideal for certain students in the dropout population. Also, Middle Colleges typically are smaller than regular high schools, so students have the opportunity to benefit from more individualized attention from teachers and counselors. "The amazing thing is that, due to the school's size, which



is usually 100–135 students, the students who may not have been successful in traditional high schools now are happy that everyone knows their name,” says Anne Murr, instructional improvement officer for Guilford County, which operates several Middle College schools.

Charles Nolan, principal of a new Middle College high school housed at Durham Technical Community College—the product of a partnership between the Durham, Orange, and Chapel Hill-Carrboro school systems—believes that one of the strengths of the Middle College program is that it has the potential to reach a group of students at risk of dropping out that does not often get addressed. “The students that Middle College is going to attract are students for whom the traditional approach to high school—the big box school—isn’t working, but who are still very bright. [Middle College] is for a different kind of student—a student who doesn’t fit in at the traditional high school but who can still do the work.”

The most complex and fully-developed offering of Middle College programs is in Guilford County, which has six Middle College programs open on local campuses in 2006–07, each one with a different subject focus. The motivation to provide so many Middle Colleges, says Murr, is simple: “[We are] trying to really connect them with a potential career or goal that makes sense to them, and the school size, the small classes, the connection with the college campuses really makes it almost like magic.”

Middle College is the kind of program that might have prevented Jon, who is now enrolled in a completion program and has an eye on a career in real estate, from dropping out at the end of the eleventh grade. “[I] didn’t know what I wanted to do for myself,” says Jon of his high school experience. He says he might have benefitted from having more time and flexibility to figure out career options.

Guilford County and the Durham-Orange area are not alone in experimenting with Middle College programs. Early college programs are also on the rise, and there were 13 such programs in operation across the state during the 2005–06 school year, and 33 are in operations for 2006–07.⁶⁹ “There are many ways to educate our students to become productive citizens, and the traditional K–12 model is only one of them,” says Nolan. “It is time to start looking at our schools in more innovative ways, and that may mean creating some type of hybrid between high school and college, which is exactly what Middle College is.”

As yet, there is limited research-based information on the impact of middle colleges and other credit-based transition programs, and information about programs that recruit students with a broad range of abilities is even scarcer. In addition, most programs have yet to implement systematic data collection procedures. Nevertheless, some early studies of Middle College programs suggest that participating students who are identified as being at risk for school failure generally perform better on average than do their counterparts in other alternative education settings, with both higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates.⁷⁰ There also is some indication that one of the benefits to participants is an increase in confidence in personal academic ability.⁷¹ More recent studies have generated less clear and less positive results, however,⁷² with one potential problem being that some programs fail to recruit and retain an academically and socio-economically diverse student body.⁷³

*But Johnny can't read
Summer is over and he's gone to seed
You know that Johnny can't read
He never learned nothin' that he'll ever need—*

*Well, is it Teacher's fault? Oh no
Is it Mommie's fault? Oh no
Is it Society's fault? Oh no
Well, is it Johnny's fault? Oh no
...*

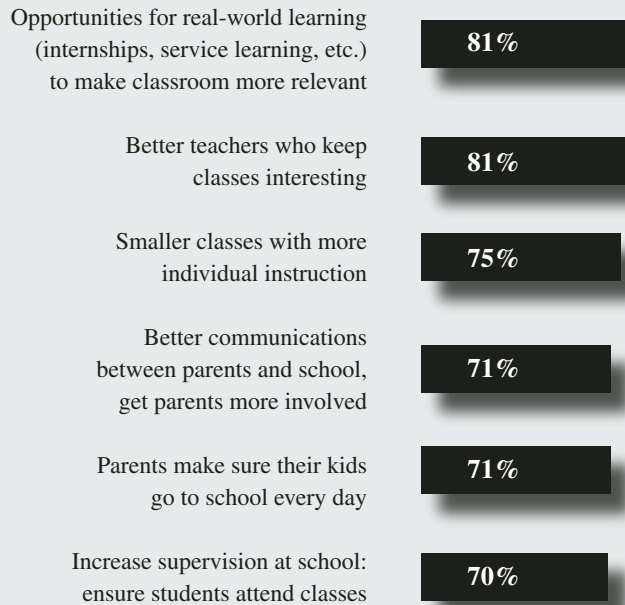
*Is it the President's fault? Oh no
Well, is it Johnny's fault? Oh no!*

—DON HENLEY AND DANNY KORTCHMAR

“JOHNNY CAN’T READ”

What Dropouts Believe Would Improve Students' Chances

This would improve students' chances of staying in school



Source: John M. Bridgeland, John J. DiIulio, Jr. and Karen Burke Morison, "The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts," Civic Enterprise in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Washington, D.C., March 2006, p. 13.

SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING EFFORTS

Smaller Schools Initiative

As part of the state's New Schools Project, smaller schools and schools-within-schools (fully-functioning schools with small student populations that operate within the context of a larger "parent" school) are gaining momentum in North Carolina as one means of reducing the number of students dropping out of school. Governor Mike Easley has been a strong proponent of the New Schools movement, along with Learn and Earn Early College, and restructuring of low-performing high schools, all of which are expected to play a role in reducing dropout rates. An Easley administration spokesperson says dropout rates are a problem for all racial and ethnic groups, and the shrinking pool of low-skills jobs makes completing high school essential. In bygone days, there may have been a job waiting in a textile or furniture factory for a young person who failed to finish school.

Small size is a factor in several of the characteristics associated with schools that are successful at reducing their numbers of dropouts,⁷⁴ in part because it can help to reduce the anonymity that often haunts the typical high school student. Gray of Garner High School has seen that problem grow as the population of Wake County has grown. "How can we relate to these kids now?" asks Gray. "Schools have gotten so large, and I think the small schools movement is one approach to addressing this problem."

One major component in making small schools a reality across the state has been substantial support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation,⁷⁵ and the legislature also may play a continuing role in the support of these efforts. One component of state Senate Bill 1057, enacted as the Education Improvement Act of 2005,⁷⁶ helps to expand small school opportunities across the state by providing pilot money for the development of 11 small specialty high schools within existing schools. Not surprisingly, one of the hoped-for outcomes of these pilot schools listed in the bill is improved graduation rates. Communities in Schools' Linda Harrill says that her organization already is involved in a Gates-funded small schools effort. "One of the newest things we are doing is we are working on creating some new small high schools focused on students 16 and older who come into the 9th grade academically challenged but who could do the work if they were in smaller environments," says Harrill. CIS, in partnership with the Charlotte/Mecklenburg Public School System, opened one small high school in Charlotte in the fall of 2006 modeled after a CIS/Gates Foundation small-schools effort in Georgia, and Harrill hopes CIS will be able to open at least 12 more over the next two to three years.

Block Scheduling

Another important school restructuring effort happening statewide is the rapid switch to block scheduling. A majority of the secondary schools in the state now operate on a block schedule, and while there is much debate about the academic merits of block scheduling, most scheduling variations result in additional opportunities for students to earn credits, which is a key ingredient in reducing the number of students who drop out. For example, schools on a block schedule with four complete classes per semester (commonly referred to as a 4x4 schedule) will be able to schedule two more classes a year than they would be able to under a traditional full-year six-course schedule. In practical terms, this means that a student who fails a core required course (like English or math) in the first semester will be able to take it again in the second semester without having to resort to summer school or repeating a grade.

OTHER SIGNIFICANT PROGRAMS AND CHANGES

Restrictions on Driver's Licensure

The reasons that students drop out extend beyond school boundaries, and in North Carolina not all dropout prevention policies are limited to schools' sphere of influence. Since August 1998, obtaining and keeping a driver's license in North Carolina has carried with it not only an "evidence of adequate progress in school" standard but also a truancy limitation. Unlicensed teens who are guilty of truancy are prohibited from



applying for a license for 90 days, and two-time offenders must wait an additional six months to apply.⁷⁷ Licensed teens also can have their license revoked if they are unable to maintain adequate academic progress or if they drop out of school.⁷⁸

Student Information Management

For many years, the greatest block to generating accurate data on dropouts has been the inability to track all students who move across state lines or even between school systems. For in-state student transfers, this tracking problem has persisted in part because the state did not require school systems to assign unique identifying numbers to students. While most school systems use Social Security numbers to identify students, others—including Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the state's largest school district—use their own unique numbering system. Still other school systems change student numbers when students change schools, and some school systems even re-use numbers once students leave a system. All of this has led to a situation in which neither the state nor a local school system can match specific data to specific students reliably statewide.

That problem may disappear in North Carolina by the end of the 2007–08 school year. By that time, according to Bob Bellamy, former Associate Superintendent for Technology Services at the N.C. Department of Public Instruction, all LEAs should be using a new student information software package called N.C. WISE (North Carolina Windows of Information on Student Education). Statewide implementation of N.C. WISE has been delayed for years because of disputes with the developer, IBM Corporation, but the state now has canceled the partnership and will see the project to completion on its own with the assistance of smaller vendors operating under more specific, performance-based contracts. About one-third of the state's 115 local education agencies already are using the system, and DPI is aiming to implement the information management system statewide by fiscal year 2008. Not only will this system



be a dramatic improvement over its predecessor, but it also will ensure that every student in North Carolina has an identifying number. “We are building a unique student ID system into N.C. WISE that will be in place in all schools by the end of the rollout,” says Bellamy. The numbers will be assigned by the system and not by the LEAs, and they will replace current student ID numbers.

“There are some folks who would very much like to use Social Security numbers because they are already out there, but we only have a Social Security number on about 80 percent of the kids,” Bellamy says. By federal law, families are not required to provide Social Security numbers to the schools, and illegal immigrants do not have Social Security numbers, but new federal reporting requirements have made it necessary for states to create unique statewide numbering systems. Even though the requirement means added expense for the state, it also means that the goal of school officials and researchers alike—tracking students when they move across state lines—is no longer as far off as it once seemed.

Have you ever really had a teacher? One who saw you as a raw but precious thing, a jewel that, with wisdom, could be polished to a proud shine? If you are lucky enough to find your way to such teachers, you will always find your way back.

—MITCH ALBOM

TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE

Caring Leadership that Makes Dropout Prevention a Priority

A less formal but no less effective means of preventing students from dropping out may be school leadership that places a priority on keeping children in school. One school system that is being aggressive in this regard is the Henderson County Public Schools, where Superintendent Steve Page is committed to and involved in addressing the problem. Among other tactics, he has posted on the wall of his office the picture, name, and school of high school dropouts. One by one, school officials try to find these young people, interview them, find out why they dropped out, and make a plan with them to get them back in school.

Cautions About Successfully Addressing the Dropout Problem Through Current Programs

With so many programs in place across the state, why does the dropout problem persist? It is important to remember that the dropout problem, like most other social problems, is not an isolated event but is instead a symptom of much larger school and societal problems—some of the “push” and “pull” factors described earlier—that may not be completely or even partially addressed by any single program or even by an entire school system. Significant dropout prevention is only likely to come about as a result of much broader societal changes.

Also, a program targeted at one group of students may not have a similar effect on another group. For example, a program aimed at potential Hispanic dropouts with an emphasis on balancing competing work and school demands is less likely to have an impact on African-American dropouts, who cite work-related reasons for dropout with much less frequency than do their Hispanic peers (13.5 percent versus 3.9 percent, respectively, in 2005–06; see Table 8). Since, as one report put it, “there is not one right way to intervene,”⁷⁹ North Carolina should continue to offer a variety of interventions. Furthermore, dropout prevention specialists should remember that the dropout problem is in a constant state of change. For example, in past decades the typical dropout nationally was an 11th or 12th grader, but now he or she is in 9th or 10th grade,⁸⁰ meaning that the typical dropout is now not only younger but also less well-educated.

Finally, there is some evidence that efforts to identify and prevent potential dropouts from dropping out of school ultimately are inefficient in that they often fail to identify a majority of the students who would actually drop out without intervention. In a 2002 article, Philip Gleason and Mark Dynarski of (continued on page 128)

Table 11. Dropout Events and Dropout Rates in Grades 9 through 12,

LEA #	School System or Charter School	1999–00		2000–01		2001–02		
		#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	
School System								
010	Alamance-Burlington Schools	436	7.3	379	6.1	341	5.3	
020	Alexander County Schools	104	6.8	85	5.4	124	7.8	
030	Alleghany County Schools	28	6.3	15	3.6	13	3.2	
040	Anson County Schools	119	9.1	84	6.6	78	6.1	
050	Ashe County Schools	84	7.9	53	5.2	62	6.2	
060	Avery County Schools	54	7.7	32	4.7	26	3.9	
070	Beaufort County Schools	154	7.0	145	6.6	152	6.7	
080	Bertie County Schools	70	6.0	69	6.0	56	5.1	
090	Bladen County Schools	75	4.6	76	4.8	64	4.1	
100	Brunswick County Schools	253	8.5	211	7.0	265	8.5	
110	Buncombe County Schools	537	7.2	443	5.9	465	6.1	
111	Asheville City Schools	75	5.6	67	5.0	61	4.6	
120	Burke County Schools	289	7.3	221	5.4	191	4.5	
130	Cabarrus County Schools	305	5.5	270	4.7	290	4.7	
132	Kannapolis City Schools	73	6.2	59	4.8	65	5.2	
140	Caldwell County Schools	227	6.4	216	6.1	176	4.8	
150	Camden County Schools	38	9.0	28	6.4	23	5.1	
160	Carteret County Schools	176	6.3	149	5.4	119	4.4	
170	Caswell County Schools	81	7.5	40	3.7	55	5.0	
180	Catawba County Schools	286	6.0	268	5.5	190	3.9	
181	Hickory City Schools	138	10.5	122	8.9	80	5.9	
182	Newton Conover City Schools	23	2.9	32	3.9	23	2.9	
190	Chatham County Schools	157	7.9	157	7.7	126	6.0	
200	Cherokee County Schools	60	5.5	61	5.6	37	3.4	
210	Edenton/Chowan Schools	43	5.3	35	4.4	39	4.8	
220	Clay County Schools	36	7.9	25	5.9	10	2.5	
230	Cleveland County Schools	136	5.5	144	5.6	114	4.4	
240	Columbus County Schools	175	7.5	146	6.5	157	7.0	
241	Whiteville City Schools	51	6.1	44	5.2	47	5.4	
250	Craven County Schools	288	6.6	294	6.8	250	5.8	
260	Cumberland County Schools	765	5.1	708	4.6	656	4.1	

Excluding Expulsions, for All 100 Counties in North Carolina

	2002–03		2003–04		2004–05		2005–06		LEA
	#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	#
	370	5.4	361	5.1	390	5.4	407	5.6	010
	91	5.7	82	5.0	78	4.7	89	5.2	020
	15	3.5	17	3.9	25	5.4	13	2.7	030
	88	6.6	71	5.3	74	5.4	89	6.5	040
	50	4.9	50	4.9	44	4.3	40	3.8	050
	27	4.0	35	5.0	40	5.6	38	5.2	060
	112	4.9	125	5.4	163	6.8	134	5.7	070
	57	5.2	58	5.2	48	4.3	46	4.3	080
	99	6.0	94	5.5	102	5.7	106	5.8	090
	193	6.2	169	5.2	206	6.0	205	5.7	100
	386	5.0	423	5.3	423	5.2	442	5.4	110
	60	4.6	54	4.1	75	5.6	67	5.0	111
	230	5.2	198	4.4	329	6.9	276	5.9	120
	269	4.2	273	4.1	375	5.2	382	5.0	130
	56	4.4	72	5.3	82	5.9	91	6.6	132
	150	4.0	260	6.5	279	6.8	190	4.6	140
	23	4.9	19	3.9	20	3.8	27	4.9	150
	137	5.0	145	5.2	97	3.5	127	4.5	160
	78	6.9	93	8.3	64	6.0	56	5.1	170
	246	4.8	208	4.0	195	3.7	218	4.0	180
	91	6.3	126	8.2	111	7.3	100	6.6	181
	27	3.2	26	2.9	29	3.1	21	2.3	182
	105	4.7	124	5.3	108	4.5	90	3.7	190
	61	5.3	55	4.8	52	4.6	60	5.1	200
	41	5.0	40	5.0	37	4.7	29	3.5	210
	8	2.0	7	1.7	12	2.9	22	4.9	220
	117	4.2	112	2.8	304	5.6	381	6.8	230
	106	4.8	105	4.8	115	5.3	119	5.4	240
	36	4.2	46	5.3	39	4.8	38	4.8	241
	236	5.5	204	4.7	240	5.4	239	5.3	250
	628	3.8	619	3.7	556	3.3	618	3.6	260

(continues)

Table 11. Dropout Events and Dropout Rates in Grades 9 through 12,

LEA #	School System or Charter School	1999–00		2000–01		2001–02		
		#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	
270	Currituck County Schools	89	8.7	58	5.7	58	5.5	
280	Dare County Schools	82	5.9	103	7.2	76	5.3	
290	Davidson County Schools	314	5.5	392	6.8	320	5.6	
291	Lexington City Schools	60	7.2	73	8.7	59	7.1	
292	Thomasville City Schools	33	6.0	27	4.7	21	3.4	
300	Davie County Schools	90	5.7	85	5.2	110	6.5	
310	Duplin County Schools	126	5.3	160	6.5	133	5.5	
320	Durham Public Schools	502	6.1	391	4.6	548	6.2	
330	Edgecombe County Schools	201	8.6	181	7.9	132	5.8	
340	Forsyth County Schools	813	6.4	719	5.5	786	5.8	
350	Franklin County Schools	188	8.9	135	6.4	136	6.1	
360	Gaston County Schools	674	7.5	606	6.6	548	5.8	
370	Gates County Schools	50	7.5	33	5.1	33	5.1	
380	Graham County Schools	19	5.9	27	7.9	24	7.1	
390	Granville County Schools	174	8.2	137	6.2	190	8.0	
400	Greene County Schools	68	7.3	68	7.3	54	5.9	
410	Guilford County Schools	1,070	6.0	710	3.9	719	3.8	
420	Halifax County Schools	133	7.3	110	6.3	115	6.5	
421	Roanoke Rapids City Schools	47	5.3	57	6.1	61	6.5	
422	Weldon City Schools	15	4.9	13	4.4	20	6.4	
430	Harnett County Schools	352	7.8	340	7.3	326	6.8	
440	Haywood County Schools	142	6.2	148	6.4	170	7.1	
450	Henderson County Schools	204	5.7	197	5.4	211	5.7	
460	Hertford County Schools	109	8.0	65	5.1	87	6.8	
470	Hoke County Schools	159	9.5	138	8.3	130	7.7	
480	Hyde County Schools	28	12.4	7	3.6	7	3.5	
490	Iredell-Statesville Schools	326	6.9	310	6.3	274	5.3	
491	Mooresville City Schools	58	4.9	80	6.3	54	4.3	
500	Jackson County Schools	67	5.8	63	5.4	55	4.8	
510	Johnston County Schools	336	6.4	333	6.0	344	5.8	

Excluding Expulsions, for All 100 Counties in North Carolina, *continued*

	2002–03		2003–04		2004–05		2005–06		LEA
	#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	#
	46	4.2	71	6.0	74	5.8	61	4.7	270
	64	4.3	41	2.6	46	2.8	54	3.3	280
	287	5.0	266	4.5	299	4.9	376	5.8	290
	61	7.2	60	7.1	55	6.5	47	5.6	291
	27	4.1	27	3.9	29	4.0	29	3.8	292
	85	5.1	84	4.9	68	3.7	100	5.2	300
	108	4.4	140	5.5	134	5.2	150	5.8	310
	534	5.8	572	5.9	566	5.7	520	5.2	320
	162	6.8	151	6.3	144	6.0	181	7.3	330
	747	5.3	756	5.2	760	5.0	919	5.7	340
	140	6.1	145	6.2	110	4.6	150	6.0	350
	551	5.7	490	4.9	531	5.1	588	5.5	360
	29	4.3	40	5.8	29	4.2	26	3.7	370
	18	5.1	16	4.2	24	6.3	16	4.5	380
	124	5.1	104	4.1	144	5.4	189	6.6	390
	49	5.3	71	7.6	60	6.4	62	6.3	400
	588	3.0	639	3.1	644	3.0	766	3.4	410
	91	5.3	71	4.3	106	6.4	78	4.8	420
	50	5.5	59	6.3	62	6.5	68	7.0	421
	16	5.0	17	5.1	16	4.8	14	4.1	422
	311	6.4	274	5.5	305	5.8	347	6.3	430
	150	6.2	187	7.5	176	7.1	150	6.0	440
	196	5.2	214	5.5	137	3.5	156	3.9	450
	76	6.2	50	4.4	64	5.5	68	5.8	460
	143	8.4	110	6.4	111	6.1	118	6.4	470
	6	2.9	12	5.5	1	0.5	7	3.2	480
	277	5.0	273	4.7	260	4.3	257	4.0	490
	50	3.9	56	4.2	63	4.4	87	5.6	491
	65	5.7	70	6.0	90	7.5	79	6.7	500
	337	5.3	339	5.0	325	4.5	404	5.1	510

(continues)

Table 11. Dropout Events and Dropout Rates in Grades 9 through 12,

LEA #	School System or Charter School	1999–00		2000–01		2001–02		
		#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	
520	Jones County Schools	24	5.7	23	5.7	26	6.4	
530	Lee County Schools	166	6.7	207	8.1	190	7.3	
540	Lenoir County Schools	234	7.6	195	6.4	186	6.1	
550	Lincoln County Schools	247	7.6	178	5.4	180	5.3	
560	Macon County Schools	89	7.0	82	6.4	78	5.9	
570	Madison County Schools	37	5.1	47	6.4	33	4.5	
580	Martin County Schools	107	7.3	82	5.9	84	6.0	
590	McDowell County Schools	132	7.2	128	7.2	64	3.6	
600	Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools	1,981	6.8	1,729	5.8	1,479	4.8	
610	Mitchell County Schools	25	3.4	23	3.2	50	6.6	
620	Montgomery County Schools	109	8.1	75	5.9	81	6.4	
630	Moore County Schools	168	5.2	162	4.8	107	3.1	
640	Nash-Rocky Mount Schools	399	7.7	370	7.2	294	5.6	
650	New Hanover County Schools	390	5.8	369	5.5	338	5.0	
660	Northampton County Schools	83	7.4	70	6.5	60	5.7	
670	Onslow County Schools	429	6.7	355	5.6	339	5.3	
680	Orange County Schools	82	4.7	94	5.2	80	4.2	
681	Chapel Hill-Carrboro Schools	32	1.2	57	1.9	41	1.3	
690	Pamlico County Schools	34	5.0	27	4.1	33	5.0	
700	Pasquotank County Schools	124	6.9	132	7.2	125	6.6	
710	Pender County Schools	142	7.6	93	5.1	133	6.7	
720	Perquimans County Schools	52	8.6	43	7.4	32	5.5	
730	Person County Schools	103	6.3	113	6.9	92	5.5	
740	Pitt County Schools	433	7.4	422	7.1	405	6.6	
750	Polk County Schools	19	3.0	27	4.0	35	5.1	
760	Randolph County Schools	385	8.1	289	6.0	300	5.9	
761	Asheboro City Schools	83	7.6	84	7.3	72	5.9	
770	Richmond County Schools	151	6.7	141	6.3	119	5.3	
780	Robeson County Schools	719	10.2	758	10.7	535	7.7	
790	Rockingham County Schools	228	5.5	252	6.0	240	5.5	

Excluding Expulsions, for All 100 Counties in North Carolina, *continued*

	2002–03		2003–04		2004–05		2005–06		LEA
	#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	#
	17	4.2	15	3.8	36	8.6	19	4.7	520
	161	6.0	163	5.9	207	7.2	230	7.8	530
	165	5.4	184	5.9	179	5.7	246	7.4	540
	177	5.0	177	4.8	166	4.3	235	5.9	550
	77	5.8	85	6.4	79	6.0	90	6.6	560
	39	5.1	35	4.3	44	5.2	34	4.0	570
	64	4.6	86	6.0	85	6.0	73	5.4	580
	98	5.2	131	6.6	157	7.6	127	6.3	590
	1,301	4.0	1,528	4.5	1,108	3.1	1,724	4.6	600
	44	5.8	41	5.4	36	4.8	40	5.4	610
	47	3.7	63	4.7	64	4.6	72	5.1	620
	92	2.6	125	3.3	101	2.6	181	4.6	630
	326	6.0	329	5.9	349	6.1	411	7.1	640
	354	5.0	398	5.4	414	5.4	306	4.0	650
	65	6.0	54	4.9	59	5.3	87	8.0	660
	294	4.5	293	4.4	313	4.6	329	4.7	670
	116	5.8	95	4.6	109	4.9	98	4.3	680
	33	1.0	43	1.2	54	1.5	57	1.6	681
	37	5.3	40	5.6	34	4.9	44	6.3	690
	129	6.5	119	5.9	112	5.5	118	5.8	700
	106	5.1	141	6.5	107	4.7	145	6.0	710
	32	5.2	46	7.3	36	5.9	47	7.8	720
	73	4.2	84	4.6	99	5.3	89	4.8	730
	436	6.8	464	7.0	454	6.6	417	5.9	740
	30	4.3	20	2.8	48	6.2	36	4.6	750
	341	6.5	341	6.3	313	5.6	342	5.9	760
	93	7.1	71	5.3	66	4.8	53	3.9	761
	85	3.7	114	4.9	108	4.5	120	4.9	770
	597	8.4	586	8.2	525	7.3	548	7.5	780
	237	5.3	247	5.3	301	6.3	304	6.5	790

(continues)

Table 11. Dropout Events and Dropout Rates in Grades 9 through 12,

LEA #	School System or Charter School	1999–00		2000–01		2001–02		
		#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	
800	Rowan-Salisbury Schools	398	6.6	343	5.6	319	5.0	
810	Rutherford County Schools	270	9.2	227	7.9	216	7.4	
820	Sampson County Schools	78	3.8	102	4.9	95	4.5	
821	Clinton City Schools	56	7.2	43	5.7	38	5.0	
830	Scotland County Schools	159	7.9	130	6.5	82	4.2	
840	Stanly County Schools	149	4.9	132	4.4	104	3.4	
850	Stokes County Schools	144	6.5	113	5.1	113	5.0	
860	Surry County Schools	162	6.8	153	6.4	126	5.3	
861	Elkin City Schools	6	2.0	13	4.1	11	3.4	
862	Mount Airy City Schools	14	2.6	29	5.2	16	2.8	
870	Swain County Schools	33	6.1	38	6.9	20	3.7	
880	Transylvania County Schools	83	6.4	83	6.4	60	4.7	
890	Tyrrell County Schools	4	1.6	14	5.6	8	3.3	
900	Union County Schools	326	5.4	278	4.4	327	4.8	
910	Vance County Schools	178	8.8	143	6.8	191	8.5	
920	Wake County Schools	1,097	4.1	1,024	3.7	1,020	3.5	
930	Warren County Schools	112	11.0	85	8.6	70	6.9	
940	Washington County Schools	28	3.9	38	5.4	44	6.4	
950	Watauga County Schools	98	6.0	76	4.7	93	5.7	
960	Wayne County Schools	281	4.9	292	5.1	260	4.5	
970	Wilkes County Schools	205	6.7	202	6.4	251	7.9	
980	Wilson County Schools	285	7.9	255	7.2	220	6.2	
990	Yadkin County Schools	91	5.4	113	6.5	100	5.7	
995	Yancey County Schools	44	6.0	42	5.5	34	4.5	
999	NORTH CAROLINA ^a	23,597	6.4	21,368	5.7	20,202	5.3	

^a Including Charter Schools

Sources: N.C. Department of Public Instruction, School Improvement Division, <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/schoolimprovement/effective/dropout/>, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2007). Annual Report on Dropout Events and Rates. Report to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee. February 2007.

Excluding Expulsions, for All 100 Counties in North Carolina, *continued*

	2002–03		2003–04		2004–05		2005–06		LEA
	#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	#
	341	5.2	389	5.8	374	5.5	300	4.4	800
	155	5.2	153	5.0	151	4.8	193	5.9	810
	86	3.9	130	5.6	145	6.1	160	6.8	820
	20	2.6	46	5.5	51	5.8	48	5.0	821
	83	4.3	93	4.7	91	4.6	97	4.7	830
	102	3.3	123	3.9	104	3.3	127	4.0	840
	120	5.2	122	5.3	117	5.0	135	5.6	850
	104	4.2	124	4.7	138	5.0	162	5.8	860
	6	1.8	14	3.8	10	2.6	15	3.8	861
	16	2.8	8	1.4	19	3.1	18	2.8	862
	32	5.6	55	9.0	43	7.0	37	5.7	870
	71	5.5	74	5.7	55	4.3	65	5.0	880
	7	2.9	20	8.1	14	6.0	17	7.6	890
	330	4.4	283	3.5	322	3.7	389	4.1	900
	144	6.3	161	6.7	192	7.5	217	8.3	910
	791	2.6	1,130	3.5	1,274	3.7	1,437	3.9	920
	59	5.6	56	5.2	55	5.1	39	3.8	930
	32	4.9	35	5.5	17	2.6	28	4.2	940
	65	4.1	67	4.3	51	3.3	76	4.8	950
	248	4.3	317	5.4	304	5.1	344	5.7	960
	199	6.4	224	7.2	223	7.1	189	6.1	970
	222	6.1	193	5.2	229	6.0	258	6.7	980
	92	5.1	89	4.8	76	4.0	89	4.6	990
	30	3.8	38	4.7	50	6.0	36	4.3	995
	18,964	4.8	20,035	4.9	20,175	4.7	22,180	5.0	999

(continues)

Table 11. Dropout Events and Dropout Rates in Grades 9 through 12,

LEA #	School System or Charter School	1999–00		2000–01		2001–02		
		#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	
Charter Schools								
01A	Lakeside School	NA	NA	NA	NA	2	6.5	
01B	River Mill Academy	NA	NA	3	4.1	7	9.0	
01C	Clover Garden	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0.0	
01D	New Century Charter High	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
06A	Grandfather Academy	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0.0	
06B	Crossnore Academy	5	16.9	5	16.1	3	8.3	
16A	Cape Lookout Marine Science High	37	26.7	36	26.1	NA	NA	
19B	Woods Charter	NA	NA	4	7.2	10	13.3	
32D	Kestrel Heights School	NA	NA	5	9.4	7	13.0	
32J	Ann Atwater Community	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
34D	C G Woodson School of Challenge	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
36B	Piedmont Community Charter	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0.0	
41C	Guilford Preparatory	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0.0	
53A	Provisions Academy	NA	NA	NA	NA	8	22.9	
55A	Lincoln Charter	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0.0	
60C	Kennedy Charter	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
60H	Crossroads Charter High	NA	NA	NA	NA	99	29.8	
64A	Rocky Mount Preparatory	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0.0	
66A	Gaston College Preparatory	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
68N	Pace Academy	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
81A	Thomas Jefferson Class Academy	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0.0	
83A	Laurinburg Charter	NA	NA	51	29.3	30	16.4	
83B	The Laurinburg Homework Center	NA	NA	8	13.2	3	4.5	
84B	Gray Stone Day	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
90A	Union Academy	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
92C	Baker Charter High	33	49.2	31	44.9	28	41.2	
92F	Franklin Academy	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0.0	
92G	East Wake Academy	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0.0	
92K	Raleigh Charter High	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
92P	Community Partners Charter H.S.	NA	NA	NA	NA	7	5.4	
93A	Haliwa-Saponi Tribal School	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0.0	
95A	Two Rivers Community School	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
999	NORTH CAROLINA ^b	23,597	6.4	21,368	5.7	20,202	5.3	

^b Including traditional schools

NA: Data were not available NOTE: These data are self-reported by LEAs and charter schools, and N.C. DPI does not conduct audits to validate accuracy. This table was created from the data that were initially released in past years. Any manual corrections to numbers or rates that were made after the initial release of data in any given year are not reflected here.

Excluding Expulsions, for All 100 Counties in North Carolina, *continued*

	2002-03		2003-04		2004-05		2005-06		LEA
	#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	#	Rate	#
	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	01A
	0	0.0	1	1.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	01B
	1	3.8	0	0.0	1	1.5	2	2.4	01C
	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	01D
	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	06A
	3	7.3	2	5.6	1	3.3	2	5.5	06B
	69	38.4	49	30.2	40	24.4	66	32.9	16A
	7	8.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.0	19B
	1	3.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	6	5.8	32D
	1	6.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	32J
	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0.0	34D
	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	36B
	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	41C
	1	2.9	0	0.0	2	3.9	2	3.8	53A
	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	1.9	55A
	2	5.3	2	3.5	0	0.0	0	0.0	60C
	64	20.0	28	10.4	10	4.4	16	6.9	60H
	1	0.8	4	2.5	9	5.2	4	2.3	64A
	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0.0	66A
	0	0.0	0	0.0	11	11.0	8	7.3	68N
	1	1.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	81A
	47	25.7	31	22.1	NA	NA	0	0.0	83A
	11	11.5	19	17.8	25	21.4	30	22.6	83B
	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0.0	84B
	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0.0	90A
	21	34.4	20	28.4	50	42.9	96	67.1	92C
	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	92F
	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.7	92G
	0	0.0	1	0.2	4	0.8	3	0.6	92K
	10	7.6	2	1.7	9	7.7	15	13.6	92P
	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	93A
	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	NA	NA	95A
	18,964	4.8	20,035	4.9	20,175	4.7	22,180	5.0	999

(continued from page 117) Mathematica Policy Research in Princeton, New Jersey, describe in detail their attempts to verify the validity and predictive power of the most commonly-referenced indicators of potential dropout risk. Their findings are discouraging: “[R]isk factors commonly used by dropout prevention programs are weak predictors of dropping out. . . . A program designed to be large enough to serve all future dropouts in a school would end up serving well under half the dropouts if it were to use common risk factors to identify its participants.”⁸¹ Their study examined the predictive power of 20 different indicators associated with middle school students dropping out, but even when examining students who exhibited as many as four of these indicators, the predictive power was only 18 percent (i.e., only 18 percent of those students who exhibited all four factors actually eventually dropped out). Mirroring the Education Statistics Access System (ESAS) data used throughout this article, the best single factors for predicting that middle school students would drop out were high absenteeism and students who were over-age for their grades, but their predictive powers were only 15 percent and 14 percent, respectively. In other words, a middle school dropout prevention program that recruits students based on factors like these is populated by a vast majority of students who without intervention would not drop out anyway. High school prediction was better, but even when working with 40 different identifiers, the indicators accurately predicted only about 42 percent of dropouts.⁸² Harnett Central High’s Capps, who teaches tenth graders, has seen evidence of this phenomenon firsthand. “The students I have taught who drop out are not usually the students who struggle academically,” says Capps. “The students who drop out are sometimes very capable of doing their work.”

Gleason’s and Dynarski’s point is not that dropout prevention programs are a waste of time. Rather, they argue that predicting who will drop out of school is excessively difficult and that even the best prevention programs will be inefficient. Without more accurate indicators that a student is likely to drop out, no one program is likely to work for all students.



5. Where Should We Go From Here?

Conclusions and Recommendations

Antoine failed almost every class, but he did not drop out. Somewhere along the line, he decided that, no matter what, he was going to pass high school, even after he lost the support of his friend Alex, who seemed to have inspired Antoine to perform better in school (albeit too late in the year), when Alex moved away. Perhaps it was his mother's concern and interest. Perhaps it was the relationships he developed with me and with a few other teachers. Perhaps he discovered something inside himself that none of us knew about. Whatever the reason, Antoine had acquired the one elusive characteristic that might help him see it through to the end—resiliency. At our final meeting after the year had ended, Antoine set his sights clearly on what he needed to do to pass when he returned in August.

North Carolina and the state's public school systems are not sitting by idly while students drop out. In April 2005, the N.C. Department of Public Instruction made a presentation to the State Board of Education in which it outlined several recommended strategies for reducing the dropout rate. These included: developing programs to ease the transition from elementary to middle and from middle to high school; establishing stronger collaborations among agencies that provide services for children and families; reducing suspensions and expulsions; improving student tracking; differentiating instruction; and working on developing smaller learning communities.⁸³ In addition, there are many efforts to reduce the number of dropouts at the local level, and recent trends suggest that the state as a whole is making some progress. The scope and speed of this progress, however, must be increased, and that is not likely to happen until elimination of the dropout problem is more firmly established as a statewide priority. To arrive at that point, North Carolina must continue to change and improve the ways in which the state measures and reports the dropout rate and the ways in which the N.C. Department of Public Instruction and local school systems encourage students to stay in school.

Recommendation # 1: N.C. Department of Public Instruction and State Board of Education should reform and expand counting and reporting practices regarding dropouts to give a more accurate picture to the public and allow better comparisons nationally.

To the N.C. Department of Public Instruction's credit, its official annual dropout document is very forthright in its explanation of how this state's dropout count is calculated, how the rate has changed over the years, and even how the state continues to fall short in its efforts to eliminate dropout events. The event rate is the ratio of dropout events (occurrences of dropout) to the total student population in a given period of time (usually a full school year). Theoretically, a student could drop out, re-enroll the next year, and drop out again, thus recording two dropout events. As a result, relying purely on event rates could *overestimate* the total number of dropouts. However, the choice to report event rates exclusively may lead to unnecessary confusion. As one federal task force noted, "No single indicator of graduation, completion, or dropouts can serve all purposes."⁸⁴ For example, for the same year in which North Carolina reported its lowest dropout event in recent years (3.23 percent in 2003–04), the Annie E. Casey Foundation in its annual *Kids Count* report cited North Carolina as having one of the highest rates in the nation of 16 to 19-year-olds without high school diplomas and not enrolled in school (9 percent). No wonder the public is confused. First and foremost, therefore, North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction and State Board of Education should demonstrate national leadership in public education by reporting multiple high school completion totals and rates

annually in addition to the current dropout event rate, with coherent explanations of each. These rates and totals should include:

- **Completion Rates and Total**—The state should use the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey methodology (percentage of persons under 24 not graduated and not enrolled); and
- **Cohort Rates and Total**—The state should use the four-year cohort graduation rate released by N.C. DPI in February 2007.⁸⁵ The state should track four-year cohort dropout rates as well.

While a status rate is somewhat different from a true cohort rate, the N.C. Department of Public Instruction does not need to report this rate as well. The cohort rate serves a purpose similar to that of the status rate, it is more accurate, and the presentation of too many reported rates may obscure rather than clarify the dropout picture for citizens and policymakers. In addition and where possible, the state should disaggregate each rate by the same federal No Child Left Behind categories it uses to report state Accountability, Basics, and Control (ABCs) achievement testing data (ethnicity, gender, and special populations), just as it already does for the data contained in the state’s Education Statistics Access System.

Recommendation # 2: The N.C. Department of Public Instruction should improve its data collection system to enhance the way local school systems, schools, social workers, and guidance counselors report reasons for students dropping out of school.

Elizabeth Glennie, the director of the North Carolina Education Research Data Center, believes that the state is already a leader in its data collection and management. However, even with the recommended change above, the system will still have plenty of room for improvement in the area of dropout data. “Given that students leave school for different reasons, the first thing I’d want to do is learn more about who is leaving for what reasons,” she says, adding that one major help would be “having standards for the ways in which items are reported,” including “having a definition of what the [dropout reason codes] mean.”

Counselors and other local school personnel sometimes cite general lack of attendance as a reason for students dropping out when in almost every instance there is a more specific reason. In some local school districts, general attendance is cited when the person who records the data does not know a student’s actual reason for dropping out. This hurts educators’ ability to understand why students are dropping out and tailor efforts to keep students in school. Thus, the N.C. Department of Public Instruction should stop accepting “general attendance” as a reason for students dropping out of school, issue standards and definitions for the codes for dropping out, and require local school systems to be more specific in their documentation and reporting.

Recommendation # 3: The N.C. General Assembly’s Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee should study the impact of raising the compulsory attendance age to 18 as part of a policy of encouraging as many students as possible to complete high school.

North Carolina can eliminate at least one of its factors pushing students to drop out by revising the state’s compulsory attendance law. As mentioned earlier, students are required to attend school until age 16 in North Carolina. If a 17-year-old leaves school without a diploma, she or he is still considered a dropout and is counted as such, but there is no legal impetus to stay in school. While there may be circumstances under which a student should legally be granted the opportunity to drop out before the age of 18, this state and others with an early dropout age send the message that

adulthood (as indicated by the right to choose to stay in school or to leave and join the work force) begins at age 16, even though the guarantee of state-provided schooling continues for most students until the age of 18. The message became less mixed with the passage of the dropout prevention driver's license law of 1998, which applies to all students under the age of 18, not 16,⁸⁶ but that policy alone is not enough.

The N.C. Department of Public Instruction recommended in April 2005 that the State Board of Education look into the possibility of increasing the mandatory attendance age.⁸⁷ In the 2007 legislative session, bills have been introduced to raise the compulsory school attendance age to 17 (S.B. 171) and to 18 (H.B. 1474). Some states have long had a compulsory attendance age of 18 (such as Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin), and several states recently have raised the compulsory attendance age to 18, including New Mexico, Louisiana, and Texas. The majority of states now have a compulsory attendance age of at least 17. While it is too early to determine the effect these changes have had on the dropout rates of states that have most recently changed the compulsory age, evidence from states with an established age of 18 is promising.⁸⁸ The dropout rates for Minnesota and Wisconsin are the second and third lowest in the nation. One early study cited evidence that compulsory schooling does constrain some students from dropping out who would have chosen to drop out otherwise, and that there is "a greater decline in the enrollment of sixteen-year olds in states that permit sixteen-year olds to leave school than in states that compel sixteen-year olds to attend school."⁸⁹ Student respondents to a more recent survey about dropouts that was sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation suggested that having "too much freedom" was a factor in decisions to drop out, and that institution of more rigorous requirements and oversight would reduce their willingness to drop out.⁹⁰ By all measures, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin—all of which have long had a compulsory attendance age of 18—experience lower dropout rates than does North Carolina. The common denominator for these three states is compulsory school attendance until age 18.

Recommendation # 4: The N.C. Department of Public Instruction should consider revising and updating the high school curricula by increasing real-world elements such as service learning, internships, and career exploration with an eye toward adding relevance and increasing the number of students who stay in school. At the same time, the department must maintain academic rigor for all students.

One factor that is pushing students out of school but which is difficult to identify and eliminate is a lack of relevancy for some students in the state's Standard Course of Study. The curriculum is currently weighted more toward college-bound students and sets admirable standards for the expectations we have for all students, but unless and until schools do a better job of making college a possibility for all students, curricula and graduation requirements must be *relevant* and *meaningful* to the large population of non-college-bound students.

John Reimer, an alternative school counselor in Caldwell County and president of the North Carolina Dropout Prevention Association, sees a connection between the dropout rate, school curricula, and the shrinking economic opportunities in many areas of the state that are still tied to tobacco, textiles, furniture, and declining manufacturing. Now that schools are turning their attention with more regularity to testing, Reimer says students are spending more days during the school year learning how to master tests rather than learning how to learn and how to be resilient in a rapidly-changing economic landscape. "Resilience is what keeps kids bouncing back," Reimer says, whether at school or at work, and if school does not provide students with the tools necessary to be successful at work, they will see little reason to stay. Senator Stan Bingham agrees. He says students with little to connect to in school are sometimes only one failing experience away from losing sight of the value of

schooling. “It’s almost as if you fall off the cliff, you make a mistake, and then you’re doomed.”

Recent experiments statewide with Early College, Middle College, and the New Schools Project are positive steps toward addressing this concern about curriculum, but they are not yet available statewide, and there is as yet little data to indicate how successful these programs ultimately will be. Research indicates that high school dropouts long for opportunities for real world learning that would make the classroom more relevant, including internships and service learning. The N.C. Department of Public Instruction and the State Board of Education need to incorporate more of these kinds of experiences for students that society has deemed less likely to succeed.

Recommendation # 5: The N.C. General Assembly should require the N.C. Department of Public Instruction to formally evaluate all existing dropout prevention programs and policies and appropriate funds for this evaluation.

Many of the programs and practices described in this article are wonderful examples of the varied and creative approaches that local school districts are taking to address the dropout problem, but too little hard evidence has been accumulated to establish what works. Without hard data on program and policy effectiveness, progress toward a comprehensive statewide plan for reducing and eliminating the dropout problem will be limited. To date, evidence on the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs is somewhat sketchy.

Recommendation # 6: Once the N.C. Department of Public Instruction completes its research, and it should do so by 2009, the Center recommends that DPI require each local school system develop a research-based Dropout Prevention Plan that addresses the unique needs of its local population and incorporates the resources in its own community.

A running theme throughout this article has been that a student’s decision to drop out is often the product of a long series of events and circumstances, and, consequently, that it will take more than one type of dropout prevention intervention to stem the dropout tide statewide. As researchers Gleason and Dynarski warn, there is a history of unsuccessful or only moderately successful dropout prevention programs, from the local level to the federal level. For example, the School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program, which was funded by the federal government between 1988 and 1995, supported dozens of local dropout prevention programs, but none of them showed more than mixed results, and several showed no impact at all.⁹¹ Also, most programs address only student-related factors; few attempt to address the many family-related factors that data suggest also contribute to a student’s decision to drop out.

Senate Bill 408, sponsored by Senator Bingham and passed by the 2005 General Assembly,⁹² required the State Board of Education to “review the research for best practices, effective policies, and model programs” around the country in reducing the dropout rate and the number of suspended students. “Look at the top performing schools in the country [and learn] what courses they are teaching,” says Bingham. “What is New Jersey doing? What is Arizona doing? I want the Board to go to other states and see what they are doing. Why waste our time *imagining* what *should be* when there are programs out there that [already] work?” In response, the N.C. Department of Public Instruction prepared a 30-page report delivered to the State Board of Education in December 2005 and the legislature’s Joint Education Oversight Committee in January 2006. The report provides a checklist of efforts in other states and paragraph-long descriptions of what are labeled model programs. While a good first step, the report fell short of the sort of evaluative research Bingham advocated.

Such research would provide an excellent foundation for the Dropout Prevention Plans recommended by the Center for local education agencies. For many LEAs, such

plans may be nothing more than formal declarations of the coordinated and thoughtful work already taking place, but for several other districts it could provide the impetus for the development of a long-needed roadmap. In any case, DPI and the State Board of Education need to focus LEAs on the effort to develop research-based dropout prevention plans.

* * *

All of these recommendations point in one common direction, and that is toward first raising awareness of the problem of students dropping out and then encouraging broader statewide engagement in reducing the number of dropouts in North Carolina. The numbers are going down, but reducing and ultimately eliminating the dropout problem is beyond the reach of schools alone. In many of its recommendations to the State Board of Education, the N.C. Department of Public Instruction acknowledges the role the wider community must play,⁹³ and in order to bring the problem to its knees, dropouts should receive the same kind of sweeping attention that student achievement on standardized tests has garnered in recent years. Until the state provides more and better data, until more people both in and out of schools work on the problem, until the dropout issue becomes a statewide concern, and until individualized and creative programs saturate our schools and communities, North Carolina will continue to lose the potential of thousands of children who drop out every year.



FOOTNOTES

¹ A dropout event is not the same as a dropout. Each time a student drops out, whether he or she has dropped out before, the event is counted as a dropout. Therefore, the total number of students who dropped out between 1999 and 2006 is lower than the total number of dropout events, but, because North Carolina only reports events, there are no data available to determine the number of students.

² For the 2003–04 school year, 9 percent of North Carolina’s 16-to-19-year-olds did not have a high school degree or a General Educational Development certificate and were not enrolled in school. From: “Percent of teens who are high school dropouts,” 2006 Kids Count Data Book Online, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, Md., 2006, p. 45, on the Internet at http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/sld/db06_pdfs/entire_db.pdf. States ranking lower than North Carolina were: Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, ranked 41st; Arizona, Nevada, and Tennessee, tied at 45th; Georgia and New Mexico, tied at 49th; and Indiana, ranked 50th.

³ In an interview with Jessica Jones that aired on public radio station WUNC-FM, Chapel Hill, N.C., February 2005.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2004–2005*, Indicator Number 608.

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey, 2004*, Table 9.

⁶ Daria Hall, *Getting Honest About Grad Rates: How States Play the Numbers and Students Lose*, The Education Trust, Washington, D.C., 2005, p. 2 (statistics cited from the United States Census and the Department of Justice); “School Dropouts: Education Could Play a Stronger Role in Identifying and Disseminating Promising Prevention Strategies,” U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO-02-240), Washington, D.C., 2002, p. 1.

⁷ J. Catteral (1985), cited in Hoor Bhanpuri and Ginger M. Reynolds, *Understanding and Addressing the Issue of High School Dropout Age*, Learning Point Associates, Naperville, Ill., 2003, pp. 3–4.

⁸ Each of the four School Snapshots in this article is based on events that transpired in the author’s high school classroom during the 2004–05 school year. The names have been changed, but the events themselves are unaltered.

⁹ USGAO (2002), pp. 12–13; Beth A. Young, *Public High School Dropouts and Completers from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2000–01* (NCES 2004–310), National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C., 2003, p. 15.

¹⁰ Both figures are derived from data available in the *Education Statistics Access System* [ESAS], Financial and Business Services, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Data retrieved June 15, 2005, March 3, 2006, and February 8, 2007 from <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/reports.htm>.

¹¹ This calculation does not make corrections for certain conditions and events that would alter the final result, such as students who repeat a

grade, or overall relative growth or reduction in a county’s school-aged population. Those factors alone, however, do not account for the total difference between the number of students who were enrolled in the 8th grade in 2001 and the number of students who started 12th grade in the 2005–06 school year.

¹² Phillip Kaufman and Christopher D. Chapman, *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2001* (NCES 2005-046), National Center for Education Statistics, U. S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C., 2004, Table 8A, pp. 41–42.

¹³ The 2002 GAO report cited in note 6 above stated that “no one measure is ideal for all situations” (p. 12). A recent federal task force established to resolve the counting issue, the Committee on Educational Excellence and Testing Equity, also noted that “no single indicator of graduation, completion, or dropouts can serve all purposes.” (National Research Council, *Understanding Dropouts: Statistics, Strategies, and High-Stakes Testing* [NCES 2005-105]. Alexandra Beatty, Ulric Neisser, William T. Trent, and Jay P. Heubert, Editors, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., 2001, p. 12).

¹⁴ *Dropout Data Report, 2003–2004*, N.C. Department of Public Instruction, Raleigh, N.C., 2005, p. iii. Averaging attendance over two years accommodates for student population growth during the school year of record. “School year” means from the first day of school to the last day of summer vacation before the next school year. Thus, students who drop out over the summer are counted against the previous school year’s dropout total. Also, students who are first-time enrollees in an LEA and who do not remain enrolled for more than 20 days are not counted as dropouts. This exemption keeps LEAs from being held responsible for highly transient students, according to DPI.

¹⁵ Michael J. McLaughlin, “High school dropouts: How much of a crisis?” *Backgrounder*, The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., August 3, 1990, No. 781. On the Internet at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/BG781.cfm>. Also see Paul E. Barton, *One-Third of a Nation: Rising Dropout Rates and Declining Opportunities*, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, N.J., February 2005, p. 31. On the Internet at <http://www.ets.org/media/onethird.pdf>.

¹⁶ Quoted in Jay P. Greene, *High School Graduation Rates in the United States*, The Manhattan Institute, New York, N.Y., 2002, p. 6.

¹⁷ Duncan Chaplin, *GEDs for Teenagers: Are There Unintended Consequences?* The Urban Institute, Washington, D.C., 1999, p. 8. On the Internet at <http://urban.org/uploadedPDF/GED.pdf>.

¹⁸ Donna W. James (ed.) with Sonia Jurich, *More Things That Do Make a Difference for Youth: A Compendium of Evaluations of Youth Programs and Practices, Volume II*, American Youth Policy Forum, Washington, D.C., 1999, p. 123. On the Internet at <http://www.aypf.org/compendium/index.html>.

¹⁹ Chaplin, note 17 above, pp. 3–4, 21; Chaplin notes that when states require parent permission to

take the GED, the high school completion rate rises (p. 28).

²⁰ Barton, note 15 above, p. 32.

²¹ Young, note 9 above, p. 4.

²² *Ibid.* at Table 5.

²³ *Dropout Data Collecting and Reporting Procedures Manual*, N.C. Department of Public Instruction, Raleigh, N.C., 2004, pp. 3–4.

²⁴ Paul E. Barton, *Unfinished Business: More Measured Approaches in Standards-Based Reform*, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, N.J., 2005, Table 4, p. 46.; and Hall, note 6 above, pp. 5–6.

²⁵ *Ibid.* at pp. 47–48.

²⁶ *Ibid.* at p. 46.

²⁷ Kaufman *et al.*, note 12 above, pp. 41–42.

²⁸ DPI will need to retain the original rate for at least one additional year in order to be able to calculate what is known as “safe harbor” status for schools, a condition that allows a school to meet NCLB Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals if it demonstrates notable improvement from the previous year in a certain statistical area by at least 10 percent, even if it falls below the expected standard for a given statistical category.

²⁹ Barton, note 24 above, p. 52.

³⁰ Data from N.C. DPI (2006). Dropout Prevention & Reporting, School Improvement Division. Retrieved March 1, 2006, from <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/schoolimprovement/effective/dropout/>. Also see *Annual Report on Dropout Events*

and Rates. Report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee. February 2007. Retrieved February 2007 from <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/schoolimprovement/effective/dropout/>.

³¹ Even though data for 1998–1999 are available, I have limited my data analyses in this section and ones that follow to school years 1999–2000 and up because the dropout rate was only incorporated into the state’s accountability model as of the 1999–2000 school year.

³² Walt Haney *et al.*, *The Education Pipeline in the United States 1970–2000*, The National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy, Boston College, Boston, Mass., 2004, pp. 10–11, p. 13 (Table 2).

³³ Data from N.C. Department of Public Instruction, Dropout Prevention and Reporting, School Improvement Division. Retrieved March 1, 2006, from <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/schoolimprovement/effective/dropout/>. Also see *Annual Report on Dropout Events and Rates*. Report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee. February 2007. Retrieved February 2007 from <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/schoolimprovement/effective/dropout/>.

³⁴ ESAS, note 10 above.

³⁵ Greene used a modified *cohort* rate approach.

³⁶ Greene, note 16 above, pp. 3, 11, 12, and 16. Of the 50 largest school districts in the na-



tion, North Carolina has only two—Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Wake County—and their graduation rates were ranked 22nd and 18th, respectively. All data are for 1998.

³⁷ Young, note 9 above, Table 3.

³⁸ *Annual Report on Dropout Events and Rates*, see note 30 above, figure 6, p. 8. For 2005–06, the rate for Caucasian students was 4.40 percent and the rate for Asian students was only 2.71 percent.

³⁹ U.S. General Accounting Office, note 6 above, p. 13.

⁴⁰ *Annual Report on Dropout Events and Rates*, see note 30 above, figure 9, p. 10.

⁴¹ U.S. General Accounting Office, note 6, above, p. 16.

⁴² Michelle Fine, *Framing Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an Urban Public High School*, State University of New York Press, Albany, N.Y., 1991, p. 182.

⁴³ U.S. General Accounting Office, note 6 above, p. 15; Haney *et al.*, note 32 above, pp. 53–55; Will J. Jordan, Julia Lara, and James M. McPartland, *Exploring the Complexity of Early Dropout Causal Structures*, Johns Hopkins University Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students, Baltimore, Md., 1994, CDS Report No. 48, pp. 1–33.

⁴⁴ Camilla A. Lehr *et al.*, *Essential Tools: Increasing Rates of School Completion: Moving from Policy and Research to Practice*, National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, ICI Publications, Minneapolis, Minn., 2004, pp. 12–13.

⁴⁵ Russell W. Rumberger, *Why Students Drop Out of School and What Can Be Done*, University of California, Santa Barbara, Calif., 2000, pp. 12–13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* at pp. 14–15, Lehr *et al.* (2004), note 44 above, pp. 12–13.

⁴⁷ M. Gail Jones, Brett D. Jones, and Tracy Y. Hargrave, *The Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham, Md., June 2003, p. 130.

⁴⁸ Haney *et al.*, note 32 above, p. 16.

⁴⁹ Jones *et al.*, note 47 above, pp. 129–130.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Haney *et al.*, note 32 above, pp. 49–51.

⁵¹ For more on *No Child Left Behind* and North Carolina's compliance with the legislation, see Trip Stallings, "Pass/Fail: Meeting the Challenges of the State ABC and Federal 'No Child Left Behind' Accountability Programs," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 21, No. 3, August 2004, pp. 32–57.

⁵² Haney *et al.*, note 32 above, pp. 53–55.

⁵³ On the Internet at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/resources/data/esas/>.

⁵⁴ The reasons for dropping out described in this section are solicited from students when possible, but when not possible, they are provided by data managers and/or dropout prevention counselors. As such, these data only represent *reported* reasons for dropping out and are subject to various biases on the part of both students and counselors (including differences in reporting tendencies across LEAs and even across schools). (*Dropout Data Report*, note 14 above, p. 18.) Finally, the largest category, Attendance (General), is in many ways a catch-all category that some data managers use

when precise reasons for dropout are not known (Elizabeth Stearns and Elizabeth Glennie, "When and Why Dropouts Leave School," *Youth and Society*, Vol. 38, Issue 9, pp. 29–57 (2006)). Thus, a student whose reason for dropping out is reported as Attendance (General) may in fact belong in one of the other attendance-related categories (Work, Family, and School), or even another dropout category altogether. A more rigorous analysis and discussion of these data can be found in the Stearns and Glennie article.

⁵⁵ Donna W. James and Cheryl Donahue, Eds. (1999). *Some Things Do Make a Difference for Youth*. Washington, D.C.: American Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved 17 May, 2006, from <http://www.aypf.org/publications/compendium/comp01.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Dan Linton, Jr., Louis Moser, Christina Holden, and Susan Siegel. (2006). 2004–2005 *Results from the CIS Network*. Alexandria, Va.: Communities in Schools.

⁵⁷ The 2006 N.C. General Assembly enacted S.B. 571, "School Counselors and Dropout Prevention/Study," which requires the State Board of Education to report on the role school counselors play in providing dropout prevention and intervention services to secondary students.

⁵⁸ In past years, each secondary school had a designated dropout prevention counselor.

⁵⁹ Brian Kleiner, Rebecca Porch, and Elizabeth Farris, *Public Alternative Schools and Programs for Students at Risk of Education Failure: 2000–01*, National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, D.C., 2002, pp. iii–iv and 6.

⁶⁰ Debbie Cenziper and Ted Mellnik, "How North Carolina Creates More Dropouts," *The Charlotte Observer*. Charlotte, N.C., Dec. 17, 2001, p. 1A. On the Internet at <http://www.bridges4kids.org/articles/12-03/CharObserver12-17-01.html>.

⁶¹ Barton, note 15 above, p. 21.

⁶² Kleiner *et al.*, note 59 above, p. 26.

⁶³ Rhonda Carpenter, "Duke Endowment Gives to Help EYA's North Carolina Youth Succeed," *Eckerd Youth Alternatives Website*, July 7, 2005. On the Internet at http://www.eckerd.org/NewsCenter/pressreleases05/Duke_Endowment_Help_EYA_NC.html.

⁶⁴ *Dropout Data Collecting and Reporting Procedures Manual*, note 23 above, pp. 4 and 27.

⁶⁵ Eckerd Youth Alternatives. (2004). *Eckerd Wilderness Educational System Evaluation Report—Fiscal Year 2003: North Carolina*.

⁶⁶ Tom Murphy, "Dropout program seeks aid—RBC Centura aims to help lower rates," *The Rocky Mount Telegram*, Rocky Mount, N.C., June 9, 2005, p. 1A.

⁶⁷ John M. Bridgeland *et al.*, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, Civic Enterprise in Association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Washington, D.C., March 2006, p. 6.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* at p. 13.

⁶⁹ Governor Michael Easley, Address to the 18th Annual Meeting of the North Carolina Education Governing Boards, Duke University, Durham, N.C., February 16, 2006. See <http://www.newschoolsproject.org> or call 919-277-3760 for more information.

⁷⁰ Thomas Bailey and Melinda Mechur Karp, *Promoting College Access and Success: A Review of Credit-Based Transition Programs*, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C., 2003, pp. 1 ff.

⁷¹ Katherine L. Hughes, Melinda Mechur Karp, Baranda J. Fermin, and Thomas R. Bailey, *Pathways to College Access and Success*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

⁷² Bailey *et al.*, note 70 above.

⁷³ Hughes *et al.*, note 71 above.

⁷⁴ Jacqueline Ancess and Suzanna Ort Wichterle, *Making School Completion Integral to School and Design*, National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching, New York, N.Y., 2001, pp. 17–22. On the Internet at <http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/dropouts/ancest.pdf>. The major elements of schools successful at reducing the number of dropouts, according to these authors, are: smaller class sizes with lower student-teacher ratios; smaller school sizes; portfolio assessments (i.e., assessments based on a historical collection of a student's work) instead of test-only assessments; a shared sense of school as an intellectual community; and staff members who are committed to the school mission.

⁷⁵ Easley, note 69 above. In addition to Easley's comments, New Schools official Tony Habit projected 150 such small schools programs by 2008 at the February meeting of the Governor's Education Cabinet. Paul Bonner, "State Plan Gives Students Level Playing Field.," *The Durham Herald-Sun*, February 17, 2006, pp. A1 and A2.

⁷⁶ Session Law 2005-276 (S.B. 622), Section 7.52.(a).

⁷⁷ N.C.G.S. 20-11.

⁷⁸ N.C.G.S. 20-11; North Carolina Community College System, *Dropout prevention/driver's license guidelines*, Raleigh, N.C., 1998, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Lehr *et al.*, note 44 above, p. 18.

⁸⁰ Haney *et al.*, note 32 above, p. 10.

⁸¹ Philip Gleason and Mark Dynarski. "Do We Know Whom To Serve? Issues in Using Risk Factors to Identify Dropouts," *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, University of Louisville, Louisville, Ky., Volume 7, No. 1, 2002, p. 26.

⁸² *Ibid.* at pp. 34 and 37.

⁸³ Marvin Pittman *et al.*, *SBE Issues Session: Dropout Prevention, Suspensions/Expulsions and Related Issues*, Presentation to the North Carolina State Board of Education, Raleigh, N.C., April 6, 2005.

⁸⁴ Committee on Educational Excellence and Testing Equity, note 13 above, p. 9.

⁸⁵ The federal Task Force endorses this method for all performance indicators, including graduation, completion by alternative or additional means, transfer, and dropout statistics. *Ibid.* at p. 4.

⁸⁶ N.C.G.S. 20-11.

⁸⁷ Pittman *et al.*, note 83 above.

⁸⁸ Bhanpuri and Reynolds, note 7 above, p. 6; for example, the dropout rates for Minnesota and Wisconsin are the 2nd and 3rd lowest in the country.

⁸⁹ Joshua D. Angrist and Alan B. Krueger. (1991). Does compulsory school attendance affect schooling and earnings? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 106(4), 979–1014.

⁹⁰ John M. Bridgeland, John J. DiIulio, Jr., and Karen Burke Morison. (2006). *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Retrieved May 17, 2006, from <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/downloads/ed/TheSilentEpidemic3-06FINAL.pdf>.

⁹¹ GAO, note 6 above, p. 4. Federal dropout prevention funding was continued under NCLB as the School Dropout Prevention Program, but there are as yet no comprehensive studies of its effectiveness.

⁹² Session Law 2005-271 (S.B. 408).

⁹³ Among the recommendations were strategies for raising public awareness of dropout prevention, involving faith communities in the discussion, and increasing the role social workers play in reducing dropouts (Pittman *et al.*, note 83 above).