

The High Cost of Dropping Out

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In 1961, the National Education Association began the Project on School Dropouts. Daniel Schreiber, a school principal in New York, initiated the program to help more than 50,000 disadvantaged children. He firmly believed that “the United States . . . cannot afford to have almost one million youths drop out each year only to become unwanted and unemployed” (Schreiber, 1964).

In 1965, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was created to distribute funding to schools to help disadvantaged students (Hirschfeld, 2008). Funds were authorized for professional development, instructional materials, resources to support educational programs, and the promotion of parental involvement (Paul, 2017).

Figure 2.1 presents a timeline of other national initiatives in education around this time and since.

In a *USA Today* interview, Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, stated that “the pandemic sparked both an immediate emergency and a slow-motion disaster for disadvantaged students in the United States” (Torres, 2020). In districts that turned to remote instruction, achievement growth was lower for all subgroups, but especially for students attending high-poverty schools (Goldhaber et al., 2022).

Updated data from the KIDS COUNT Data Center show that 14% of U.S. high school students did not graduate on time in 2019–20 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023).

Robert Balfanz, the director of the Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education, stated, “the graduation flexibility states provided in 2020 ‘held students harmless’ for academic disruptions, but they also may have given educators a false

Figure 2.1**National Education Initiatives**

In 1986, the National Dropout Prevention Center was formed. It serves as a clearinghouse on issues related to dropout prevention and offers research-based practices and strategies to increase graduation rates in schools across the United States.

In 1994, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act provided resources to states and communities to develop and implement comprehensive education reforms aimed at helping all students reach challenging academic and occupational skill standards in an attempt to provide both equity and excellence for all students (“What Is Goals 2000,” 1994). They stated their goal by the year 2000 would be to have a graduation rate of 90%.

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) replaced the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA). States were required to bring all students at least up to a minimum academic standard on state tests by the 2013–14 school year. By 2015 no states had reached that proficiency level (Klein, 2015).

In 2006, one of the most extensive surveys of American high school dropouts, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, was conducted by Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison. Commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the primary purpose was to study the dropout problem from a perspective that had not been considered before: by the student dropouts themselves. The results of this survey will be mentioned later in this book.

In 2009, Race to the Top (RTT) funding was introduced by President Obama as a competitive fund to promote school improvement on both a state and local level and turn around struggling schools (Chen, 2022).

In 2015, Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act to replace NCLB, allowing states more independence over how they delineate school success and the interventions they use when schools fail to show progress. One of the goals was to reach the highest high school graduation rate on record at 81%, by helping disadvantaged and high-need students (Brown et al., 2016). “It’s important to note here that although graduation rates reached a record high of 83% in the 2014–2015 school year, it’s difficult to know which states earned this increase in graduation rates through higher standards and which states achieved it through lowered expectations” (Kamenetz & Turner, 2016).

Then in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative effect on student learning and the overall dropout rate, especially after schools nationwide shut down (Moscoviz & Evans, 2022).

In 2020–21, two COVID relief packages were distributed to help states cope with the effects of the pandemic. The Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund was given to states to offer flexibility in directing aid to high-need students (Lieberman, 2022).

sense of security with regard to high school students' progress." State flexibility was intended to be temporary, but students in the subsequent high school classes became more disengaged, not less (Sparks, 2022).

So why hasn't the student dropout rate been significantly reduced in the last six decades? It's reasonable to wonder why, after years of additional federal funding provided to states to address this issue, our nation would not have initiated a more effective solution by now. Unfortunately, so many support personnel in schools continue to be overwhelmed by other demands of their time each day. Many continue to exhaust much of their professional time providing administrative and other non-prevention services in the schools. Too many students in need of more intensive support do not have access to enough individualized encouragement and coping strategies in time to prevent their dropping out of school.

Next, let's take a closer look at the real impact of student dropouts and then examine what can be done to better address this issue.

The Impact of Dropping Out

When students drop out of school, it initiates a gauntlet-like path in life that is enclosed on both sides with hazardous choices and unconsidered outcomes. Their lives usually don't lead even close to a place that they might have envisioned before dropping out. Eventually, a large number of these young people become desperate, needing to rely on public assistance and/or eventually becoming homeless or incarcerated. Consider the following statistics:

- Studies have shown that students who drop out of school are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system (Chilton, 2023; Hale & Canter, 2023). For example, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, about 68% of state prison inmates did not complete high school, and 70% of inmates in federal prisons did not graduate from high school (Truth in American Education, 2023).
- Dropping out of school has dramatic effects on a student's future employment, earnings, health, and overall welfare. According to *Public School Review (PSR)*, students who drop out of high school are more likely to live a life of cyclic unemployment and have a greater dependence on government assistance than those who graduate from high school or get a GED (Barrington, 2023).

- The American Public Health Association considers school dropouts as “a public health issue because disparities in education predict disparities in health outcomes. Promoting education and its consequent reduction in health disparities could save eight times more lives than medical treatment” (Lansford et al., 2016).
- Dropouts are more likely going to experience a lifetime of increased obstacles and other challenges. In addition to surges of depression and anxiety, there are other negative effects resulting from dropping out of school.

According to Kate Barrington from *PSR* (2023),

- high school dropouts account for 67% of inmates in state prisons and 56% of federal prisons;
- students who drop out of high school earn an average of \$670 less per week than students who graduate;
- it’s estimated that half of all Americans on public assistance are school dropouts;
- the dropout rate costs our country over \$7.3 billion in annual Medicaid spending;
- females 16 to 24 who are high school dropouts are more likely to be, or become, young single mothers; and
- dropouts are more likely to experience a life of sporadic and low-paying employment and higher rate of needing government assistance.

We need to consistently remind students of the many benefits of graduating. Besides providing better job opportunities, there are several other advantages from graduating that students should consider. According to Acceleration Academies (2022), graduating from high school provides the following benefits:

- **Opportunities in school and work**
More flexibility in the jobs applied for, better chance of going to college, higher chance of being successful, and opens up more possibilities.
- **Connections through school**
Valuable connections for advice, information, and direction, provides a safe community of professionals and friends.

- **Inspiration to family and friends**

A sense of accomplishment and opportunity to feel proud, encourages more respect from other family members and peers, and can provide a role model for them.

- **Increased self-confidence**

A boost of self-esteem, determination, and perseverance to succeed in other areas of life.

My Personal Story

After I left my home in Connecticut, my parents had the police searching for me for several months. They had no idea that we were living somewhere north of Quebec, Canada, first in our car and then in an abandoned cabin we found in the middle of a desolate area. I had used my older sister's birth certificate as my identification to cross the Canadian border. We sustained ourselves mostly by eating the fish that we caught in a nearby lake. While there, my boyfriend Kevin became physically abusive, and I was very afraid. I literally had nowhere to escape to and no one around I could seek help from. After our money ran out, he decided we would leave Canada and live somewhere in Vermont.

We arrived in small hippy community on the outskirts of Burlington. Rather than looking for employment, Kevin pawned personal items to buy our food. Homeless and starving, we soon found an older guy who said we could stay at his place for a while. This turned out to be a bad situation. He was attracted to me, and I was worried for my safety. After several weeks, a local noticed how young I was and must have realized I was a runaway and called the police. I was picked up and questioned by a police officer. Even though I gave him a false name, he said I had to go to the police station because there was an all-points bulletin (APB) posted on a runaway that fit my description. We were finally caught! My parents were contacted and came to "rescue" me. When my boyfriend found out my parents were on their way to pick me up, he quickly left the state. I thought maybe I was finally free from him when my parents arrived. I was actually excited and relieved to see them.

I wish kids could have a glimpse of what life is really like when you drop out and have no means to support yourself. My decision to drop out and run away should have taught me a lesson. Instead, I ended up running away again a few months later.

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