

# The High School Dropout Crisis

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## I. Identifying the Problem

Over the past 4 decades, the U.S. economy has transformed into a globally competitive market which places a premium on knowledge and education, where the high school diploma is now “an increasingly important prerequisite for economic and social mobility in the United States.”<sup>1</sup> High school dropout status has evolved into a debilitating characteristic often leading to poverty crime and dependency even as expenditures on education have soared. Despite these developments, only about 70% of students graduate on time with a regular diploma: an astounding one million children drop out of high school every year.<sup>2</sup> Although an individual’s investment in education should rise as the benefits to graduation increase, the dropout rate has actually increased from 23% to 30% over the past three decades.<sup>3</sup> While dropping out is a national problem, minority students, lower-income students, inner-city students, and those attending highly segregated schools all drop out at significantly higher rates than their peers. There are significant individual, familial, and community costs of dropping out of high school. High dropout rates may handicap a huge segment of the population, exacerbating poverty. School reform has concentrated on improving academic achievement, not graduation rates. It is necessary to learn more about discover the causes of this dropout crisis in order to prevent the creation of a permanent underclass whose potential is so limited by the lack of a high school diploma.

There are multiple methods of calculating graduation and dropout rates, generating a debate about the true size of the dropout problem. Historically, graduation rates have been

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, Larry, Icek Ajzen, Jeanne Saunders and Trina Williams. “The Decision of African American Students to Complete High School: An Application of the Theory of Planned Behavior.” *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 2002: 94.4, 810-819.

<sup>2</sup> Swanson, Christopher, (2008). “Cities in Crisis: A Special Analytic Report on High School Graduation.” Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. April 1.

<sup>3</sup> Barton, P., (2005). “One Third of A Nation: Rising Dropout Rates and Declining Opportunities.” Educational Testing Service, Policy Evaluation and Research Center..

heavily inflated, as high schools routinely count students who promised to obtain a GED as graduates or exclude a variety of “leavers” from dropout statistics, effectively omitting out students who leave due to military service, imprisonment, pregnancy, etc. The National Center for Education Statistics states that the graduation rate in 2001 was 86.5%.<sup>4</sup> The NCES graduation and dropout rates face almost universal skepticism, as they estimate a yearly dropout rate of only 5% of all youth. This paper will utilize graduation and dropout rates calculated using the Cumulative Promotion Index, a widely-used estimation method considered most accurate by many academic studies and found to be the least susceptible to bias.<sup>5</sup> The CPI method, developed by the Urban Institute, uses enrollment and grade promotion rates to estimate likelihood of graduation, using the Common Core of Data from the US Department of Education. This method of estimating graduation rates is not perfect; it errs on the side of a more conservative estimate. If anything, the CPI overestimates the graduation rate, and so the problem may be even larger than reported here.

In 2001, the national graduation rate was 68%.<sup>6</sup> Only around 50% of Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans finish public high school with a regular diploma after four years, while over 75% of Whites and Asians do so.<sup>7</sup> In 49 states, Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans graduated at rates at least 5% lower than whites; in the lowest-performing states – New York, Ohio, Nevada, and Florida – Black and Hispanic graduation rates were at least 20 percentage

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<sup>4</sup> “Drop Out Rates in the United States: 2000.” The National Center for Education Statistics. 2000. [www.nces.gov](http://www.nces.gov).

<sup>5</sup> Orfield, G., Losen, D., Wald, J., & Swanson, C., (2004). *Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis*, Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University.

<sup>6</sup> Swanson, Christopher B. “Who Graduates? Who Doesn’t? *A Statistical Portrait of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001*.” Education Policy Center, The Urban Institute. 2004.

Another well-regarded study found a similar graduation rate of 71%. Greene, Jay and Marcus Winters (2005). *Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991–2002*. The Manhattan Institute.

<sup>7</sup> Bridgeland, J., DiIulio, Jr., J., & Burke Morison, K., (2006). “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts.” Civic Enterprises & Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

points below graduation rates for white students.<sup>8</sup> As incomes rise, so do graduation rates, creating a huge gap between poor and rich: high school students in the bottom 20% of the income distribution were six times as likely as their peers in the top 20% of the income distribution to drop out.<sup>9</sup> Males consistently have lower graduation rates than do their female counterparts.<sup>10</sup>

The disparities go far beyond individual characteristics, as the statistics tell of widespread segregation by race and income throughout the country, coupled with extremely low graduation rates. In High Poverty Districts, only 57.6% of students graduate, low poverty districts have graduation rates of around 76%.<sup>11</sup> Students in the inner city are twice as likely to drop out as their counterparts in the suburbs, while school districts where a majority of students are minorities graduate only 56.4% of their students, while majority white districts graduate 74.1% of all students.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, in schools where at least 90% of students are minorities, only 42% of all the freshmen advanced to grade 12.”<sup>13</sup> Nearly 90% of these “intensely segregated minority schools” are also concentrated poverty schools:

These schools are characterized by a host of problems, including lower levels of competition from peers, less qualified and experienced teachers, narrower and less advanced course selection, more student turnover during the year, and students with many health and emotional problems related to poverty and to living in ghetto or barrio conditions. Few whites, including poor whites, ever experience such schools.<sup>14</sup>

Even more alarming, the Urban Institute found that even when characteristics like race and income were held constant, district poverty and school segregation were still strong predictors of

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<sup>8</sup> Orfield.

<sup>9</sup> “Drop Out Rates in the United States: 2000.” The National Center for Education Statistics. 2000. [www.nces.gov](http://www.nces.gov)

<sup>10</sup> Orfield.

<sup>11</sup> High poverty school districts 38% of more of students receive Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) under the National School Lunch Act. Low poverty districts have less than 38% of their students receiving FRL.

<sup>12</sup> Davis.

<sup>13</sup> Orfield.

<sup>14</sup> Orfield.

dropping out, suggesting a relationship between district characteristics that affects individual children beyond their personal situation.<sup>15</sup>

While the data shows the magnitude of the problem varies across locations, socio-economic status, and student characteristics, the dropout crisis is widespread, affecting the entire nation. However, districts large and small often do not recognize dropout problems due to poor record keeping. There are numerous examples of high schools reporting graduation rates above 90% while one third of each freshman class does not graduate in four years. Inflated graduation rates, caused by the use of an inaccurate state calculation method, leads school administrators and communities to be unaware of or ignore dropout problems year after year. New York City highlighted the debate over high school graduation rates during the mayoral election race of 2005, in which education was a crucial issue. The city's debate underlined one of the most disconcerting aspects of increased accountability standards through the No Child Left Behind legislation: the "pushing out" of low-achieving students, in pursuit of higher average test scores. New York's official rate included neither "discharged" students nor special education students, possibly significantly inflating its graduation rate. But the biggest problem is that low-performing students are at increased risk of being "pushed out" or "counseled out" by administrators and counselors due to a potential downward pull they may have on test scores, which have become most important due to the incentive structure of No Child Left Behind. That high-risk and struggling students may be being pushed out of schools further emphasizes the extended scope of the dropout problem.<sup>16</sup>

The highly variable graduation rates among low and high income students and white and minority students raise important questions about the school system and what leads these

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<sup>15</sup> Orfield.

<sup>16</sup> Hu, Winnie, (2005). "Truth Test: Is High School Graduation Rate Up or Down?" *The New York Times*. October 12, 2005.

students to drop out of high school. Such low graduation rates are undermining the premise of equality of opportunity, limiting mobility and creating a permanent underclass. The increasing consequences of dropping out call for an immediate effort to reform school enrollment accounting standards in order to address the poor reporting that enables schools and communities to ignore their growing dropout problems.

## **II. The Consequences of Dropping Out of High School**

Dropping out has not only adverse effects on the individual but also on their family, peers, and community. Everything from socio-economic status to life span appears to be affected by high school completion status. As schools across the country focus primarily on achievement and college admissions, the extensive consequences of dropping out are infrequently discussed. High school students are unaware of the costs of dropping out. A great majority of dropouts indicate they now know the value of a high school diploma, and regret their decision. A full 74% of survey respondents said they “would have stayed in school, knowing what they know today about the expectations of the world.”<sup>17</sup>

### *A. Individual Consequences*

Dropping out of high school hinders one’s ability to advance in education, effectively putting restrictions on one’s potential. Although a Graduation Equivalency Degree (GED) can be achieved, it is not a perfect substitute for a high school diploma in neither higher education nor the labor market. High school dropout status puts a constraint on job eligibility: even in manufacturing jobs where a diploma may not be necessary to do the job, many employers use the

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<sup>17</sup> Bridgeland.

diploma as either an indication of a desired skill level or simply as a proxy for responsibility and discipline. Throughout the country, dropouts have a much more difficult time finding well-paying jobs than high school or college graduates – high school graduates are 50% more likely to participate in the labor force and 56% more likely to be employed. The employment effects are most extreme for African-American dropouts. Only about 40% of all African American dropouts are in the labor force, and only about 35% are employed, compared to labor force participation and employment rates of 70% and 66% among African American high school graduates.<sup>18</sup> From 1997-1999, at the height of the economic growth of the ninties, African American dropouts between 20 and 24 were more than twice as likely to be unemployed as white dropouts of the same age.<sup>19</sup>

Dropping out of high school affects an individual far beyond just income and unemployment: High school graduates live on average over 9 years longer and incur \$20,000 less in annual health care costs than high school dropouts, who experience higher rates of cardiovascular illnesses and diabetes.<sup>20</sup> These chronic diseases and increased health costs are evidence of increased stress and disability in a dropout's daily life. Civic participation is also affected when a student drops out of school. As civic and political engagement increase with education, graduates are three times more likely to vote than high school dropouts.<sup>21</sup> These dramatic effects of dropping out suggest that the adverse effects of dropping out permeate every aspect of an individuals' life.

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<sup>18</sup> Labor force participation indicates that an individual is either currently employed or has sought employment in the past month. Non-participation in the labor force indicates that an individual is not employed and has not searched for work in the past month. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics: bls.gov

<sup>19</sup> US Department of Education, 2001: Digest of Education Statistics 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Levin, H. M., (2005). *The social costs of inadequate education*. The Campaign for Educational Equity. Summary of Columbia University Teachers College symposium on the social costs of inadequate education, New York, October 24–26, 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Levin.

## B. Effects on the Family

The effects of low skills sets, dependency, and unemployment has primary effects within the family. The economic consequences of dropping out of high school have been increasing over time: “Between 1971 and 2002, earnings for male workers without a diploma dropped 34.7 percent.”<sup>22</sup> This huge drop in real earnings for dropouts is even more devastating if considered with the low employment rates among dropouts. Such low earnings demonstrate the difficulty dropouts face in supporting their families, economic mobility, and further investments in education. “In short, it is becoming less and less likely that hard work alone is sufficient to bring a dropout into the middle class.”<sup>23</sup> Because dropouts earn so little and are so limited in their mobility in both the workforce and in terms of socioeconomic status, their families will likely suffer as a result.

As children of lower income families face a multitude of negative influences from their low income neighborhoods and poor schools, as family income increases, drop out rates correspondingly increase. Moreover, parental education has important effects on dropping out, as does the education of other relatives. A study on “Friends, Family and Neighborhood” found that the percentage of relatives completing high school was a significant predictor of academic success among urban African American high school students.<sup>24</sup> The experiences of one’s relatives as well as their expectations have an effect on a student’s motivation, goals, and effort, which influence probability of graduation. Dropping out has clear intergenerational effects, where poverty persists due to low levels of education and resultant low employment, income,

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<sup>22</sup> Nelson, A., (2006). “Closing the Gap: Keeping Students in School.” *InfoBrief*. Association for Supervisions and Curriculum Development. 4.6.

Female dropouts’ earnings also dropped over the same 30 years, but not by nearly as much.

<sup>23</sup> Nelson.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, T., Davis, L., Saunders, J., and Williams, J.H., (2002). “Friends, Family, and Neighborhood: Understanding Academic Outcomes of African American Youth.” *Urban Education*, May 2002; 37: 408 - 431.

and socioeconomic status levels, which in turn predict lower education levels for the dropout's offspring.

### *C. Community Outcomes and Beyond*

As opposed to a community or populations with higher-employment levels that make significantly higher wages, a low income neighborhood with high levels of dropouts provides fewer educational and professional role models for teenagers and higher levels of crime, idleness, and dependency. As suggested from the statistics linking poverty and segregation to higher dropouts rates, having many friends or associates who have dropped out increases a student's risk of doing so. The "Friends, Family and Neighborhood" study found that the more friends a student has who are on track to graduate, the better the student's academic performance.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, "residence in a neighborhood in which many other youths are involved in crime, use illegal drugs, or are out of work and out of school is associated with an increase in an individual's probability of the analogous outcome even after controlling for a variety of family background and personal characteristics."<sup>26</sup> Being surrounded by youth people exhibiting high risk behavior and unemployment can push a student towards these same behaviors and negatively influence their decision making and perspective. The effects of having more dropouts in the community are clearly negative. High school dropouts spread risk of negative social and economic outcomes to their peers, family, and community through their actions and influence on their peers.

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<sup>25</sup> Williams.

<sup>26</sup> Case, A., & Katz, L. (1991). *The company you keep: The effects of family and neighborhood on disadvantaged youths* (Working Paper No. 3705). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

A community with a high level of dropout population has fewer resources to offer its youth, and statistically common characteristics of dropouts are negative influences on communities. Drop outs are three times as likely to be chronically poor through their lives, compared to their graduating counterparts. They are less likely to be permanently employed, more likely to receive social assistance, and are at a higher risk of drug use and criminal activity.<sup>27</sup> Dropping out imposes high costs on society: it creates a group of individuals so restricted in their earning potential that many opt out of the labor force, turn to illegal activity, or need government assistance.

Beyond the more obvious moral or social obligation or incentive that governments might have to keep students in school and ensure their educational success, there are other significant monetary incentives to do so. The consequences of dropping out lead to significantly increased public expenditures, as dropouts are more likely to be dependent on outside sources of income. A Massachusetts study found that dropouts in the state pay significantly less in taxes and receive much more public assistance: “high school dropouts were the only group of adults in Massachusetts whose transfer costs outweighed the payroll and income taxes that they paid.”<sup>28</sup> Across the U.S., the average high school dropout received \$2,132.00 more in cash and in-kind transfers than he paid in income and payroll taxes, whereas the graduate with no post-secondary schooling paid \$2,146.00 more in taxes than he received in cash transfers!<sup>29</sup> The costs of crime and imprisonment add further fiscal burdens for states. Dropouts are institutionalized at such high rates that they cost the state two to three times more than diploma holders in average

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<sup>27</sup> Williams.

<sup>28</sup> Khatiwada, I., McLaughlin, J., Sum, A., (2007). “The Fiscal Economic Consequences of Dropping Out of High School: Estimates of the Tax Payments and Transfers Received by Massachusetts Adults in Selected Educational Subgroups.” Center of Labor Market Studies, for the Boston Private Industry Council.

<sup>29</sup> Khatiwada.

institutional costs.<sup>30</sup> It clearly would be worthwhile to spend money on preventive measures such as keeping students in school.

The great number of young adults with limited mobility due to their dropout status has horrible implications for the economy. Lower labor force participation and incomes hinder economic growth; lower overall skill levels caused by one third of the nation failing to complete high school hurts global competitiveness. It would be in the U.S.'s economic interest to spend money on preventive measures that would help students to develop human capital, reducing their future risk of poverty, unemployment, dependency, and incarceration and increasing the country's ability to grow and compete.

### **III. Causes of Dropping Out of High School**

Why are so many low-income and minority students opting out of public education when the costs associated with dropping out are so high? The decision to drop out of high school is influenced by many different factors; individual dropouts occur for a unique and complex combination of reasons. However there are some important root causes that may be leading to the current dropout crisis. While many often assume that dropouts were failing when enrolled, the vast majority of dropouts had passing grades and had the potential to succeed in high school.

Research has found dropping out to be attributed to a variety of causes, most often stemming from peer influences, residential mobility, and school-related, family-related, or job-related issues.<sup>31</sup> Alienation from school is a particularly large obstacle to graduation, especially

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<sup>30</sup> Khatiwada. The "annual costs of institutionalization of male high school dropouts were 2 times as high as those of high school graduate without any postsecondary schooling" and "female high school dropouts still generated for 3 times the average institutional costs of female high school graduates" with no post secondary schooling.

<sup>31</sup> Jordan, W., Lara, J., and McPartland, J., (1996). "Exploring the Causes of Early Dropout among Race-Ethnic and Gender Groups." *Youth & Society*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 62-94.

for white students. African American males face difficulties due to suspension or expulsion more than any other group. Females from minority groups drop out for familial reasons more often than males or white females.<sup>32</sup> Despite these trends, the vast majority of dropouts are due to perceived and real obstacles within the school, not outside influence like family or the need to work.<sup>33</sup>

To find the root causes of high school dropout we must look beyond absenteeism, family-related reasons, disciplinary action, and failing grades. While these are cited as direct reasons for dropping out, they are more like avenues to dropping out and consequences of other more complex circumstances. One must look beyond the surface reasons to determine how a student's attitude, school, family, and neighborhood influence him and his decision to graduate or dropout.

#### *A. Academic Performance, Deviant Behavior and Their Determinants*

Poor academic performance, or "flunking out" has been the traditional scapegoat for student dropouts. While academic difficulty, often to the point of failure, may be the reason behind many instances of dropping out, it is not the most cited reason for leaving school, nor does it tell the whole story in itself. Academic failure can be a symptom of social or individual difficulties within the school, neighborhood, or home.

If a child has fallen far behind in school due to persistent difficulties, he may see graduation as an unachievable feat. The standardization of high school testing and the rise of high-stakes assessments in the advent of No Child Left Behind has made it increasingly difficult for struggling students to graduate. In New York students must pass five different subject tests in addition to completion of 22 courses in order to receive a regular New York State High School

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Bridgeland.

Diploma.<sup>34</sup> To students already struggling to complete course requirements and stuck at very low skill levels, the tests may seem like an insurmountable obstacle. Frustration and hopelessness over the situation increase the risk of dropping out; the perverse incentive schools may have to “push out” low-performing students in order to raise their achievement levels may lead to these students receiving less support or even encouragement to leave school.<sup>35</sup> While higher academic achievement and accountability are appropriate goals, the challenges and needs of low performing students must be considered; alternative programs and assessment methods should be explored in order to better serve the considerable population of struggling students at risk of dropping out. While the limits of this paper prohibit a comprehensive overview, there is a huge amount of literature on how to reform our schools and craft an educational structure that more creatively engages and serves the student of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Academic failure is a common and persistent precursor to dropping out. The key questions surrounding this issue ask: what leads to academic struggle and eventual failure, and how does academic failure relate to the decision to drop out? One theory suggests that academic failure is directly responsible for dropping out, as poor academic achievement mediates antisocial and destructive behaviors.<sup>36</sup> Academic failure would then cause corresponding characteristics of dropping out such as disciplinary problems, alienation from the school, drug use, trouble with peers, and clashes with teachers. This places all blame for these dropout behaviors on a students’ low academic achievement levels: low achievement instigates behavior which leads to dropping out. Some students who are failing are able to get support they need through school settings, extra help catching up in credits and assistance in getting their grades

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<sup>34</sup> University of the State of New York State Education Department. <http://www.nysed.gov>

<sup>35</sup> Bridgeland.

<sup>36</sup> Battin-Pearson, Sara, Newcomb, Michael D., Abbott, Robert D., Hill, Karl G., Catalano, Richard F., Hawkins, J. David, “Predictors of early high school dropout: A test of five theories.” *Journal of Educational Psychology*. Vol. 92, Issue 3.

up. The fact that student failure is still common despite these interventions, and that this failure may often be a catalyst for destructive behavior, is evidence of the difficulties schools face in appropriately supporting students who are struggling academically.

But this simple explanation does not tell the whole story, as it gives just academic failure as a root cause for dropping out, and is in direct contradiction of the evidence finding many dropouts are preventable. Only 35% of dropouts list failure as a reason for leaving school. In a very important and high-profile study sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Civic Enterprises conducted a comprehensive survey of a representative sample of high school dropouts, detailing “The Silent Epidemic” of dropping out.<sup>37</sup> The study’s most important finding is that most dropouts were preventable: a massive 88% of dropouts said they had passing grades, and 70% were confident that they could have graduated had they tried harder. The statistics and literature go against common assumptions that dropouts are failing out or that the school would be better off without them, as most of these dropouts seem to have been avoidable.

In addition, not all who are failing engage in disruptive and destructive behavior. Many students have poor academic achievement levels due to low motivation and other destructive behaviors; conversely, these behaviors influence many passing students to drop out. Academic failure may encourage deviant behavior and these behaviors may lead to the decision to dropout for some students, but further explanation is necessary to discover causation as well as other possible motivations. We must further examine what causes students to sabotage their education.

Drug use, criminal behavior, and early sexual activity are all correlated with dropping out. The incidence of a student’s peers engaging in these activities is also a predictor of

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<sup>37</sup> Bridgeland, et al.

dropping out.<sup>38</sup> Deviant behavior increases the likelihood of dropping out through lower levels of academic achievement but also has a direct effect on dropout rates regardless of academic performance, so that it goes beyond the mediating effect discussed earlier.<sup>39</sup> The same is true for peer behavior: deviant behavior by a student's friends negatively influences behavior as well as academic achievement. Deviant behavior and dropping out do seem to often come hand in hand, although this is not always the case. Whether the dropout was caused directly or indirectly (through academic failure) by deviant behavior or that of his peers, it is more important to discover why a student resorts to this antisocial behavior.

Student alienation from the school has a particularly important influence on academic achievement and deviant behavior. The most cited reason for dropping out was that classes just were not interesting and the student was bored – 47% of all dropouts reported these reasons for leaving school. Almost as many students reported that they missed too many days of school and were not able to catch up or that they spent time with people who were not interested in school. Almost 70% of the dropouts surveyed reported that they had too much freedom in school and that “keeping students from skipping classes” would help more students stay in school.<sup>40</sup> Dropouts report low levels of motivation as well as a lack of real world learning opportunities. The experiences of dropouts show that greater access to information or guidance may have led to very different outcomes.

### *B. Imperfect Information*

The most troubling aspect regarding recent dropout rates is that the majority of the students regretted their decision. Worse yet, while in school dropouts “didn't see any direct

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<sup>38</sup> Battin-Pearson.

<sup>39</sup> Battin-Pearson.

<sup>40</sup> Bridgeland.

connection between what they were learning in the classroom and to their own lives or to their career aspirations.”<sup>41</sup> This disconnection between what students feel that the school offers and real life is absolutely critical: it suggests that students don’t recognize the payoffs that a diploma provides. If they do not perceive the benefits to education, for whatever reason, students have no reason to stay in high school. This alienation from school and feeling of high school’s irrelevance leads to academic failure as well as deviant behaviors. A classic market failure, imperfect information, is at work in this situation: students do not perceive the benefits to investment in human capital, and so they will not invest. If information was more widely dispersed and available to all, students would realize the future benefits in a diploma and would invest at more appropriate rates. This problem of access to information is only partially fixable through increasing information channels: most teenagers are not equipped to make decisions that require so much foresight and have such huge consequences at such a young age.

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So many students drop out at age 16, the age at which most states allow students to drop out of school. However at this time students are not equipped with the maturity or the information to make this decision. A vast majority of dropouts, 81%, said that they now believe graduating from high school is important to success in life, while 74% said they would stay in school if they could do it over again. The prevalence of regret among dropouts when considering their decision to leave school is a perfect illustration of imperfect information: they are not aware at the time of the decision how important a diploma would end up being. This lack of awareness is complicated, but can be attributed to natural immaturity at this age and the inability to make sound judgments about the future, which add to the lack of information about

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<sup>41</sup> John Bridgeland. In an interview with Elaine Korry, as part of the National Public Radio report, “High School Dropouts Aren’t All ‘F’ Students.” Morning Edition, March 2, 2006.

the future as well. Their perspectives after dropping out and becoming accustomed to the realities of life after high school are more informed, and filled with regret.

Compounding the problem, not only do teenagers lack helpful information about the real world, but they are naturally short-sighted: “adolescents have difficulty with long-term planning and delayed gratification.”<sup>42</sup> They are not equipped to make a decision that will affect them so profoundly for the rest of their lives when they are so young. This is precisely why parental influence is so important. When students are making these crucial decisions without a great deal of parental guidance or expectations, it is not surprising that they make the wrong decision. The problem of imperfect information involves not only a lack of information about the benefits to education but also the ways in which teenagers have imperfect means of processing and making judgments using this information.

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### *C. Parental Involvement*

The family has a substantial influence on a student’s decision to drop out. While parental divorce, familial stress, and parental control and acceptance all have socialization influences on a student, “the most prominent and consistent effect from the family on the child’s academic success has been the parent’s own education levels.”<sup>43</sup> The negative effect of a parent’s education level on their child’s decision to drop out materializes, in one way, through parental expectations. Low parental expectations and monitoring have detrimental effects on a child’s academic achievement. Teenagers are risk-takers and are unlikely to think about the future rationally; they need an adult that is able to encourage the student to do well in school in order to

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<sup>42</sup> Bridgeland.

<sup>43</sup> Battin-Pearson.

reap unseen benefits down the road. Without guidance and clear expectations, teenagers may treat high school casually, or may even deem it not worth their time.

The Gates Foundation study found that students needed more discipline in their lives that would keep them in school. Students need positive parental influence and expectations in their lives that helps them to make the right decision. Not only do dropouts report low levels of parental knowledge about their grades and behavior in school, but they also report that they did not have enough rules in life.<sup>44</sup> Parental work schedules and a variety of other reasons may keep parents from becoming involved in their students' schooling. This lack of involvement has devastating effects, and is a crucial cause reason why students drop out of school.

In an insightful study, "Family Influences on Dropout Behavior in One California High School," Rumberger et al. studied family-process characteristics such as communication patterns, discipline, and parenting studies as well as parental attitudes and behaviors towards school.<sup>45</sup> Dropouts report making significantly fewer of their decisions jointly with their parents than high school graduates, even when compared to graduates with lower levels of academic achievement. The children of parents who made the decisions in the household and concerning education were less likely to drop out – the students who made decisions themselves, and so were less influenced by the foresight and judgment of their parents, were more likely to drop out. In addition, they were also more likely to have parents who used a permissive parenting style, and their parents are less involved in their education than all other groups of parents. In sum,

What most distinguishes dropouts from other low-achieving students who stay in school is the higher levels of educational involvement by both the parent and the children of those who stay in school... This lack of parental control and excessive

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<sup>44</sup> Bridgeland.

<sup>45</sup> Rumberger, Russell, Ghatak, Rita, Poulos, Gary, Ritter, Phillip, and Dornbusch, Sanford, (1990). *Family Influences on Dropout Behavior in One California High School*. *Sociology of Education* 63: 283-299; Astone & McLanahan (1991). *Family Structure, Parental Practices and High School Completion*. *American Sociological Review* Volume 56, Number 3: 309-320.

peer influence may lead to improper social attitudes and behaviors, as well as to a host of negative outcomes... which influence dropout behavior.<sup>46</sup>

Parental expectations and parenting styles have a huge effect on a student's achievement in and attitudes towards schooling. In general, a parent's expectations have been shown to increase as they have higher levels of education. Low-income students, whose parents have on average much lower levels of education, are at an even greater disadvantage and it is easy to see how a generational cycle of dropping out ensues. Teenagers are looking for guidance and social cues as to how to act towards school, and so parents have a huge effect on a student's educational attitude and behavior. In addition, lower-income parents react differently to poor academic performance: Rumberger finds that they are more likely to accept the authority of the school and negative feedback, becoming discouraged and discouraging their children in the face of poor performance.<sup>47</sup> This negative feedback is not helpful to students struggling in school. As they may already be frustrated and are beginning to feel alienated from their teachers and the school itself, the lack of parental encouragement will lead to intensified feelings of hopelessness or disengagement.

While income is known to be a predictor of academic success and high school graduation, Guo, Brooks-Gunn, and Harris studied parental welfare status and labor force participation, and its effects on the academic success of their children.<sup>48</sup> Looking at the welfare status and employment of the parents may be helpful to discern a students' familiarity with the working world and the benefits to investment in education – which in turn may have an impact

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<sup>46</sup> Rumberger (1991).

<sup>47</sup> Rumberger et al, 1991.

<sup>48</sup> Guo, G., Brooks-Gunn, J., and Harris, K.M., (1996). "Parent's Labor Force Attachment and Grade Retention Among Urban Black Children." *Sociology of Education*. 69:3, 217-236.

on graduation rates. Persistent dependence on welfare is found to be associated with increased risks of a child repeating a grade in middle or high school.<sup>49</sup>

It is difficult to understate the modeling effects that parents provide to their children. Parents are important suppliers of information about the benefits to education, most of which are unforeseeable by teenagers. Even beyond acting as information sources, parents can also help children make judgments that they may not be mature enough to make. Information primarily comes from one's parents, whether it is through direct conveyance or a child's observations of a parent's workforce and educational experience. Parental influence mitigates the market failure of imperfect information that often occurs with human capital investment. In addition, as a parent communicates less with the student and leaves decisions about academic achievement and staying in school up to the child, the parent abandons his role as an informative source of guidance.

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### **IV. Objectives**

Three themes that recur throughout the literature and firsthand accounts are particularly important. Parental involvement and support and engagement at school are crucial to the academic experience and keeping students in school. Additionally, there is limited access to information about the labor market and the benefits of investment in education. The causes for this state of imperfect information are complex and less well understood. Students not only do not have the information about costs and benefits, but they also may be unwilling or unable to plan into the future and weigh forthcoming costs and benefits. Parents, mentors, community figures, and schools can serve as information channels for students. All three themes, parents,

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<sup>49</sup> Guo, et al.

school engagement, and information, can be addressed by providing students with adequate support and guidance in high schools so that they are better able to process information about their future and can take advantage of the opportunity to invest in themselves. Support that helps engage a student in his education and integrate him into the school will help him to achieve a higher level of academic achievement. Increased access to information and guidance can help students make more informed decisions about their future and hopefully encourage them to invest in themselves and their education.

The most obvious policy remedies available are to increase the age of compulsory school attendance or to take measures that make it more difficult for children to drop out of school. When so many students drop out at age 16 they are making a disastrous decision at an age where they are not equipped with the necessary maturity, knowledge and foresight. Increasing the age of compulsory schooling would ensure that students are making a slightly more informed decision. Requiring a longer and more intensive dropout process that provides additional support and information to potential dropouts would also help to ensure that students and parents are more aware of the consequences of their actions and are making a more informed and well thought-out decision. This approach is not a foolproof remedy and does not address the causes of school and student failure and disengagement, but would be a relatively small and inexpensive approach towards ensuring the dropout process is not a simply and quickly made decision.

In order to address the higher risks low-income students face, as they may have less parental guidance, school support, and more limited knowledge about the labor market, schools must provide increased resources. Programs that contribute to expanded involvement or low-income parents and increased communication between school and parents could have positive effects on students' decisions and behavior modeling. A long-term and more expensive strategy

is to reform curriculums in order to make the high school education more practical and interesting to students, engaging them at higher levels and motivating them to put forth a greater effort.

While these approaches may lead to greater levels of engagement of both parents and students, they will require significant investment of resources and sharp changes in attitudes and behavior. Another possibility for increasing engagement and improving information channels is enhancing extracurricular and community programs. This approach would capitalize on the unique ability of programs outside of the traditional school structure to reach students, expand their social networks, and help them build knowledge that applies beyond the classroom. Integration and engagement have a positive effect on graduation rates, as students are able to identify with the school and school culture. Stronger social ties have been shown to be positively correlated with graduation rates.<sup>50</sup> School engagement theory and social integration theory may be used to predict graduate rates based on the student's integration within the school<sup>51</sup>. Low levels of engagement in bonding between the student and his school, professors, or peers may be mediated through low levels of academic achievement, having an adverse effect on probability of graduation.

Extracurricular activities have been shown to have a positive correlation with graduation rates, leading to increased integration within a school and interaction with new groups of peers and adults.<sup>52</sup> Extracurricular activities may increase school engagement, which is often viewed as a solution to poor academic performance and student alienation.<sup>53</sup> Behavioral engagement

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<sup>50</sup> McNeal, Jr., Ralph B. "Extracurricular Activities and High School Dropouts." *Sociology of Education*, Vol. 68, No. 1. (Jan., 1995), pp. 62-80.

<sup>51</sup> McNeal.

<sup>52</sup> Mahoney, J., and Cairns, R., (1997). "Do Extracurricular Activities Protect Against Early School Dropout?" *Developmental Psychology*, 33(2): 241-53..

<sup>53</sup> Fredricks, J.A., Blumenfeld, P.C., Paris, A.H., (2004). "School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence." *Review of Educational Research*, 74:1, pp. 59-109.

involves commitment, or investment, in the school, and is most directly displayed through participation in school-related activities.<sup>54</sup> Behavioral engagement has been found to have a positive correlation with academic achievement for students at all levels of schooling.<sup>55</sup> Engagement and interaction can also be considered from emotional and cognitive perspectives. Extracurricular activities may be a way for schools to support students who are having difficulties with integration and engagement in their studies due to differences in support structures at home. The evidence suggests that improvements in these areas would lead to greater academic achievement and a greater likelihood of graduation. Students that are involved in extracurricular activities increase their connections to peers and adults and have more significant investment in their school. Student engagement can be improved by encouraging involvement in different areas of the school community and helping students to discover new hobbies and professional and academic areas they are interested in.

The concept of social capital is also very important in the discussion of high school graduation, and may inform the conversation as to how extracurricular activities have a positive effect on a student and make him more likely to graduate from high school. Participation in extracurricular activities may help a student to develop additional personal connections and knowledge about the world outside of his neighborhood as he explores various topics and groups outside of his immediate circle, which may have a positive or negative influence. These connections and the knowledge gained from them may be what enable middle and upper class students who have expanded social networks to not only realize the benefits to an education, but also make that education itself more valuable. Social capital is productive, “making possible the

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<sup>54</sup> Finn, J., (1989). "Withdrawing from School." Review of Educational Research 59:117- 42.

<sup>55</sup> McNeal.

achievement of certain ends,” existing within the structure of relations between actors.<sup>56</sup> Social capital, like physical capital and human capital, facilitates productive activity and is used by combining organizational resources.<sup>57</sup>

One of the most important forms of social capital is information channels, or “the potential for information that inheres in social relations.”<sup>58</sup> Information may be used as a basis for action; using information gained from social interaction is a way of capitalizing on “social relations that are maintained for other purposes.”<sup>59</sup> Extracurricular activities, by exposing students to different groups of students and mentors, provide a social structure of relations that can facilitate the use of social capital and provide an avenue for the spreading of information. By serving as bases for social capital, extracurricular activities enhance a student’s access to information from which they make decisions. Extracurricular activities provide information through social networks in a variety of ways, beyond social connections. Extracurricular activities provide information about different fields, like newspapers or engineering and potential new interests, activities, or hobbies, such as a foreign language, video games, or volunteering. They enable students to explore different academic, recreational and professional fields, providing valuable information and helping to build relationships. Sparking a student’s interest in hobbies and activities engages them in other social circles and increases their investment in the school – it does not particularly matter how professionally constructive an activity may be in order for a student to benefit from these baseline social effects. Additional positive effects from

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<sup>56</sup> Coleman, J., (1988). “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital.” *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 94, Supplement: Organizations and Institutions: Sociological and Economic Approaches to the Analysis of Social Structure, pp. S95-S120.

<sup>57</sup> Coleman, J.

<sup>58</sup> Coleman, J.

<sup>59</sup> Coleman, J.

the activities, such as the broadening of a student's perspective and skill development, are important but secondary benefits

As a student chooses to participate in extracurricular activities, he may feel more in control of individual outcomes and more integrated into his school. Locus of Control Theory accounts for the extent to which students believe that their actions affect outcomes, and is used to determine how teenagers assess the returns to education.<sup>60</sup> “Teenagers with more internal locus of control tend to believe that their actions, such as graduating from high school, will influence the likelihood that they receive a high-wage path while teenagers with more external locus of control tend to believe that graduating from high school will have little effect on the likelihood of receiving higher wages.”<sup>61</sup> Extracurricular activities may help a student to feel more in control of what happens to him and to develop a more internal locus of control. This leads students to consider the future effects of their present behavior more carefully, and would lead to better decisions about their investments in education.

Extracurricular activities are supplemental to academic activities and take place after school hours, where the primary focus of program does not have to be academic. Who organizes and administers the activity does not matter as long as the activity is structured and productive. The program can take place at a school, community center, church, sports club, etc. Community organizing and development organizations are particularly well-positioned to involve students in constructive activities in their neighborhoods, expanding their social interactions and helping them to learn about the professional world while building up their communities. The presence of active community organizing organizations in a neighborhood has a positive influence on graduation rates in the area, and extracurricular and community activities reduce dropout rates by

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<sup>60</sup> Coleman, M., DeLeire, T., (2003). “An Economic Model of Locus of Control and the Human Capital Investment Decision”. *Journal of Human Resources*, 38(3), 701-721.

<sup>61</sup> Coleman, M.

aiding in the development of social capital.<sup>62</sup> These programs are well-positioned to tackle the most prominent causes of dropping out: disengagement from the school, deviant behaviors, and lack of information from parents, neighborhoods, and schools about the benefits to an education. By helping students to develop informational networks and become more involved in their high schools, extracurricular and community programs can easily provide support to at-risk students.

Extracurricular activities help students to perceive the benefits to a diploma more accurately, enabling them to make a more informed decision about their high school education. Enlarging students' network and engagement also means that students will have access to more mentors that can set expectations and encourage them to graduate. All of the positive effects from extracurricular activities show how effective it would be to expand these programs.

Activities and programs that get young people involved, expand their networks and introduce them to more information channels should be considered as a policy option. Low income students are at such a disadvantage in information and networks compared to their middle and upper class peers; developing these programs in low-income schools and neighborhoods would help to mimic the natural social networks of higher income communities. The education of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not confined to the classroom, and requires increased engagement of students. For a student to stay in school and invest in himself, he must have a moderate understanding of the benefits to this investment. This understanding is developed through the examples and expectations from the student's parents, adult mentors, and peers; parental influence and guidance to supplement the judgment of the student, who may not have developed the ability or discipline to understand future costs and benefits; and life experiences gained from the

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<sup>62</sup> <http://www.mott.org/recentnews/news/2008/annenber.aspx>, McNeal, Jr, Ralph B. "Extracurricular Activities and High School Dropouts." *Sociology of Education*, Vol. 68, No. 1. (Jan., 1995), pp. 62-80.

neighborhood, school, extracurricular activities and elsewhere. The importance of information and social networks to this understanding cannot be understated.

The decision to drop out of high school is complex, influenced by a huge variety of factors. The extremely high graduation rates throughout the country are leaving a huge part of the country without crucial labor market and academic skills, at risk of prolonged unemployment, crime, and poverty. The preventability of so many dropouts makes the dropout crisis particularly worrying. By helping students expand their social networks and information channels, low-income students can have increased access to information and mentors that can help them to make educational investment decisions. This can be accomplished through extracurricular and community programs, as they are practical and effective methods reaching at-risk students and lowering the dropout rate. Greater funding for these programs in low-income neighborhoods, whether they take place in the school, community center, church or sports field, would increase the variety of programs offered to students so that more students can be reached and can find activities and programs they are interested in exploring. Greater involvement and engagement would expand potential and increase graduation rates in low-income communities, helping to reduce the growing educational and income disparities in the U.S.

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