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HOW CAN WE HELP?

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM EVALUATIONS OF FEDERAL DROPOUT-PREVENTION PROGRAMS

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A Research Report from the School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program Evaluation

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Dropping out of school is easy. Students who have done it say they simply stopped going to school one day. Some said they dropped out because they thought school principals or teachers wanted them to. Others said they dropped out because of circumstances outside their control. Either way, they may have encountered little resistance from others around them.

As a society, we do not want students to drop out. We know that students who do probably are not prepared for what happens to them afterward. Most dropouts will not work as much as students who finish school and will not earn as much when they do work. Economic trends are likely to make this worse rather than better. Dropouts are more likely to depend on public assistance, to use drugs, to be arrested and spend time in jails or prisons. We want students to succeed in school and in adult life. Dropping out is a signal that a young person has not succeeded in school and may not succeed in adult life. But can dropping out be reduced or prevented?

Local school districts have long operated dropout-prevention programs, but these districts do not often conduct large-scale evaluations to study the effectiveness of their programs. Beginning in the late 1980s, the U.S. Department of Education conducted three large evaluations of the effectiveness of programs designed to reduce dropping out. The programs and the evaluations were supported by funds from the Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act (under the Cooperative Demonstration Program) and two phases of the School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program (SDDAP), one operating from 1989 to 1991, the other from 1991 to 1996.

The evaluation of the second phase of SDDAP on which this summary focuses, was the longest and largest of the three evaluations. It was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., with Policy Studies Associates and RMC Research. It looked into how dropout-prevention programs operated, how programs used their funds, what kinds of students attended the programs, and whether programs improved student outcomes. More than 20 programs around the country were part of the evaluation, and more than 10,000 students--some who attended the programs and some who did not--were followed for two to three years so that program effects could be measured.

The key finding from the evaluation is that most programs made almost no difference in preventing dropping out *in general*. Dropping out is as hard to prevent as it is easy to do. Some outcomes improved for some students, but no program was able to improve all the key education outcomes such as dropping out, attendance, test scores, and grades. This finding is consistent with findings from the other two evaluations.

On the other hand, a few programs did make a difference on some outcomes. Three programs preparing students who had already dropped out to get the General Education Development certificate improved GED completion rates. An alternative high school on a community college campus reduced dropout rates. Several alternative middle schools also reduced dropout rates. And efforts to restructure whole schools so that students are less likely to drop out improved test scores when the focus was on changing what happened in the classroom. Educators and policymakers continue to address the dropout issue and these results from the evaluation can shape their thinking.

If we as a society want to encourage more students to complete high school, we need to continue trying new approaches and ideas that may work better. A starting point for a new approach is to consider why some programs have an effect while others do not. Program successes may be rare

because of the difficulty of matching program designs with students those designs can help. Programs that succeed simply may be the right blend of activities, approaches, and supports for their students. Using a specific program approach, such as creating a school within a school or an alternative school, is fundamentally a one-size-fits-all solution that is in conflict with the many different kinds of students and the many different reasons they have for dropping out. We should not have much confidence in a doctor who treated all patients with the same medication ("take two aspirin") though patients complained of different problems. We would have more confidence in a doctor who first tried carefully to diagnose problems before prescribing treatments.

Likewise, we should not have much confidence in a dropout-prevention program that treats all students in the same way. The program may be an effective treatment for some students and an ineffective treatment for others. Trying to understand the particular characteristics of individual students and using this understanding as a basis for developing interventions for struggling students, may be a useful approach for program designers to consider.

Schools that diagnose student problems well currently may not be able to pull together the many kinds of resources necessary to intervene successfully. Schools may need to integrate better with other service providers to be able to help students, but we do not yet have any good examples of this to point to. However, this may be the most promising direction for helping to reduce dropping out.

What Dropout-Prevention Programs Do

To understand dropout-prevention programs, it is useful to understand program objectives and what programs do to meet them. It is also useful to know more about how programs allocate their resources and the kinds of students they serve. Detailed descriptions of the programs and students they serve are found in evaluation reports (Adelman and Rubenstein 1994; Hershey et al. 1995; Rosenberg and Hershey 1995; Gleason and Dynarski 1994; Gleason and Dynarski 1995). Table 1 provides a brief description of programs that were part of Mathematica's evaluation.

Most programs in the evaluation of the second SDDAP expressed their objectives simply. Program staff wanted students to attend school more and learn more because of their experiences in the program, which ultimately would result in students being less likely to drop out. Many programs also wanted to build students' self-esteem and their ability to cope with challenges and problems in a mature way. Program staff frequently expressed the view that students had had too many negative experiences in school and that programs should provide positive experiences. The main objective, though, was to get students to come to school. Programs felt that they needed students to come to school for other program services to matter at all.

Successfully completing a program meant different things, depending on the program. For programs operating in middle schools, successful completion generally meant that students continued on to and were better prepared for high school. Some middle school programs were trying to accelerate their students so they could catch up with their age peers, and successfully completing the program might mean compressing two years of middle school course work into a single school year.

Successfully completing programs for students of high school age generally meant that students received either a high school diploma or a GED certificate. In the evaluation, these two ways of

TABLE 1

SDDAP PROJECTS INCLUDED IN THE IMPACT EVALUATION

Program/Location	Sponsor	Project Approach
Middle School Projects		
COMET Program Miami, FL	CBO with school district	School within a school
Twelve Together Program Chula Vista, CA	School district with local foundation	Weekly peer discussion groups with volunteer counselors
Up with Literacy Long Beach, CA	School district	Tutoring and homework assistance, counseling
Early Identification and Intervention Project Rockford, IL	School district	General studies class for homework assistance counseling
Middle School Leadership Program Albuquerque, NM	CBO with school district	Leadership workshop
Project ACCEL Newark, NJ	School district	School within a school
Accelerated Academics Academy Flint, MI	School district	Alternative school
Griffin-Spalding Middle School Academy Atlanta, GA	CBO	Alternative school
High School Projects		
School-Within-a-School at Wells Academy Chicago, IL	University/ school district	School within a school
Corporate Academy Miami, FL	CBO with school district	Alternative school
Middle College High School Seattle, WA	School district	Alternative school
JFY High School and University High School Boston, MA	CBO	Alternative school
Horizon High Schools Las Vegas, NV	School district	Alternative school
Student Training and Re-Entry (STAR) Tulsa, OK	Vocational school district	Nine-week reentry program on vo-tech campus
Metropolitan Youth Academy St. Louis, MO	CBO	GED program
Flowers with Care Queens, NY	CBO	GED program
Restructuring Projects		
Spruce High School and Middle School Dallas, TX	Southwest Texas State University with Dallas Independent School District	Staff development, school-based decision-making, health clinic and child care center
Ottawa Hills High School and Iroquois Middle School Grand Rapids, MI	Grand Rapids Public Schools	Outcomes-based curriculum, dropout-prevention services
Gratz High School and Gillespie Middle School Philadelphia, PA	School District of Philadelphia	School councils, staff development
Central High School Phoenix, AZ	Phoenix Union High School District	Ninth-grade enclave, staff development, dropout-prevention services
Century High School Santa Ana, CA	Santa Ana School District	Interdisciplinary instruction, staff development, dropout-prevention services

completing high school were associated with different program structures. Programs leading to diplomas typically were set up by school districts. They were similar to regular high schools, except that the schools often were much smaller, enrolling no more than about 400 students. Programs leading to GEDs typically were set up by community-based organizations and were smaller than diploma programs, enrolling no more than about 100 students. Programs leading to diplomas tended to last longer than GED programs, especially for students who had not progressed far in school. GED programs were more often for students who had already dropped out, and they were structured to allow students to pace work on their own and take the GED test whenever they were ready.

All programs in the evaluation shared two features. Programs tried to help students overcome personal, family, and social barriers and problems that interfered with their ability to go to school and do well there. Programs also tried to create smaller and more personal settings in which students could feel secure and learn more effectively. The two features overlap somewhat. For example, counselors in some programs spent part of their time helping students deal with barriers and part of their time helping students with their studies.

Counseling Was a Primary Component of Dropout Prevention Programs

Counseling was the primary tool that programs used to help students deal with barriers and problems affecting progress in school. Nearly all programs offered access to counselors as one of their services, and the type of counseling offered was more geared toward intervention than that offered by counselors in regular schools. Some programs had counselors on staff. Others linked students with counselors if the need arose. Some programs had students meet with counselors regularly (weekly or monthly, for example). Others had counselors on staff who met with students as the need arose. Programs used other types of staff (such as community liaisons or mentors) who also were able to help students, but this was much less common than using counselors.

What programs were doing in providing access to counselors highlights an important aspect of what they could not do. Working from within schools or community organizations, counselors and programs in general could not address large-scale community problems such as unemployment and crime, and they could only mitigate family problems such as poverty and abuse. Research often has shown that communities and families strongly influence academic achievement. Programs to keep students in school that do not improve communities or family situations implicitly are assuming that what happens to students in school contributes importantly to whether students drop out. However, student problems that programs could address may have been minor compared to student problems they could not address.

An alternative approach might focus less on schools and more on communities. Neighborhood development efforts, enterprise zones, and comprehensive service initiatives such as the U.S. Department of Labor's "Youth Fair Chance" program (Corson et al. 1996), which target whole neighborhoods or cities and involve a wide range of organizations within these areas, also have the potential to reduce dropping out. Whether they do so, however, is a question that is only beginning to be addressed.

There's a Program You Can Go To

Some of the schools just want to get you out. . . . For them, it's 'there's a program you can go to' and they push you to go into it so that you can leave their school.

Student, alternative high school, Boston

This math teacher told me, 'Hey, you know what? If I were you I'd drop out of school, "cause no matter what you do you're not gonna pass . . . and it really depressed me because I love math. She used to tell me every day, 'I don't know what you come to school for.'

Student, alternative high school, Miami

Smaller School Settings Were a Primary Component of Dropout-Prevention Programs

The other important component of dropout-prevention programs was an attempt to create smaller school settings. Educators and researchers have long noted that students in large schools can become alienated and uninterested to the point where they feel little attachment to school and eventually drop out.[1] Smaller and more personal school settings are the prescription that comes from this diagnosis.

Some programs created smaller and more personal settings by setting aside time during a school day where students in the program could meet in small groups to work on academic skills, or meet with mentors. Others did so by setting up alternative schools that were smaller than schools that students otherwise would have attended or setting up schools within schools. The alternative schools and school within schools programs generally served no more than 400 students at a time, and some schools had fewer than 100 students. Alternative schools and schools within schools generally also had more teachers and staff per student than regular schools. The result was a small-school setting where teachers and staff could give students more attention and, in theory, help them do better in school.

More Was Spent on Students in Dropout-Prevention Programs

Providing access to counselors and creating smaller school settings had a clear implication for resources. Students had more spent on them as a result of being in the programs. Program budgets and enrollments varied widely, but the median program had an annual budget of $650,000 to $700,000 and a median student enrollment of 300, implying average spending per student of roughly $2,200 (Adelman and Rubenstein 1994). This amount represented an increase of about a third over what students normally would have had spent on them (Rosenberg and Hershey 1995). Programs

[1]Wehlage et al. (1989) explore the literature and provide case studies of small schools.

Everybody Knows You

Teachers know you and everybody knows you. And the teachers will say "Oh, I know you can do better" because they know who you are.

Student, Corporate Academy, Miami, Florida, talking about her experience at the Academy

You gotta stand up, in the back of the room. There is no way I am gonna stand up to go to school.

Student, Corporate Academy, Miami, Florida, talking about crowding in her previous high school

They give you a lot of help in this program, better than in regular school.

They're more dedicated to their work.

Students at JFY Academy, Boston, Massachusetts

devoted about three-fourths of their resources to staff, allocating the resources to teachers (31 percent), counselors (21 percent), administrators (18 percent), aides (17 percent), and others (13 percent).

The extent to which programs increased spending differed by the type of program. Programs that added services to regular school (such as programs to build self-esteem) increased resources by moderate amounts. Programs that reduced class sizes were associated with the largest increases in spending on students, and programs that set up alternative schools often had the smallest increases in spending. A program called Career Opportunities Motivated Through Educational Technology (COMET) in Miami, Florida, operated with class sizes of 15, about half the size of regular classes in comparable district schools. The evaluation estimated that students who participated in the COMET program had 110 percent more spent on them than comparable students not in the program. Students in the Metropolitan Youth Academy in St. Louis, a small program preparing students for the GED, had about eight percent less spent on them than students in other district schools. The Academy had higher staff-to-student ratios than regular high schools. However, it used adult-education instructors who were paid less than teachers in regular high schools and did not offer other services (such as libraries, sports teams, clubs, and staff professional-development opportunities) found in regular high schools.

Most Students in the Programs Were at Risk of Dropping Out

The second phase of SDDAP supported two types of dropout prevention programs: one focused on schools, the other on students. The first type--called "restructuring" programs--operated in

schools that had many students who were dropout-prone, and focused on changing the schools to reduce dropping out. The second type--called "targeted" programs--operated in schools or community organizations but on a smaller scale, identifying students who were dropout-prone or who had dropped out and working with them to try to help them complete middle school or high school. Targeted programs tried to get help to students who needed it, whereas restructuring programs tried to make targeted programs unnecessary by improving schools and school outcomes for all students.

Both program types mostly served students who were "at risk" of dropping out (Table 2). Students in targeted middle and high school programs, and in restructuring middle and high schools, commonly had several risk factors. These included living in a single-parent household, having parents or a sibling who did not complete high school, being home alone more than three hours a day, having low income or being on public assistance, or having limited English proficiency. Overall, 74 percent of students in targeted middle school programs and 94 percent of students in targeted high school programs had two or more risk factors, compared to 37 percent of 8th graders and 31 percent of 10th graders nationwide (Gleason and Dynarski 1994). The proportions are similar for students who were attending restructuring schools.

At-risk students had other characteristics that do not conform to stereotypical notions of a school dropout (Table 2). Nearly all program participants (89 percent in the targeted middle school programs and 84 percent in the targeted high school programs) felt they probably would graduate from high school or were very sure they would graduate. Some had excellent attendance records and high grades: 60 percent of students in the targeted middle school programs were absent fewer than 10 days in the previous school year. Many had high aspirations for how far they wanted to go in school and in their careers. Seventy-five percent of students in targeted middle school programs said they wanted to get a college degree or a postgraduate degree, compared to 66 percent of eighth graders nationwide. Fifty-two percent indicated they expected to have jobs when they were 30 years old that would be classified as managerial or professional (usually the highest-paying jobs), compared to 39 percent of eighth graders nationwide.

Programs often use risk factors to identify appropriate students to serve, but programs used risk factors in a simple way. Students with risk factors were more likely to be considered for programs, and offsetting factors were almost never considered. Because risk factors on their own may not be good predictors of dropping out, programs may not have the best information for determining who they should serve.

Risk Factors Did Not Accurately Predict Dropping Out

The coexistence of risk factors with factors associated with high academic achievement suggests that dropping out may not be easy to predict using risk factors. Clear evidence that risk factors may not be good predictors of dropping out comes from a comparison of risk factors and whether students were dropouts two or three years later (Gleason and Dynarski 1998). If risk factors were good indicators of dropping out, knowing a student's risk factors would make a precise prediction of whether the student will be a dropout in the future possible. Follow-up data collected as part of Mathematica's evaluation allow the quality of the risk factors as predictors of dropping out to be

TABLE 2

THE DIVERSE NATURE OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

	Targeted Middle School Programs	Targeted High School Programs	Restructuring Middle School Programs	Restructuring High School Programs
Gender				
Male	49	55	53	52
Female	51	45	47	48
Race/Ethnicity				
Black	39	41	42	36
White	18	32	15	20
Hispanic	32	17	37	39
Other	11	9	6	6
Risk Factors				
Single-Parent Family	42	55	35	35
Family Receives Public Assistance	35	31	24	14
Limited English Proficiency	8	4	16	20
Overage for Grade Level	47	78	32	31
Low Grades	21	54	11	15
Disciplinary Problems	54	73	51	39
External Locus of Control	49	44	45	38
Has Own Children	0	14	1	3
At Least Two Risk Factors	74	94	62	57
Aspirations				
How Far Student Would Like to Get in School				
High school or less	10	14	10	9
Vocational school or some college	15	43	16	20
Four-year college or graduate degree	75	43	74	71
Student Certainty of Graduating from High School				
Very sure	58	48	64	76
Probably	31	36	32	20
Probably not	8	13	3	3
Surely not	3	3	1	1
School Attendance and Performance				
Days Absent During Baseline Year				
10 or less	60	27	63	46
11 to 20	25	25	20	41
More than 20	15	48	17	13
Percentile Score on Standardized Test				
Reading	36	39	34	38
Math	37	38	40	38

SOURCE: Gleason and Dynarski 1994; 1995.

NOTE: All numbers are in percents.

checked. The key finding from the analysis is that commonly used risk factors are weak predictors of dropping out. The analysis showed that many students with numerous risk factors stayed in school and many with no evident risk factors dropped out. The risk factor that was best able to predict whether middle school students were dropouts--high absenteeism--correctly identified dropouts only 16 percent of the time. Using risk factors was better than using no information at all, but it was not as good as their widespread use might indicate.

The result that risk factors do not predict dropping out has troubling implications for the effectiveness of dropout-prevention programs. It is difficult to believe that programs can make a dent in the dropout problem if they cannot accurately predict who will be a dropout in the first place. Even if dropouts could be identified accurately from risk factors, the wide variation in characteristics of students programs serve means that programs are working with a range of problems and issues that may require different approaches.

Can Old Dogs Learn New Tricks?

The context of the dropout-prevention programs affected their ability to operate effectively and adapt if necessary. The programs generally operated within schools or school districts or were collaborations between schools or school districts and other organizations. The programs often brought new and different elements into the local educational landscape: new services, different teaching styles, changes in how schools were organized, and an emphasis on trying to help students who had not succeeded in other schools. However, few institutions in America are more stable and slow to change than schools. The question is whether dropout-prevention programs, which were relatively small compared to their host schools or school districts, could be implemented and be accepted in a setting long noted for its resistance to change.

The evaluation observed that dropout-prevention programs were implemented more smoothly when they were not trying to affect how regular schools worked (Hershey et al. 1995). Dropout-prevention programs that tried to affect the way regular schools worked did so at their own peril. Districts and schools often expressed support for reducing the dropout rate and often were strong advocates of dropout-prevention programs. When dropout-prevention programs tried to change the status quo, however, district and school support evaporated quickly. Dropout-prevention programs could survive and flourish by accommodating school districts, but programs should not expect districts to adapt to accommodate them.

Experiences of three types of dropout-prevention programs illustrate the kinds of issues that arise when new elements come together with established settings and procedures. These three types of programs are (1) partnerships between community-based organizations and school districts, (2) alternative schools, and (3) school restructuring initiatives.

Partnerships between a community-based organization and one or several school districts were a common type of dropout-prevention program, in part because the U.S. Department of Education promoted these kinds of partnerships. Often, the community-based organization provided the impetus for the program, and its partner district provided teachers or access to students in schools. Regardless of the respective roles in the partnership, the success of the partnership depended heavily

on actions of districts and schools, which in turn depended heavily on larger forces (such as budgets and changes in leadership) affecting districts.

A long list of examples illustrates the fragility of district-community-based organization partnerships. Three programs that were partnerships between community-based organizations and school districts relied on districts to contribute teachers. Each was affected at one time or another by district decisions to reduce or withdraw the teachers. Another program operated by a community-based organization began as a leadership course taught during the regular school day. After one year of operation, the district told the organization that students would be attending an alternative middle school and the course would no longer be offered. The community-based organization was not consulted about the change but had to conform to it. Another community-based organization had to alter its plans to offer a values-enrichment course for at-risk students when most schools in its two partner districts declined to offer the course. As the examples suggest, the relationship between school districts and community-based organizations rarely was a relationship between equal partners.

The Challenge of Being Different

Alternative schools were another common type of dropout-prevention program in the evaluation. By their nature, alternative schools tried to change student experiences, not by changing existing schools, but by offering students a new kind of school (Hershey et al. 1995; Feister and Rubenstein 1994). Alternative schools struggled to coexist with regular schools, however. Alternative schools ran into problems recruiting students, which led districts to question the need for the schools. And alternative schools struggled with the difficult challenge of creating an academic setting in which students who had not succeeded in other settings would do better.

Alternative Schools Are Threats

Creators of alternative schools have to realize this is a threat to the public school system because the implication is that 'you have failed and we have come in to pick up the pieces.'

District administrator

Alternative schools are inherently suspect because they're different.

Alternative school administrator

It's almost impossible for an alternative school to be all the things that people perceive.

High school principal

Recruiting troubles may seem an odd problem for alternative schools to have. How could small schools for at-risk students operating in urban districts with many at-risk students have trouble recruiting enough students? The answer is that simply opening the doors of an alternative school is not enough to attract students. They have to know what the school is all about and have to want to come. The fact that some schools had to work hard to recruit students suggests that schools had difficulty spreading the message about what they were all about or that students may have had reservations about the schools.

Spreading the message about an alternative school's mission is no small challenge. It was certainly not safe for alternative schools to assume students and parents were eager to experiment with the schools. Alternative middle schools were new and untested, and students and parents may have been reluctant to be test cases. Alternative high schools in general have a longer history than alternative middle schools, but many districts in the evaluation had operated alternative high schools only for a short time. The schools did not have a public profile that attracted students: they had to contend with a public image that "bad kids" went there. The schools had not developed a network of referral sources. They had limited resources for advertising, and districts put pressure on them to not appear to be taking students away from regular schools. Schools were better able to attract students when the schools were close to where students lived, were flexible in who they would accept, and had extracurricular activities that made them more like regular school (Hershey et al. 1995). Students wanted their alternative-school experiences to be different from regular schools, but not too different.

Districts might have been able to help alternative schools in their recruiting efforts, but most did not. The lack of action is perhaps predictable. Alternative schools for at-risk students symbolize the fact that some students fail in regular schools. Few organizations or individuals hold symbols of their failure in high regard. Also, regular schools viewed alternative schools as competing for resources and students, which made it difficult for them to support the schools.

Some alternative schools made the recruiting task more difficult by restricting the kinds of students they would accept. The schools believed they needed to be restrictive to avoid becoming a dumping ground where regular schools could send their worst students. For example, one alternative school interviewed prospective students to assess whether they were motivated enough to succeed in the school. Another alternative school put incoming students on a two-week probationary period, during which they had to demonstrate exemplary behavior and attendance or be sent back to the regular schools.

In restricting the kinds of students they wanted to serve, alternative schools were trying to have it both ways. On the one hand, the schools professed their mission to be that of serving students who had not succeeded in regular schools. On the other hand, they wanted to serve students who *could* succeed in alternative settings, students with potential to succeed that had not yet been tapped. Recognizing the first objective, regular schools sent all kinds of students to alternative schools including "the worst misfits you can imagine," in the words of one alternative-school teacher. Recognizing the second objective, alternative schools sometimes sent "misfits" back to regular schools. The fact that alternative schools turned students away as not being motivated enough or not being able to behave well enough furthered the view among principals and district administrators that alternative schools were receiving preferential treatment. Certainly it was asking a lot of a

regular-school principal or teacher to refer students to an alternative school, only to have the school send back students it preferred not to serve. After all, regular schools themselves could not be selective. Alternative schools may have gained more control over who they served by being selective, but it cost them much-needed support from regular schools.

Teaching the Hardest To Teach

More than other dropout-prevention programs, alternative schools had to address the issue of how to help dropouts or potential dropouts succeed in the classroom. Students who do well academically in regular schools typically do not attend alternative schools. Alternative schools had to succeed with the other students, those with low ability, those with ability who were alienated in regular schools, and those who were unable or unwilling to learn in regular schools. Many students were attached to school by a thread that could easily break if they were pressured academically or were in some way dissatisfied with their experiences in alternative schools.

What did alternative schools do differently to work with these students? Their small sizes and added services may have helped at-risk students. In addition, the types of curriculum and instruction observed in the evaluation provide a clue as to what alternative schools did differently. The ways schools worked with students in the classroom can be grouped into four approaches:

1. Some schools taught the usual material in the usual way, though typically in smaller classes.

2. Some schools picked up the pace of standard curricula and pushed students to learn more and faster so that those who were behind grade level could accelerate their progress through school.

3. Some schools developed challenging curricula, often by creating thematic and interdisciplinary units that required students to use knowledge from several subject areas to address real-world issues.

4. Some schools used competency-based curricula that allowed students to work independently and progress as fast as their own efforts would allow.

A natural question is whether one approach is better than others. The evaluation’s answer is that the choice of teachers was more important than the choice of curriculum. The evaluation observed inspired and creative teachers engaging students intellectually with traditional material. More often, the evaluation observed classes with interesting subject material in which almost no teaching occurred, and classes where traditional lecture styles were used and students were not engaged. Students said that, when teachers pushed them to learn while caring about them as individuals, they wanted to work harder and succeed. They did not appreciate having teachers spoon-feed material to them as a way to help them succeed academically.

Teachers Make a Difference

[This teacher is] always ready to help you. When I first came to this school, I didn't like her, "til I realized that the only thing she was trying to do was help me.

Student, Accelerated Academics Academy, Flint, Michigan

The teachers stay on you . . . they'll keep staying on you until you get your goals.

Student, Project ACCEL, Newark, New Jersey

[The teachers] believe you can do the work, and you don't want to let them down.

Student, Up With Literacy program, Long Beach, California

There's this teacher over [the regular high school] . . . you can put anything down and he'll give you a check mark for it. He doesn't check it. He just gives you a mark and says, 'OK, you did your work." How you gonna learn from that? You ain't gonna learn nothing.

Student, JFY Academy, Boston, Massachusetts

Alternative schools succeeded in creating smaller and more personal settings where students felt comfortable and more connected with teachers and other staff. But they also struggled to recruit students and engage them academically. Can alternative schools become a more permanent part of the landscape in school districts? The answer depends partly on their effectiveness at keeping students in school. As described below, it is questionable whether the alternative schools in the evaluation achieved their primary objective of keeping students in school. An issue for later consideration is whether better options are available for helping students who need help.

Change Needs to Come From Within

The clearest examples of how difficult it can be to change schools came from the restructuring initiatives that were a major part of the second-phase SDDAP. Restructuring initiatives were the largest dropout-prevention grants in the program, with individual grants averaging $1 million a year in the first four years of the grants. Grants of this size were not large compared to annual budgets of average urban school districts, but the funds represented large amounts for particular schools taking part.

As the label suggests, the major objective of restructuring efforts was to change the structure of schools so that more students would stay in school. However, the label applied loosely to a variety of school reforms and services attempted by districts that received restructuring grants. Reforms, for example, included school-based governance, school councils, outcomes-based education, block scheduling, minischools, and interdisciplinary instruction. Services more directly

related to dropout prevention, such as counseling and attendance monitoring, also were significant components in the restructuring initiatives. The term "restructuring" is used here in this general sense. Other reports provide more detail about activities in restructuring schools (Hershey et al. 1995; Rubenstein 1995).

The federal investment in restructuring was intended mostly to promote change in schools so that fewer students would drop out. The evaluation did not observe much change, however, or even signs of it beginning. Restructuring schools found it easier to add dropout-prevention services than to change teaching and learning. Some initiatives managed to change teaching and learning to a degree, but the changes were fragile and easily undone if district leadership changed or local political contexts shifted. The evaluation found that the investment was more likely to be associated with change in districts where restructuring had been under way before the grant began and had a broad base of support among teachers, principals, and the outside community. In districts where this support had not yet been built, the investment mostly yielded short-term services that could be dropped easily when funding ended.

Unlike other types of dropout-prevention efforts, restructuring required changing schools as organizations. Successful programs to change schools as organizations, such as James Comer's School Development Program and Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools program, are built around three elements. The programs first strive for consensus that change is needed (why change?), pull people together and develop a process or plan for change that people believe in (how can we make change happen?), and provide leadership and resources throughout the effort (do we have support for change?).

Some or all of the elements were missing for nearly all the restructuring initiatives. The first element--building a consensus that change was needed--is perhaps the most crucial but was the one most frequently absent in restructuring initiatives. School staff clearly understood that their schools needed to change, that their school dropout rates were too high and attendance rates and test scores were too low. But the evaluation almost never observed a consensus for change and, in particular, agreement that restructuring was the way to change. Without consensus, there was little commitment.

The lack of consensus was related to a lack of reflection and debate about the source of the problems. Understanding the dropout problem (or a school performance problem) would mean asking hard questions: Why are students dropping out? What are the barriers students face in school? How can the barriers be removed or mitigated? How much are schools responsible? Parents? Communities? What can teachers do differently that would help? But the evaluation found little evidence that school staff came together to identify sources of a problem and commit to addressing them. Some restructuring activities observed in the evaluation were consistent with a view that large schools needed to be made more personal. For example, some schools were reorganized into smaller units, or students were scheduled together in groups. Adding counselors, student advocates, and mentors is also consistent with making large schools more personal, by giving students more access to adults who can help them and be good role models. However, these activities did not emerge from schools' critical examinations of how they operated and affected students, but as promising ideas that had been adopted with success elsewhere.

More often, diagnoses stopped at symptoms without trying to understand causes. For example, teachers and principals often said that poor attendance was a serious problem and schools needed to do something to improve attendance. The response often was to implement more attendance monitoring, through automated telephone systems or more efforts by staff to contact parents or students. But why were students not coming to school? Were they bored and in need of more challenging and engaging academic work? Were they unable to succeed because their school was too challenging? Were they working because their families needed the money? Were they at home taking care of sick family members or siblings? Were all of these true but for different students?

Accurately diagnosing the attendance problem could point to much different solutions. Automated telephone systems that called the homes of students who were absent and played a recorded message would be a solution for only a few of the causes. Restructuring initiatives that installed automated telephone systems may have believed they were trying to improve attendance, but such systems work only if parents get the messages and are able to do something about it. The evaluation saw no evidence that these kinds of assumptions were checked to see if they were valid.

The second element of effective change--working together to develop a plan for change consistent with the diagnosed problems--was not evident in restructuring initiatives. More often, the people who developed the plans were from outside the schools that were supposed to carry them out. District administrators or grant writers often played key roles in developing restructuring plans, usually with little or no input from principals or teachers of schools that were to take part. Teachers were simply told that their school needed to change in some ways, which almost guaranteed that teachers were not committed to change.

Change would have been easier to promote if teachers or principals believed that how they did things contributed to the dropout problem. The evaluation rarely found this to be the case. The evaluation commonly observed instruction in restructuring schools that was repetitive, boring, and even sometimes demeaning, but teachers and principals either were oblivious to this or ignored it. This is perhaps explained by an organizational structure that provides few rewards or incentives for outstanding teaching while penalizing deviations from traditional norms of schooling (covering the prescribed content; keeping students reasonably quiet in class). Whatever the case, few principals and teachers were eager to change what they were doing even as students were dropping out in response to it.

The third element of successful change--providing leadership support--also proved difficult for districts that received restructuring grants. Teachers and principals may not have viewed restructuring as a solution to a self-identified problem, but strong and steady leadership could possibly have pushed restructuring ahead against apathy or resistance. However, nearly all districts that received restructuring grants experienced turnover of top leaders (superintendents, project directors, principals) during the grant period. New leaders generally were less enthusiastic about restructuring than those they replaced. New leaders had their own agendas, their own ideas for change. Because the restructuring plan was imposed on schools, there was no constituency within schools that wanted to keep it going when leadership changed. Support for restructuring may have been low at the outset of the effort, and the course of events did nothing to raise it.

Changing evolved practices and relationships in schools can take a long time and be a risky venture, so failures are likely along with successes. What stands out as the most significant obstacle is that the same people did not write and carry out the grants. Enthusiasm for restructuring on the part of grant writers does not mean enthusiasm for restructuring on the part of teachers and principals, whose activities, roles, and relationships potentially are being changed by restructuring. Pushing grant money into a school to support change when the school has not charted its own course of change is like pushing on a string.

The Crucial Question of Program Impacts

To what extent did programs successfully reduce or prevent dropping out? For example, for a student who is struggling in a regular district high school and is at risk of dropping out, how likely is it that participating in one of these programs will encourage the student to stay in school to get a diploma?

The evaluation could not observe what would have actually happened to program participants if they had not come to the program. So, for targeted programs, it took the next best approach and used an experimental design to measure program impacts. It compared what happened to program participants to what happened to students who were *statistically equivalent* to program participants. These students were eligible for the dropout prevention programs but were denied entry to the programs as part of the evaluation. Experiences of equivalent students are a proxy for what would have happened to program participants if they had not been able to enter the program. Random assignment ensures the statistical equivalence of the two groups of students by randomly assigning students into a treatment group (whose members are allowed to enter the program) and a control group (whose members are denied access to the program). For each group, the evaluation followed their academic experiences for a two-to three-year period following random assignment. This type of experimental design is widely viewed as the best way to measure program impacts.

Two features of the experimental design used for the evaluation affect how results are interpreted. First, students in the treatment group did not necessarily enter or stay in the dropout prevention program being studied. Some students may have moved or may have lost interest in the program. This problem was exacerbated in a few sites where random assignment took place in the spring for a program beginning in the fall. By using the entire treatment group and control group, instead of just program participants, the evaluation measured the impact of *access to* dropout prevention programs, which may underestimate the impact of *participation in* dropout prevention programs.

Also, students in the control groups were able to receive other dropout-prevention services available to them. They could attend regular high school or any other dropout prevention program other than the program in the evaluation. Thus, the measure of program impacts reveals how the program affects students relative to other programs in the area. A finding of "no impacts" does not imply that a program did not help students. It means the program helped students about the same as other available programs. In a service-rich environment, a program with high-quality dropout prevention services might have no measurable impact on student outcomes. In an area with few dropout prevention services, even a lackluster program might have statistically significant impacts.

Measuring the effects of school restructuring on dropping out and other student outcomes required a different approach. The evaluation could not randomly assign students to treatment and control groups, because every student in a restructured school was influenced by "the treatment." Instead, the evaluation used a comparison group methodology, selecting a sample of students in schools with similar student characteristics to the schools involved in the restructuring effort. The evaluation then measured student, teacher, and parent outcomes over time in both restructuring and comparison schools and compared trends in these outcomes. Improvements over time in these student, teacher, and parent outcomes in restructuring schools that were not found in comparison schools were evidence of positive restructuring impacts.

The comparison group methodology has a known weakness that affects how results are interpreted. Although the evaluation selected comparison schools that were similar to restructuring schools in observable characteristics, schools can differ in other ways not easily seen. For example, the culture of a school--whether it has a respected or a lax principal, or high or low academic standards--may not be captured by observed characteristics. And even if restructuring and comparison schools were similar at the outset of the evaluation, they could change over time in important ways having nothing to do with school restructuring. A school's principal may retire or move to another school, or a school may come under pressure from the district to improve its performance. These kinds of changes could be unrelated to the restructuring effort but important enough to influence outcomes such as teachers' attitudes or student attendance. Most of the effort in interpreting the results from the restructuring impact analysis was in trying to understand the influence other events may have had on the results.

Alternative Middle Schools Have Promise

Communities and school districts that take the term "dropout prevention" most literally set up programs for students in middle school (or earlier grades). To truly prevent dropping out, the thinking goes, schools or programs need to intervene in students' lives before they have left school or are so far behind academically and alienated from school emotionally that dropping out is just a matter of time. Middle school programs tried to step in and help students become more engaged and productive in school before they went too far off track.

A key issue for middle school dropout-prevention programs is how best to serve students. Should programs leave the basic structure of school intact but give students supplemental help? Or should they fundamentally change students' school experiences by having them attend a different kind of school or a school within a school? The more intensive approach may have a greater chance of helping students, but it risks stigmatizing and further alienating them.

The modest evidence of middle school program impacts favors the more intensive intervention approach, however, among the eight middle school dropout prevention programs in our evaluation, half provided low-intensity supplemental services such as tutoring or occasional classes to promote self-esteem or leadership.[2] These supplemental programs had almost no impacts on student

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[2]These programs included the Albuquerque, New Mexico, *Middle School Leadership Program*,
(continued...)

outcomes. None of the programs affected the dropout rate, and average student grades, test scores, and attendance were similar among treatment and control group students (Table 3).[3] Supplemental programs are relatively straightforward to implement, but they do not appear to keep students in school or improve their attendance or academic performance.

Four middle school programs in the evaluation took a more intensive approach to serving at-risk students. Two of these programs--the *Griffin-Spaulding Middle School Academy* near Atlanta, Georgia and the *Accelerated Academics Academy* in Flint, Michigan--were alternative middle schools with facilities that were physically separate from the regular district middle schools. The other two programs--*Project COMET* in Miami, Florida, and *Project ACCEL* in Newark, New Jersey--were located within regular schools but separated students from other students within the school for much of the day. These four programs typically taught students in smaller classrooms than regular middle school students and provided more intensive counseling services. Three of the four programs primarily served students who were overage for their grade level, and these programs attempted to accelerate students' academic progress to allow them to "catch up" with their age peers.

The alternative middle school programs in our evaluation successfully kept kids in school and accelerated their academic progress. Compared with control group students, treatment group students admitted to these programs were half as likely to drop out and completed an average of half a grade more of school (Table 3). These programs seemed to keep students in school longer.

On the other hand, alternative middle schools do not seem to help students learn more in school. Alternative middle schools in the evaluation had no impacts on grades or test scores, and they had impacts on attendance in the wrong direction (treatment group students were absent more often than control group students). Although students were promoted at a faster rate than students in regular middle schools, student learning did not seem to improve in these programs.

The effects of alternative middle schools were concentrated primarily in the Atlanta and Flint programs (see box). These programs show that intensive intervention can keep students in school longer or even accelerate their progress in school. Perhaps these sixth- through eighth-grade years represent a critical juncture in students' school careers, where attention and positive feedback may send them in one direction, while lack of attention or negative school experiences may send them in another. Evidence from Atlanta and Flint suggests that something positive happened for their students that kept them in school. But, on the sobering side, the programs' lack of effects on attendance or academic performance outcomes suggests that participants are not learning more than students in regular schools.

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[2](...continued)
the Chula Vista, California, *Twelve Together Program*, the Long Beach, California, *Up With Literacy Program*, and the Rockford, Illinois, *Early Identification and Intervention Program.*

[3]Table 3 shows average student outcome levels among treatment and control group students across the supplemental middle school and alternative middle school programs in the evaluation. Since data were not always available from every site, the table also shows the number of sites on which the treatment and control averages for a particular outcome are based. The table also shows the number of sites for which impacts were statistically significant at the 10 percent level.

TABLE 3

IMPACTS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAMS

	Average Treatment Group Mean	Average Control Group Mean	Number of Sites	Number of Sites with Significant Impacts[a]
Supplemental Programs				
Dropout Rate (Percentage)				
End of Follow-Up Year 2	7.8	7.0	4	0
End of Follow-Up Year 3	11.5	15.0	4	0
Days Absent				
During Follow-Up Year 2	10.5	10.0	4	0
During Follow-Up Year 3	14.3	14.3	4	0
Math Grade				
Follow-Up Year 2	69.5	68.3	4	1(+)
Follow-Up Year 3	67.5	67.0	4	0
Reading Test Score (percentile)				
Follow-Up Year 2	36.0	35.5	2	0
Follow-Up Year 3	37.0	34.0	1	0
Alternative Middle School Programs				
Dropout Rate				
End of Follow-Up Year 2	4.7	9.3	3	1(-)
End of Follow-Up Year 3	9.0	18.0	2	1(-)
Highest Grade Completed				
End of Follow-Up Year 2	7.9	7.4	3	3(+)
End of Follow-Up Year 3	8.6	8.1	2	2(+)
Days Absent				
During Follow-Up Year 2	18.3	15.3	4	3(+)
During Follow-Up Year 3	18.0	17.0	2	0
Math Grade				
Follow-Up Year 2	65.0	66.3	3	0
Follow-Up Year 3	62.0	64.0	2	0
Reading Test Score (Percentile)				
Follow-Up Year 2	16.3	16.7	3	0
Follow-Up Year 3	28.0	31.0	1	0

SOURCE: Dynarski et al. (1997)

[a] Plus and minus signs indicate whether impacts were positive or negative.

Alternative Middle Schools - Some Good News

The alternative middle schools in Atlanta and Flint had similar impacts on student outcomes. The schools reduced dropping out and accelerated students' progress in school. Neither program positively affected student achievement.

	ATLANTA		FLINT	
	Treatment Group	Control Group	Treatment Group	Control Group
Dropout Rate (Percent)	6	14	2	11
Highest Grade Completed	8.6*	7.9	8.5*	7.8
Math Grade	59	63	67	66
Reading Test Score (Percentile)	--	--	12	12

NOTE: All outcomes measured at the end of the second follow-up year, except for highest grade completed, which is measured at the end of the third follow-up year in Flint.

* Significantly different from the control group at the ten percent level, two-tailed test.

SOURCE: Dynarski et al. (1998a).

For Some High School Students, Short Roads May Be Better

Dropout-prevention programs for students of high school age face a different dilemma than those for middle school students. The choice between supplemental and intensive intervention is moot, since their students are older and have either already dropped out or are on the verge of doing so. They need intensive intervention. The dilemma for these programs involves the appropriate educational goal for the program. Should their students take the long road and earn a high school diploma? Or should they take the short road and earn a GED certificate?

The modest impact evidence favors the short road. Five of the high school dropout-prevention programs in the evaluation offered high school diplomas. Four were structured as alternative high schools and one was a school within a school.[4] None of these programs significantly lowered dropout rates (Table 4), though more of their students received diplomas than GED certificates. In contrast, participants in the three GED programs were more likely to earn their GED certificates and even somewhat more likely to complete their diplomas than control group students (this result arises

[4]The four sites operating alternative high schools were Boston (*JFY High School and University High*), Las Vegas (*Horizon High Schools*), Miami (*Corporate Academy*), and Seattle (*Middle College High School*). The school within a school approach was used in Chicago (*Wells Academy*).

TABLE 4

IMPACTS OF HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT-PREVENTION PROGRAMS

	Treatment Group Mean	Control Group Mean	Number of Sites	Number of Sites with Significant Impacts
Alternative High School Programs				
Dropout Rate				
End of follow-up year 2	35	30	5	1(+)
End of follow-up year 3	39	40	3	0
Completion Rate				
High school diploma	21	15	4	0
GED	13	19	4	1(-)
Either	33	34	4	0
GED Programs				
Dropout Rate				
End of follow-up year 2	56	58	3	0
End of follow-up year 3	57	60	3	0
Completion Rate				
High school diploma	9	3	3	0
GED	30	20	3	0
Either	39	24	3	1(+)

SOURCE: Dynarski et al. (1998a).

NOTE: For alternative high schools, completion rates refer to the second follow-up year for two programs and the third follow-up year for two programs. For GED programs, completion rates refer to the third follow-up year.

because students who start in GED programs can leave the program and go to other programs or back to high school). The total effect is that GED programs improved the overall high school completion rate from 24 percent to 39 percent, a relative increase of over 60 percent.

One positive finding for alternative high schools is that they influenced whether students earned a diploma or a GED. Four of the five alternative high school programs served students who were old enough to graduate during the follow-up period. In these programs, more students earned high school diplomas and fewer earned GED certificates. The differences were not statistically significant in any of the four sites, but the pattern is consistent across sites. Control group students were less likely to earn a high school degree and more likely to earn a GED. Alternative high schools affected how students completed school but not the overall completion rate.

A closer look at Seattle's *Middle College High School* provides insight about how alternative high schools can affect different students. Middle College High School had higher high school completion rates and lower GED completion rates (see box) for students whose characteristics suggested that they were least likely to drop out (termed "low risk" students in the box, though most were at some risk of dropping out). The school also reduced dropping out for high-risk students.

Helping Motivated Students Get Diplomas
Impacts of Seattle's Middle College High School

Seattle's Middle College High School is an alternative high school set up on a community college campus. The program served dropouts or students on the verge of dropping out of regular high schools. It screened students when they first applied to the school to ensure that they were motivated to succeed. The school had success helping low-risk students get diplomas. It also was able to reduce dropping out for high-risk students.

	Low-Risk Students		High-Risk Students	
	Treatment Group	Control Group	Treatment Group	Control Group
Dropout Rate	33	33	27*	42
Completion Rate	53	56	59	58
High school diploma	33	24	27	25
GED	20	32	32	33
Still In High School or GED Program	13	11	13	0

NOTE: All outcomes measured at the end of the third follow-up year. Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding.

*Significantly different from the control group level at the ten percent level, two-tailed test.

SOURCE: Dynarski et al. (1998a)

One key feature of Middle College High School is that it made a serious effort to serve students who were motivated to succeed in school by having staff and current students interview prospective students. The positive impacts of the school suggest that alternative high schools can be successful when they serve students who want to succeed. Other features of Middle College High School, such as its dedicated staff and location on a college campus, no doubt also played a role in its success, but serving students who wanted to succeed seems crucial.

Overall, alternative high schools did not reduce dropout rates much, and a natural question is whether GED programs could be more successful. Two programs in the evaluation--the Queens, New York *Flowers with Care Program* and the St. Louis, Missouri, *Metropolitan Youth Academy*--were designed to help students prepare for the GED. A third program--the *Student Training and Re-entry Program* in Tulsa, Oklahoma--was a transition program for high school dropouts to help them determine and achieve an appropriate educational goal (which usually turned out to be a GED certificate).

Among the three GED programs, the Metropolitan Youth Academy in St. Louis had the largest impacts (see box), with 26 percent of treatment group students earning a GED certificate or a high school diploma within two years, compared to 16 percent of control group students. This is a substantial effect, and it is especially notable since the academy served students who were more at risk than any other program in the evaluation. The results show that it is possible to help the hardest-to-serve students.

Serving the Hardest-to-Serve Students
Impacts of the St. Louis Metropolitan Youth Academy

St. Louis's Metropolitan Youth Academy is a GED program for highly at-risk students. Nearly all of the students served were dropouts and had, on average, the most risk factors of any program in the evaluation. The program was more successful at helping students earn GEDs, though many of its students were able to complete their GED.

	St. Louis	
	Treatment Group	Control Group
Dropout Rate	62	64
Completion Rate	26*	16
High school diploma	5	5
GED	21	11
Still in High School or GED Program	12	10

NOTE: All outcomes measured at the end of the second follow-up year.

* Significantly different from the control group at the ten percent level, two-tailed test.

SOURCE: Dynarski et al. (1998a)

The positive results for the Metropolitan Youth Academy need to be considered with caution, for two reasons. First, although the program improved school completion, the overall level of school completion for its students was low (about 38 percent after two follow-up years). Put another way, well over half of its students were high school dropouts two years later. Second, the educational goal of programs like the Metropolitan Youth Academy remains in question. Researchers continue to debate the benefits of the GED, with some arguing that GED completers are not much better off than dropouts. The jury is still out on the benefits of getting a GED.

Taken as a whole, our findings on the effects of high school dropout-prevention programs reveal no magic bullets. The limited success of the eight programs we studied suggests that we do not know how to promote educational success among most high school age students who have dropped out or are on the verge of doing so. Several of the programs we studied offer promising approaches, however. For motivated students, the middle college model used in Seattle may improve their chances of finishing high school. For students who are already dropouts and who have substantial other problems hindering their educations, GED programs can help them receive a GED. The results cannot be compared directly--we cannot say middle college schools are better or worse than GED programs--because the types of students served were different. The most that can be said is that high-risk students are probably better off taking the short road, and motivated students are probably better off taking the long road. But putting high-risk students on the long road may do little for them.

Can Restructured Schools Reduce Dropping Out?

As described earlier, the largest federal grants went to efforts to restructure schools. These efforts included reforms of school governance, changes in classroom instruction and curricula, and services for students. The evaluation collected and analyzed data on student, teacher, and parent outcomes in restructuring and comparison schools in four sites that began school restructuring efforts in the 1991-1992 school year: Dallas, Texas; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Phoenix, Arizona; and Santa Ana, California.[5]

Generally, impacts of restructuring on student outcomes were negligible, though there were several exceptions that we talk about below. Few differences in student outcomes between restructuring and comparison schools emerge in these sites, at either the middle school or high school level. Where absenteeism or test scores are higher or lower in a restructuring school relative to a comparison school, the difference typically is the same difference evident in the baseline year (1991-1992), before restructuring had gotten off the ground. At the high school level, for example, the average number of days absent in 1994-1995 is higher in comparison schools than in restructuring schools, but that was also true in 1991-1992.

In middle schools, the dropout rate in 1994-1995 (for students who were sixth graders in 1991-1992) was higher for restructuring schools than comparison schools. In high schools, the average dropout rate was higher in comparison schools. However, this difference was caused almost entirely

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[5]Typically, the evaluation collected data from one restructuring and one comparison school at both the high school and middle school levels in each site.

by a large difference in Grand Rapids (where the 1994-1995 dropout rate was 22 percent in the comparison high school and 12 percent in the restructuring high school). The lower dropout rate in the Grand Rapids restructuring high school could not be attributed to the positive effects of school restructuring, however, because further analysis suggested other sources of the difference (Dynarski et al. 1998). Restructuring efforts in Grand Rapids were slow to develop, and the comparison school went through a significant leadership change that appeared to affect student and teacher outcomes. The results in Grand Rapids probably arose because of problems at the comparison school instead of restructuring.

Restructuring did appear to affect student outcomes in the Dallas middle school that took part in the restructuring effort. Between 1991-1992 and 1993-1994, the school's reading test scores improved substantially while the comparison school's reading test scores stayed the same (Dynarski et al. 1998). The score gains may be related to the "accelerated schools" model adopted by the school, but the timing of the model's implementation suggests other factors also were affecting scores.

School restructuring efforts were more likely to influence teacher outcomes than student outcomes. For example, middle school teacher perceptions about the climate of their school were more positive between 1992-1993 and 1994-1995 in restructuring schools and more negative in comparison schools (Table 5). High school teacher perceptions showed little difference, except in Phoenix, where teachers in restructuring schools were more positive about their school's climate.

The evaluation found that restructuring did not influence parent perceptions of the climate of their children's schools. However, parents had very positive perceptions of schools overall. Restructuring was unlikely to cause parents to feel better about schools with which they were already quite satisfied.

The nature of the restructuring initiatives in schools where student or teacher outcomes improved provides a clue about the type of initiative with the most promise. Schools were more likely to show improved student or teacher outcomes when their restructuring efforts focused on improving curriculum and instruction through staff development workshops, summer training sessions, and classroom implementation. In some schools, the restructuring approach placed more emphasis on providing student services related to dropping out. It is not surprising that teacher outcomes failed to improve in schools where restructuring consisted mostly of providing more student services. However, student outcomes also did not improve in these schools. In the end, restructuring has more promise when it focuses on changing what happens in classrooms rather than on providing services for students.

Learning from the Dropout-Prevention Demonstrations: How Do We Get There from Here?

At the 1989 Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, the nation's governors worked with President Bush to identify goals for education. One goal was to increase the high school completion rate to 90 percent by the year 2000. In 1996, the rate was 86 percent, where it had been since 1990. The evaluation's results do not offer much direction for how to achieve this goal with reasonable resources.

TABLE 5

IMPACTS OF SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING INITIATIVES

	Middle Schools		High Schools	
	Students in Restructuring Schools	Students in Comparison Schools	Students in Restructuring Schools	Students in Comparison Schools
Dropout Rate				
End of 1994-1995	9	8	14	16
Percentage of Days Absent				
During 1991-1992	8	8	13	14
During 1994-1995	23	22	17	19
Reading Test Score (Percentile)				
1991-1992	28	29	36	37
1993-1994	28	32	24	26
Math Test Score (Percentile)				
1991-1992	35	40	36	38
1993-1994	27	31	29	32
Teachers' School Climate Index				
End of 1992-1993	46	51	54	54
End of 1994-1995	54	45	54	54
Parents' School Climate Index				
End of 1992-1993	75	75	74	71
Ed of 1994-1995	79	80	76	73

SOURCE: Dynarski et al. (1998b).

To see this, consider how many students programs would need to keep in school for the high school completion rate to rise by four percentage points and meet the goal. The current annual dropout rate of five percent, if applied to 16-, 17-, and 18-year-old students, yields a high school completion rate of 86 percent.[6] A lower annual dropout rate of 3.5 percent, if applied to 16-, 17-, and 18-year-old students, yields a high school completion rate of 90 percent, which is the target rate. So in terms of the dropout rate, the goal is to go from the current 5 percent rate to a 3.5 percent rate. Going from a dropout rate of 5 percent to 3.5 percent means a reduction in the number of dropouts of about 145,000 a year as of 1996. Could the few dropout-prevention programs that showed some success be replicated and reduce the number of dropouts this much?

The answer is probably not. The results in Table 5 show that the three GED programs reduced the dropout rate from 60 percent to 57 percent. Each program served about 100 students at a time. So 3 more students did not drop out as a result of each program. We would need more than 48,000 programs such as the three GED programs to reduce the dropout rate by the target amount of 145,000 students a year. The programs had average grants of about $300,000 a year, so the cost of the expanded effort would be about $14.5 billion. Alternative high schools had smaller effects on dropout rates and so would cost even more if replicated on a wider scale to achieve the goal. Alternative middle school programs had larger effects on dropout rates, but it is not yet clear whether their effects will carry over to high school. The goal of increasing the high school completion rate from 86 percent to 90 percent seems reasonable. Given what we know about impacts of dropout-prevention programs and their costs, however, it does not look like we can get there from here.

The evaluation provided other important lessons. The pattern of evidence discussed above points to some ways dropout-prevention programs could be more effective. Alternative middle school programs that created smaller class sizes, more personalized settings, and more focused teaching and learning, faced more difficult implementation challenges but had some effects, including higher rates of grade promotion and lower dropout rates. Alternative middle school programs did not result in more learning according to outcomes such as standardized test scores, so the evidence for their effectiveness is mixed. However, the results suggest that more intensive interventions for middle school students may be needed to reduce dropping out and improve other outcomes.

Programs oriented to get students GED certificates had the largest impacts, though their results were not large in an absolute sense. For example, the St. Louis program raised GED completion rates but still had about a 60 percent dropout rate. However, the program served students who were among the hardest to serve of any in the evaluation. The program's results show that some success is possible with the hardest to serve but that not many of the hardest to serve had success.

The GED credential is not the same as a high school diploma--employment rates and earnings of GED recipients are higher than earnings of dropouts, but not by much. However, Agodini and Dynarski (1998) show that the small increase in earnings attributable to the GED is enough to induce

[6]To get from the 5 percent dropout rate to the 86 percent high school completion rate, we assume 95 percent of 16-year-olds continue on in school, 95 percent of those who continue on as 17-year-olds complete another year of school, and 95 percent of those who make it through another year as 18-year-olds complete school.

some students to choose a GED over a high school diploma, especially those who are behind grade level or who can work while preparing for the GED. Being behind grade level means students take longer to complete high school and pay greater costs by not being able to work during that time. Instead of trying to direct these students back toward the high school diploma, it may make more sense to link the GED with postsecondary education or training in a way that overcomes the stigma that employers attach to the GED. Employers are more likely to focus on prospective employees' most recent training as evidence of their ability to perform well. GED recipients who go on to acquire useful skills at the postsecondary level will be better prepared for a labor market that appears to be putting an ever-increasing premium on skills honed through formal education.

Restructuring schools to reduce dropping out seems like an attractive way to approach the dropout problem. If restructuring succeeded, students would not need the kinds of interventions represented by the Seattle and St. Louis programs. The evaluation's results show that this is a big "if." A few restructuring efforts improved school climate, according to teachers, and student test scores rose in some middle schools. Dropping out was not affected, though restructuring efforts may not have operated long enough to have an effect on this problem.

The real issue for restructuring is whether schools want to do it. The evaluation mostly observed the resistance to restructuring and its temporary nature. Changes in leadership invariably undermined support for restructuring. School staff themselves, who may have been able to continue efforts to restructure on their own, were not enthusiastic supporters. When restructuring had an effect, it came when the effort focused on changing what happened in classrooms. If schools want to change what happens in the classroom--how teaching and learning occurs--these changes may affect school climate and learning. Simply adding services--a health clinic, a child care center, attendance monitoring--altered little and affected little. The trade-off is clear. Services were straightforward to implement and supported by school staff because they met the needs of students. But the services did not yield changes in any measured outcomes. Classroom changes took more effort to implement, but they changed some outcomes in a few schools.

Future dropout-prevention efforts could build on the lessons noted here by promoting alternative middle schools, alternative high schools for students with motivation or academic potential, GED programs for older students, and restructuring built on classroom change. Another path, perhaps a more challenging one, is to go back to the drawing board and ask why students drop out and what can be done about it. Do we really know why students are dropping out and how to stop it? Schools and community organizations can do only so much with students. Is it enough? Students who drop out are difficult to identify in advance. Do we know who to serve? Can a particular program be the right approach for more than a few of those it serves? Are we only addressing symptoms, without knowing what the real problems are?

If the answer is that we do not really know why students drop out, setting up dropout-prevention programs will almost surely yield weak results. Simply pumping resources into schools to create smaller schools, reduce class sizes, and provide support services will not generate results if large schools, large classes, and a lack of support services were not the real problem in the first place. Millions of dollars would be spent to reduce dropping out only slightly, an undesired outcome in an era of performance standards and pressure for more accountable government and schools.

Perhaps a useful way to think about dropout prevention is to view attending school as going to a job and prospective dropouts as employees who are not happy with their jobs or who are not performing well in them. Some employees who are not doing well in a job are coached and encouraged to do better, others quit, and others are fired. A company concerned about its high rate of people leaving might adopt a policy of meeting with employees one on one and asking straight questions: Why are you unhappy here? Why don't you like your job? What can we do to make you like your job more? Would you like a different job here instead? This approach is based on the view that each employee brings something valuable to the company and that the company wants to understand how it can best use the assets an employee brings to it. A change of job, a change of venue, or a change of personnel mix might be the answer for an employee to begin working more effectively.

Schools may work with their actual employees--teachers and staff--using the above approach, but do they do this with students? When students are doing poorly or are on the verge of dropping out, or when they want to return to school after dropping out, do school staff talk with them about problems they are having and set up a plan to mitigate these problems? Is adherence to the plan monitored, and are results fed back to the staff and students so they can make adjustments? Do schools have access to services that can help families and students deal with personal problems? If a student feels he or she is not learning much or is having difficulty with a particular teacher, is someone in the school thinking about how to get the student more engaged in learning? If a student has disagreements or arguments in school with teachers or other students, does someone in the school intervene to mediate? Are parents actively working with teachers and school staff to solve problems and address issues affecting their children?

If answers to these questions are "sometimes," "maybe," or "no," there is room for an individualized approach to dropout prevention. A school has limited ability to make most of its students happy (or at least willing to attend), and perhaps it is expecting too much of schools to think they can. But this approach is worth a try. Focusing on ways to identify students who are having difficulty and actively working to address the sources of the difficulty may be a more effective use of prevention resources than setting up a program to catch students after they fail.

How can we help? We can help by asking what it would take for schools to keep their students and get rid of their dropout-prevention programs. This is an ambitious goal, but the benefits of striving for it are huge. Perhaps preventing dropping out should be only one objective within the larger goal of creating schools where all students are given the assistance and opportunities they need to learn and develop into successful adults.

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