

# ANALYZING HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM: POLICY CONSIDERATIONS



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to analyze high school dropout in New Mexico and provide some policy implications. Causes, consequences, gainers and losers related to this social problem are discussed. Existing policies, programs and strategies are presented. Then, the paper develops an intervention to address the problem. The main idea of the program is to replace the last two years of high school by specific trainings in the field of students' interests oriented to the future job. Implementing the program out of the school structure and highlighting the students' self-determination, the proposed program could address students' school disengagement and promote school completion.

## BACKGROUND

### The social problem

The national dropout rate in public schools in both 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years were the same at 3.3% (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). For the purposes of this discussion, we will analyze the situation in one of the lowest performing states – New Mexico with the rate of dropout in 6.6% (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), nearly twice the national average.

### Analysis of the social problem

Considering Chambers and Wedel (2009) guideline in social problem analysis, causes, consequences, values and gainers-losers regarding the social problem were evaluated. Some reasons for dropout are intrapersonal such as substance abuse, school misbehavior, low level of motivation and delinquency (Theunissen, Verdonk, Feron & Bosma, 2012). Some causes are related to family and peers e.g. family environment, maternal education (Capuzzi & Gross, 2014; Theunissen et al., 2012), and peer social networks (Mahoney, 2014). Further, some causes of dropout are institutional factors related to school such as disengagement (Fortin et al., 2013). Likewise, some factors impacting dropout are at the macro level such as low socioeconomic status (Theunissen et al., 2012).

Among different consequences emerging from the social problem of dropping out, the most obvious one is limited access to employment opportunities and economic well-being (Rumberger, 2002). The U.S. Department of Labor indicates that dropouts get average annual income of \$19,225 compared to \$26,399 for people with high school diploma (Weinstein, 2013). Engaging in antisocial behavior, negative self-perception and poor interpersonal skills are other consequences (Rumberger, 2002).

Losing employment and economic opportunities, the main losers are dropouts themselves. Another important loser may be taxpayers. Increasing the rate of crime -one of the consequences of the problem- leads to insecurity, and therefore, it has to be spent more tax to ensure security and fix the situation. On the other hand, existing the problem of dropouts, some people might gain, for example employers can hire people with lower incomes.

We believe the young has capabilities which are the foundation of society, and we should provide education opportunity for all people regardless differences. According to Human Rights (1948), everybody must have access to education. These ethical considerations present the importance of examining the social problem of dropout.

## EVALUATION OF EXISTING POLICIES/INTERVENTIONS

In this section, a brief review and evaluation on policies, strategies and programs already designed to address dropout are being presented.

### No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Aiming at improvement of school retention, NCLB act was passed in 2001 by the congress. The key concepts of the act are accountability for states, and school districts, more choice for parents and students, more flexibility in spending funding, and enhanced focus on reading for young students (US Department of Education, 2002). Although there are some benefits of the NCLB act, there are many criticisms such as lack of opportunity for talented students, unfair situations for low income schools and limited choices for parents. To 2013, most states requested or obtained NCLB waiver, and they were allowed to set other goals than NCLB and take into an account the standards for college and employment besides helping low-performance schools instead of sanctioning (Hardy, 2012; House, 2013; Lloyd, 2014).

### Looking at dropout as a public health priority

Highlighting the positive effects of health on education achievement and mutually, positive effects of education on health, Freudenberg and Ruglis (2007) developed suggestions to school achievement including creating dropout prevention councils for interventions related to employment, poverty and health, engaging young people in the school for example through health programs, educating health education teachers, bringing scientific evidences to support interventions, explaining benefits of health on education to encourage public participation, and adding *reduce dropout rates* in public health agenda as a priority (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007).

### Other interventions

There are four main categories of dropout intervention programs (Johnson, 2008). First, school and community interventions highlighting the role of community support, relationships between students and teachers, students' attitudes toward school and school-community collaboration (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Johnson, 2008); Second, early interventions assuming that addressing dropout problem in early years is more effective (Fiscella, 2008; Johnson, 2008); Third, basic core strategies focusing on student-centered strategies (Johnson, 2008; Smink & Reimer, 2005); Finally, making the most of instruction interventions emphasizing on what happens in classrooms (Johnson, 2008; Smink & Reimer, 2005).

### Statewide interventions in New Mexico

New Mexico has several interventions to engage students in school through addressing academic and non-academic needs of at-risk students at school, family, court and juvenile justice system levels (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2009).

## PROGRAM DESIGN

Applying eight steps of Rapp and Poertner (1992), an intervention was developed. After providing a brief review on the proposed program, the eight steps of program design are discussed. In designing a new program, the considered dropout cause is disengagement in schools. The main characteristic of the program is to replace last two years of school by other trainings such as job skills which are more interesting for the students. Two-year time period is good time to become familiar with the principles of a specific skill and practice that.

The content of this two-year training is selected by students' freedom. Also, continuing these two years in an environment other than schools for example in a work place is helpful. The assumption here is to direct students in the way of their future job so that whether students graduate or not, they will be a future member of the workforce. In the age of 15 to 18 in which students will spend the two-year trainings, students are experiencing considerable intellectual development, and thinking about their goals and future (Atkinson, 1996).

## DISCUSSION: PROGRAM DESIGN STEPS

The first step of program developing is to define the problem, mentioned already (Rapp & Poertner, 1992). Next step is to evaluate beneficiaries. At risk population is dropouts who will be deprived from economic and social opportunities. The specific clients in this program are New Mexico students. The general population who benefit the program might be all the society.

Applying social work theories is considered as the third step of program design. Two theories working here are strengths-based, and empowerment theory (Sadan, 1997; Saleebey, 1992). Replacing two years of high school with students' interests and out of the structure of school is consistent with both theories. According to strengths-based theory, people have different capabilities, and to improve the people's situation, it is useful to focus on their strengths (Saleebey, 1992). Then, students who are at high risk of dropout have potentials which have to be discovered. Likewise, based on the empowerment theory the intervention program improves the capabilities of students by focusing on a wide variety of skills, and by improving the abilities and power, the sense of responsibility regarding the society is enhanced in individuals, and finally the enhancement brings change in society.

Step four is to discuss service procedures. Providing comprehensive career information for students and their families, personal meetings and career counseling are starting points in this program to choose the area of interests consciously (Mourshed, Farrell & Barton, 2012). Finding an appropriate work place for students to follow the area of interest, signing a memorandum of understanding between the Education Department of New Mexico and safe work places to ensure the supporting environment for students and to attract the business' collaboration, introducing of the students, and following up sessions both with students and work place are other activities of the service.

## DISCUSSION (CONT)

Students and work place have to provide a monthly report in order to make the student evaluation possible. After finalizing two years, students will attain a specific diploma in their field.

Step five; key persons in the program are school social workers, education consultants and work place supervisors. Their work is to help students find their interests, enter the desired work place and to follow up the students to achieve success. Some part of budget has to be allocated to these key persons as income, and also their training to implement the steps of the program. Step six is to discuss the environment in which the intervention will be implemented. In this program, school and approved work places by Education Department of New Mexico will be the implementation environments.

Necessary relationships to implement the program are discussed in step seven. Student-social worker/education consultant relationships are the most important ones in this intervention. The relationships have to be collaborative, flexible and friendly. Step eight considers emotional reactions. It is predictable that at the first stages of the program, students and parents feel confused in identifying their interests. By supportive social workers and educational consultants, the students could adopt with the program. Existing an opportunity for switching the area of interests is fundamental to alleviate stressful circumstances.

## CONCLUSION

Lessons learnt from the policy and strategies could help to improve more powerful and effective interventions. Highlighting the risk factor of school disengagement, an intervention program was designed. The proposed program is an innovation to address the dropout social problem by underlying self-determination and strengths of the students. It is necessary to conduct experimental and pilot studies to evaluate its effectiveness. Also, acceptance of the program in public needs support of leaders.

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