Service-Learning and Dropout Prevention

Source: RMC Research Corporation, July 2008.

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In 2001, the U.S. Department of Labor estimated that 5.2 million young people, aged 16-24, had not completed high school, were unemployed, and were not serving in the military. These "disconnected" youth represented 15% of their age category. Disconnected young people face a bleak future. During economic turndowns, those without high school diplomas are most vulnerable to layoffs. Dropouts are more likely to experience mental health problems and display more antisocial behaviors. They earn far less than their peers who graduated from high school and are far more likely to be adjudicated or incarcerated.

Re-Engaging

Preventing dropout — and re-engaging youth in school within a short period after they have dropped out — substantially reduces the negative personal and societal impacts. Young people who obtain a high school diploma or its equivalent within two years of leaving school are nearly as likely as their peers who graduated on time to be employed and unincarcerated, though they do not earn as much on average. Re-engaging youth is estimated to save the country billions of dollars in recovered revenue, employment, and crime prevention.

The challenge of re-engaging young people so that they complete school has been addressed by many groups including public school systems, institutions of higher education, and community-based organizations. Educators and researchers have addressed the problem by trying to gain an understanding of the characteristics of those students who drop out of school and the programs needed to keep them engaged in their education (Monrad, 2007).

Dropout Prevention

A recent study by Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison (2006) found that most of the young people who dropped out could have successfully completed high school if they had been exposed to the right types of interventions. In a telephone survey, students who had dropped out reported that if their school had been more supportive of them, then they would have worked harder. Students claimed that they lacked motivation, classes were boring, they needed to care for a family member, or they needed to work to earn money. They recommended that schools change in the following ways:

- improve teaching and curricula to make school more engaging;
- improve instruction and supports for struggling students;
- build a better, more inviting school climate for learning;
- make more connections between school and work;
- ensure strong relationships in school between students and at least one adult; and
- improve the communication between schools and parents;

K-12 Fact Sheet

Alternative Schools
One common way that school districts try to prevent students from dropping out is to assign them, or allow them to enroll in, an alternative school. Alternative education sites are most likely to serve high school students, although not all high school students who wish to enroll are able to be accommodated. In fact, more than half of the alternative education sites report that during the past three years, demand was higher than capacity. The number of students eligible to be served by alternative education recently rose significantly due to increases in zero tolerance policies, changes in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, increases in school violence and school failure, and better knowledge of the types of developmental processes related to antisocial behaviors and school dropout.

Programs leading to a diploma are smaller than programs in comprehensive high schools, usually no more than 400 students total. They provide more access to counseling, more personalized attention, and better links with social services (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998). Hands-on instruction and contextual learning increase student interest in the content. Business internships and in-school employment opportunities increase the likelihood of graduates' later economic stability.

Dropout Prevention and Service-Learning
Reviews of the literature have shown that service-learning is a promising strategy for dropout prevention (Billig, 2000; Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Wulsin, 2008). Service-learning activities address various components or strategies identified as important to dropout prevention such as engaging teaching and curricula, connections between school and work, adult and student relationships, communication skills, and community engagement.

A recent telephone survey of high school students showed that:

- Over 80% of students who participated in service-learning said they had more positive feeling about attending high school;
- Over 75% of students who were currently or had in the past participated in service-learning programs agreed that service-learning classes were more interesting than other classes;
- About 45% of students who participated in service-learning believed that service-learning classes were more worthwhile than their other classes; and
- Over 75% of service-learning students said that service-learning had motivated them to work hard.

For a more detailed discussion, including references and documentation, see the complete online fact sheet at www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/he/dropout/expanded.php

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