

# **SOLVING MODESTO'S DROPOUT PROBLEM**

With

A Diploma In Every Hand



John Ervin III, M.Ed.

Director, Community Affairs

# THE NATURE OF THE DROPOUT PROBLEM

## **The dropout problem is severe**

The exact number of students who fail to graduate in California remains unknown because the state is still developing a system that can accurately calculate the proportion of entering ninth grade students who graduate four years later. Available estimates, however, suggest the problem is severe. In 2005-06, 349,191 California high school students graduated. Comparing that figure to the number of ninth-graders four years earlier; 520,287; suggests that only two-thirds of California's students graduated on time, with more than 170,000 students dropping out or failing to graduate. For the same year, the California department of Education (CDE) estimates a graduation rate of 83% with 70,000 students dropping out. In 2005-06, 10,873 California students dropped out of grades 7 and 8. Estimates by the U. S. Department of Education and other outside agencies are substantially lower than those reported by the state, ranging from 65% to 74%.

## THE NATURE OF THE DROPOUT PROBLEM cont.

Despite the lack of accurate estimates, available data suggest the problem is concentrated among particular students, schools and districts. Estimated graduation rates in California are substantially lower for Blacks (57%), Hispanics (60%), and Native Americans (52%) compared to Asians (84%) and Whites (77%). English learners, who comprise 15% of all California high school students represent 30% of all dropouts.

Dropout rates are notably high in particular schools and in particular *kinds* of schools. According to CDE data, one hundred high schools with the highest number of dropouts – representing 4% of all high schools in the state and enrolling 11% of all students – accounted for 41% of California's dropouts in 2005-06. Forty-two of those one hundred schools were non-traditional schools; 25 alternative schools with an average dropout rate of 50% and 17 charter schools with an average dropout rate of 67%. In Stanislaus County 19.9% of high school students dropped out with Modesto City Schools having a 23.1% dropout rate.

## **THE NATURE OF THE DROP OUT PROBLEM** cont.

### **The cost of inaction is great**

Compared to high school graduates, dropouts earn lower wages, pay fewer taxes, are more likely to commit crimes, are less likely to be employed, are more likely to be on welfare, and are less healthy. For example:

- More than two-thirds of all high school dropouts will use food stamps during their working lives;
- The probability of incarceration for a Black male dropout is 60%;
- An “average” high school graduate earns \$290,000 more over a lifetime – and pays \$100,000 more in federal, state, and local taxes than a high school dropout.

## **THE NATURE OF THE DROPOUT PROBLEM** cont.

In all, dropouts generate considerable economic losses to taxpayers and the economy. California sustains \$46.4 billion in total economic losses – equivalent to 2.9% of the Annual Gross State Product – from each cohort of 120,000 20-year-olds who never complete high school.

The dropout problem also threatens California's future economy. The Public Policy Institute of California estimates that the education needs of California's future workforce will rise substantially. If present trends continue, California will have twice as many workers without a high school diploma (22%) as there will be jobs to support them (11%).

# THE NATURE OF THE DROPOUT PROBLEM cont.

## The causes are complex

Dropouts report a variety of reasons for leaving school, from uninteresting classes to missing too much school. But research suggests the causes are more complex, involving both more immediate and more distant factors related to students and their environment.

Among student factors, the most immediate is *disengagement*. A growing body of research suggests that dropping out is but the final stage in a dynamic and cumulative process of disengagement or withdrawal from school. Engagement refers to students' participation and involvement in both the *academic aspects* of school and social aspects, such as participating in extracurricular activities. Engagement is influenced by three aspects of motivation: students' beliefs about their competence and control (*I can*), their values and goals (*I want to*), and their sense of social connectiveness or belonging (*I belong*).

## **THE NATURE OF THE DROPOUT PROBLEM** cont.

Student motivation and engagement in high school are, in turn, influenced by more distant factors related to their early academic achievement and engagement in elementary and middle school. i.e., students who fail courses in middle school are more likely to fail courses and drop out in high school.

Student attitudes and behaviors are shaped by three settings or contexts in which they live – families, schools and communities. Family background remains the most powerful predictor of student achievement in school: students from low-income households, students with less educated parents or students not living with both of their parents are all less likely to graduate from high school.

# THE NATURE OF THE DROPOUT PROBLEM cont.

## Current approaches are inadequate

Legal

Fiscal

Targeted Programs

Alternative Education

California's current accountability system not only fails to improve the dropout problem, it actually *contributes* to it. Dropout and graduation rates are not currently included in the state's accountability system and the federal system requires only minimal improvement in graduation rates. According to the Legislative Analyst's Office, the resulting focus on improving test scores puts considerable pressure on schools to push low-performing students into alternative schools as a way of evading accountability for them.

# DROPOUT RATES IN HIGH SCHOOLS ALARM EDUCATORS

## **Recent Modesto Bee Article** (by Michelle Hatfield)

“Nearly one in four Stanislaus County high school students recently dropped out, about the same as the state average according to data released in July 2008 by the California Department of Education.

In the county, 23.6 percent of high school students dropped out. The state dropout rate comes in a little higher at 24.2 percent.

The rate is an estimate of the percentage of students who dropped out in a four year period based on data from 2006-07, the most recent available.

That 24.2 percent represents a tremendous loss of potential, “State Superintendent Jack O’Connell said during a phone conference.

Stanislaus County Superintendent Tom Changnon is dismayed at the large numbers of dropouts, saying school officials “need to make the work in high school more relevant so students want to stay in school. We also, need to develop relationships with students so they feel there is someone in the school environment who cares about them.”

Downey High School has the highest dropout rate for comprehensive schools at 16.8 percent.”

# DROPOUT RATES IN HIGH SCHOOLS ALARM EDUCATORS cont.

Students learning the English language and those who come from low-income families dropout at higher rates than the rest of the population. In Stanislaus County, 23.2% of English learners drop out, as do 27.2% of low-income students.

Minorities have higher dropout rates than whites: Nearly 32 % of black students in Stanislaus County dropped out (42% across California) and 28.3% of Latinos in the county (30.3% in California). The numbers for white students are 18.7% in the county and 15.2% for the state.

O'Connell referred to the achievement gap as real, stark and a crisis.

Modesto City Schools official Craig Rydquist said “it (the data) points out that we really have an issue and a need for alternative programs.”

# California Department of Education Dropout Data

**The following are percentages of students who dropped out based on CDE 2006-07 data**

Beyer High	7.6%	Stanislaus County	20.5%
Davis High	10.0%	Merced County	18.3%
Downey High	16.0%	San Joaquin County	34.0%
Elliott Alternative	84.6%*	Tuolumne County	11.8%
Enochs High	N/A	Calaveras County	9.6%
Johansen High	12.6%		
Modesto High	13.3%	STATE WIDE	21.1%
Turlock High	8.4%		
Pitman High	11.6%		
Ceres High	13.2%	Central Valley High	N/A
Oakdale High	5.0%	Patterson High	14.7%
Riverbank High	11.1%	Hughson High	3.6%
Waterford High	12.8%		

\*Elliott and other Alternative high schools usually have higher drop out rates because they serve at-risk students and many move in and out of campuses.

(cited from [cde.ca.gov/dataquest](http://cde.ca.gov/dataquest))

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What Districts Should Do

Modesto, California is facing a dropout problem. Funding and implementing dropout prevention programs for at-risk students alone, even programs that have been proven to be effective, cannot solve it. Instead, the solution requires a systemic approach based on building the capacity of the key educational institutions in the state, county and city, –California Department of Education, districts, and school –a strategy that will also improve student achievement.

Because the dropout crisis is concentrated within relatively few schools and districts, the state can have an immediate impact by focusing its initial attention on those schools and districts –even in the current, limited budget climate.

The following recommendations are designed to effect change through a combination of pressure and support:

- 1. Mobilize the community to address the dropout problem**

Districts must first recognize the scope of the problem and have the will to act.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What Districts Should Do cont.

**2. Adopt proven strategies to keep students in school and support their successful graduation**

Districts should adopt programmatic strategies that provide targeted academic and social supports for at-risk students. Involving school and district staff in identifying strategies and designing implementation plans is one way to build will and understanding.

**3. Implement these strategies in all targeted schools through a participatory process with clearly-specified benchmarks, timelines, and outcomes.**

Once a set of strategies is identified, teachers, administrators, and support staff must implement them. Research shows that reforms are often poorly implemented because of a lack of understanding of the intent of the reform.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What Districts Should Do cont.

- 4. Develop and use data to monitor the implementation of the strategies and to modify the implementation plan**

It is imperative to have good data to determine whether the intervention strategies are effective and to monitor implementation in order to facilitate modifications to the plan.

- 5. Partner with outside support organizations to identify strategies and to develop and monitor implementation**

School districts often lack the capacity to initiate, implement, and sustain reforms, particularly comprehensive reforms.

- 6. Develop an effective dropout/attendance recovery strategy**

It is imperative that we take an innovative and effective approach to ensure students have as many opportunities and support.

- 7. Request federal funding to pay for dropout prevention programs**

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What Districts Should Do cont.

**8. Establish early warning systems to support struggling students**

Research shows that you can predict with 66% accuracy a student in elementary school who will go on to drop out from high school.

**9. Provide support options for struggling students to meet rigorous expectations**

Student learning needs and styles differ widely; in response, states and districts should develop support options that allow all students to graduate from high school prepared for college and the workplace.

# **RECOMMENDATIONS**

## **What Schools Should Do**

**Schools have the most direct and immediate impact on student outcomes.**

**Districts must recognize the scope of the problem and have the will to act.**

Schools and their staffs create conditions that directly affect students' engagement, how much they learn, and whether they remain in school and eventually graduate.

As suggested earlier, districts have the responsibility to develop a district-wide plan to provide the resources and support for all schools to adopt these strategies; schools have the responsibility to implement them and then to be accountable for the results.

**1. Create a personalized learning environment for both students and teachers.**

Both students and teachers benefit from a personalized learning environment where they know each other well - where adults can get to know their students, understand their problems, and provide the support they need to be successful in school.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What Schools Should Do cont.

### 2. **Provide academic and social supports for students**

All students need support. The amount of support will vary for each student, but all students should be guaranteed sufficient support to meet their needs throughout their high school careers. Students may also need social support. Some programs recruit, train, and support specialized counselors or monitors to work with at-risk students to address their needs directly or to serve as a broker with organizations outside of the school.

### 3. **Provide rigorous and meaningful instruction**

Providing rigorous and meaningful instruction is the most direct means to increase student engagement and school performance.

### 4. **Create connections to the real world**

Creating connections to the real world can better engage students in learning and in school.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What The State Should Do

**The state government has the constitutional authority and ultimate responsibility for provision of education in California**

To demonstrate its commitment to addressing the dropout crisis, California should establish bold, yet attainable goals for raising graduation rates.

**1. Fix the accountability system in order to maintain pressure and allow sufficient time to address the problem**

The cornerstone of the **state** accountability system is the California Academic Performance Index (API), which measures the academic performance of schools and districts.

**2. Collect and report more useful data on dropouts and the state's progress in improving graduation rates**

California is currently developing both a student and teacher longitudinal data system

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What The State Should Do cont.

The state should expand the data system to include more information on students and the educational institutions that serve them. The student data system should be expanded to:

- Track the educational progress of students;
- Provide systemic early identification of at-risk students so they can receive needed support and services;
- Monitor the services provided to students and their effectiveness in improving outcomes.

Some of this information could come from other on-going data collection activities, such as the California Healthy Kids Survey and the California School Climate Survey. Since this expanded data system would include data from a variety of state agencies, the state should consider creating an independent state data warehouse, as several other states have done. Finally the state should use the data to issue an annual California High School Graduation report that documents trends in dropout, promotion, and graduation rates and statewide efforts to address the problem and the effectiveness of those efforts.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What The State Should Do cont.

- 3. Develop high school reform standards and create “lighthouse” districts to implement them in schools with high dropout rates**

The state needs a mechanism to monitor the capacity of school districts throughout the state on an ongoing basis, and provide support based on their level of capacity.

The districts and their partners should begin by undertaking an in-depth analysis of the nature of the dropout problem in the district’s schools, and use this information to develop a “Plan for Improvement” that would be reviewed and approved by the CDE.

- 4. Undertake middle school reform modeled on the same strategies used for high school reform**

Research reveals that the transition from elementary to middle school is a critical transition for students, particularly for those who have had academic difficulties in elementary school. 10,873 California students dropped out of grades 7 & 8 in 2005-06.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What The State Should Do cont.

**5. Make strategic investments in other proven dropout prevention strategies targeting the most disadvantaged students and schools**

The state should make strategic investments in interventions that have proven to be both *effective and cost-effective* in improving graduation rates. Some of these proven interventions, which cover all levels of the education system, include:

- Preschool and early childhood programs through grade 3
- Smaller classes in K-3
- Increased teacher salaries

**6. Re-examine state high school graduation requirements**

Both academic research studies and surveys of employers suggest that students need a wide variety of skills to be successful in college and in the workplace. They also need “soft skills” such as punctuality, perseverance, and the social skills needed to work in groups.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What Parents Should Do

- Make sure students receive individual attention in safe schools, in smaller learning communities within large schools, in small classes and in programs that provide tutoring and build on what students learn during the school day.
- Act early so students do *not* drop out: with high quality universal pre-school and full day kindergarten, and strong elementary and middle school programs
- Get involved in yours student's learning at school and at home
- Meet your student's teachers
- Get to know all of the school employees
- Join the PTA, ELAC, DLAC or other parent groups
- Check in daily with your children, review what they learned in school, determine set times for homework
- Check your school's Website regularly
- Create partnerships with your student's teachers and work as a team
- Familiarize yourself with the teachers' goals for the year
- Make sure educators have the training and resources they need to prevent dropouts
- Ask legislators for more afterschool programs

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What Businesses Should Do

- Provide workforce readiness and skills training and job opportunities
- Provide a broad network of partnering businesses and industries to maximize opportunities for youth
- Create a business mentor program where business professionals and other employees mentor youth who have an interest in a particular field or company
- Work with superintendents, principals, politicians and community organizations to formulate a strategy to address the dropout crisis
- Create a youth-based business incubator for aspiring youth entrepreneurs

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What Businesses Should Do cont.

- Work with the community to establish an annual dropout and attendance reclamation event
- Support more and earlier opportunities to participate in career and technical education courses and programs, not just limited to juniors and seniors
- Support required career exploration courses for 9<sup>th</sup> graders
- Expand and replicate effective internships and apprenticeships by creating a template of best practices kits for schools and businesses to use

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What Communities Should Do

- **Help organize a reach out to dropout and attendance/truancy recovery campaign**
- **Support the availability of more effective parenting classes**  
Providing parents with the skills and support to be effective and nurturing household leaders is essential to overcoming barriers that lead to family dysfunction and disengagement from the educational system.
- **Support accurate graduation and dropout data:** Schools and communities cannot adequately address the dropout problem without an accurate account of it.
- **Support Parent Education Programs such as PIQE (Parent Institute for Quality Education)**  
The educational system can be a daunting and intimidating experience for parents. Providing them with the information and knowledge necessary to navigate the educational system in a language that is user friendly to parents is crucial to the academic success of students.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What Communities Should Do cont.

- **Provide adult advocates and student supports:** Students need adult advocates who can help identify academic and personal challenges early and get students the support they need.
- **Support parent engagement and individualized graduation plans:** Research shows that parents' engagement in their children's school lives results in multiple benefits to the students, such as improved school attendance, educational performance, classroom behavior and emotion well-being.
- **Support the establishment of a rigorous college and work preparatory curriculum for high school graduation:**  
Students taking a rigorous core curriculum in high school are better prepared to succeed in college and in the workforce than students taking less challenging coursework.
- **Support an integrated services model to address the issues of dropouts and attendance:** Implementing an integrate student support services model will allow for a seamless delivery of service for students and families to help them deal with the issues that lead to not attending and dropping out of school .

# BEYOND SCHOOLS

**Schools alone cannot solve the dropout problem.**

Ultimately, the solution to California's dropout crisis must involve providing more resources and support to families and communities, including better housing, better health care and better employment opportunities. In particular, more support must be provided to the most disadvantaged populations.

Works cited:

California Dropout Research Project – Solving California's Dropout Crisis (February 2008)

The Modesto Bee – July 2008

America's Promise Alliance – 10-point plan for graduation success

[cde.ca.gov/dataquest](http://cde.ca.gov/dataquest)

John Ervin