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COMMENTARY

Examining the Evidence Behind High School Dropout Interventions

A Systematic Review of the Empirical Literature

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The issue of high school dropout is a serious concern for educators, policy makers, and the public. The economic and social consequences for those who do not complete high school have continued to climb as the demands for a more educated workforce have increased. Young adults who do not complete high school are more likely to be unemployed, welfare recipients, and when employed, make less money on average than their peers who did complete high school. High school dropouts are also more likely to suffer from depression or other mental health issues, join gangs or be involved in other criminal activities, and serve time in jail. These outcomes are a serious concern at the individual level and carry a large "social cost".

Given the national attention the dropout problem has received, there is a surprising lack of information about effective practices or policies, and less on the integration and effective implementation of practices and policies. Most research has focused on identifying risk and protective factors or describing prevention or intervention programs, and much of the research has relied on correlational statistics or descriptive case studies, rather than experimental design. Many practices and policies currently used do not have strong evidence of effectiveness.

This study is a systematic review addressing two main questions related to (a) the characteristics of the empirical literature examining high school dropout or school completion interventions and (b) the common elements of effective policy or practice interventions for reducing high school dropout rates or increasing school completion rates. The focus on research methods and common intervention components in this study is intentional and designed to guide practitioners wondering if their practices align with promising components as well as future research directions.

In general, results from this review indicate a gap between what is known aboutdropout risk factors and the recommendations made by experts and the focus of experimental research on dropout interventions. The vast majority of research in the area of high school dropout prevention has been focused on either identifying risk factors for students likely to dropout or intensive student level interventions. However, for many students who choose to leave high school, this decision comes at the end of a long process of disengagement from school. Additionally, the impact of individual risk factors may change across time. It may be more accurate to consider students who dropout as members of distinct subgroups for whom different interventions may be more or less effective. Although this review does describe intervention components of effective studies, none of the intervention studies included in this review disaggregated effects based on sub-groups of dropouts. Therefore, although theoretically, intervention components should be matched with subgroup needs, no conclusions can be drawn from the intervention literature in this review about the effects of different intervention components on subgroups of high school dropouts.

A systematic, tiered, preventative approach to reducing the high school dropout rate has been recommended by researchers.

However, this approach has not yet been adequately studied. Researchers have suggested that school-level tiered interventions may increase a school's capacity to address intensive student needs. However, as this review shows, the current body of empirical research provides little guidance to schools or policy makers with respect to either matching dropout interventions with particular risk factors or subgroups or to integrating dropout interventions into a mulit-tiered framework which may address student needs more effectively and efficiently.

The full study is in Freeman, J., & Simonsen, B. (2014). Examining the impact of policy and practice interventions on high school dropout and school completion rates: A systematic review of the literature. Review of Educational Research, forthcoming.

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