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COMMENTARY

Determinants of Graduation Rate of Public Alternative Schools

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The United States has been struggling with the phenomenon of high school dropout, and public alternative schools are one of the strategies to solve the issue, specifically for at-risk high school students. Such schools play an important role in educating students who are expelled or suspended from regular schools due to their at-risk behaviors and placed in such schools to continue their learning. However, each alternative high school has its own school structure and process, which could be important factors for the effects on at-risk students. This study inquired into whether, and if so, how school staffing and school processes of public alternative schools specifically for at-risk high school students are related to the graduation rate. The study used national Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) 2007–2008 as the data source.

Our study has two major findings. First, we found that school staffing can be a key factor for improving education in alternative schools specifically for at-risk students, explaining an additional 11% of variance after controlling for student demographics. Specifically, we found that the percentage of Hispanic teachers had a positively significant relationship with graduation rates, supporting early research.

Second, we found that school processes were statistically significantly associated with the graduation rate in alternative high schools, accounting for an additional 12% of variance after controlling for student demographics and school staffing. Specifically, we found that (a) "summer academic assistance or enrichment" had a statistically significant, positive relationship with graduation rate; (b) "having the same teachers for two or more years" was a marginally statistically significant positive predictor; and (c) "providing day care service" and "having traditional grades or academic discipline-based departments" were statistically significant, negative predictors for graduation rates. It appears that the educational system adopted at traditional schools is an ineffective practice for alternative high schools for at-risk students. The needs of the students in alternative high schools require a more flexible structure such as nongraded or interdisciplinary courses.

This study has a few implications for policy development and implementation. First, this study suggests that school staffing and school processes, particularly school processes, could make a difference in the graduation rate of alternative high schools for at-risk students.

Second, the study points out the offering of some effective practices in alternative high schools. Those effective practices include: (a) summer academic assistance or enrichment programs, and (b) staffing schools with Hispanic teachers. It seems that summer learning opportunities are important for students in alternative high schools.

And staffing schools with Hispanic teachers supports the literature on culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy.

Third, the study also found some negative factors associated with the graduation rate in alternative high schools. The inclusion of traditional grade or academic discipline-based departments is one of the negative predictors. Students in alternative high schools have already had a difficult experience; to continue the same arrangements for these students does not appear to work.

Fourth, the fact that many important factors illustrated in the literature did not come up as statistically significant factors seems to suggest that alternative high schools for at-risk student have their own dynamics. The special needs of the student population in alternative high schools for at-risk students and the resulting unique dynamics in these schools require us to think and practice outside the box of regular schools so that we can have the most effective alternative schools.

The full study is in Izumi, M., Shen, J., & Xia, J. (2015). Determinants of graduation rate of public alternative schoolsEducation and Urban Society, 47(3), 307-327.

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