Context

Contrary to what some people would like to think, the state of Texas is still failing an unbelievable number of its youth and is thereby failing to comply with House Bill 1010 "to reduce the statewide longitudinal rate to not more than 5 percent of the total student population."

In 1986, the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) conducted the first comprehensive statewide study of school dropouts in Texas. Using a high school attrition formula, IDRA estimated that 86,000 students had not graduated from Texas public schools that year, costing the state $17.12 billion in foregone income, lost tax revenues and increased criminal justice, welfare, unemployment and job training costs.

By 1998 – 12 years later – the estimated cumulative number of Texas school dropouts has grown to more than 1.2 million. Because these students were unable to complete high school, the state of Texas loses $319 billion.

While IDRA's research shows that 147,313 students (43 percent) from the 1993-94 freshman class did not graduate in 1996-97 in what would have been their senior year, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) reports that only 26,901 students (9.1 percent estimated longitudinal rate) dropped out of school for that same period. Why the discrepancy? Some of the answers lie in how students are counted and the fact that Texas cannot count on self-reporting by schools or TEA.

The inaccuracy of the counting and reporting was underscored by the July 1996 review of TEA by the Texas state auditor:

> Percent of students who drop out annually: Dropout data reported by the school districts was incorrect. Additionally, the agency does not have adequate controls to prevent or detect school district errors (Lawrence, 1996).

More than 100,000 Texas youth did not receive their high school diplomas, yet they were not counted as dropouts.

As a result of inaccurate calculations, the state auditor estimated that the 1994 actual dropout rate was **more than double the 1994 *reported* rate.** As recently as 1998, the state auditor advised that underreporting of dropouts must continue to be addressed by TEA (Lawrence, 1998).

Schools and the state education agency must be held accountable for their loose interpretation of the dropout definition, counting and reporting methods that include not counting:

- about *6,000* General Education Development (GED) students, students who have been expelled and are eventually incarcerated for criminal behavior, students who drop out before the seventh grade, and students who complete their high school course requirements but fail the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), and
- about *95,000* "unofficial" student withdrawals.

This means that more than 100,000 Texas youth did not receive their high school diplomas, yet they were not counted as dropouts.

This policy brief presents an in-depth look at the dropout issue in Texas. It is presented against a backdrop of the 1986 legislation that mandated schools and the state education agency ensure that at least 95 percent of Texas' youth receive their high school diplomas. This policy brief also provides some answers to keeping students in school and recommendations which, if followed, will provide the "real" numbers of students missing from our schools. This, in turn, should compel anyone with a conscience to change the state's failure rate.

> *"To set standards for young people, have them fail these standards, and then blame the failure entirely on them, their families or some other element outside of school is an abdication of our roles as educators."*
>
> *– J.V. Hamby, December 1990-January 1991*

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on 12 years of research by the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) and others on Texas dropout rates, state and local district identification, counting and reporting procedures.

Revise the goal of the state dropout program to comply with the mandate:

The goal of the program shall be to reduce the actual statewide *longitudinal* dropout rate to not more than 5 percent, such that a minimum of 95 percent of any class of students enrolling in Texas public schools will receive their high school diploma.

Rationale: The current statewide longitudinal dropout rate does not comply with the legislative mandate.

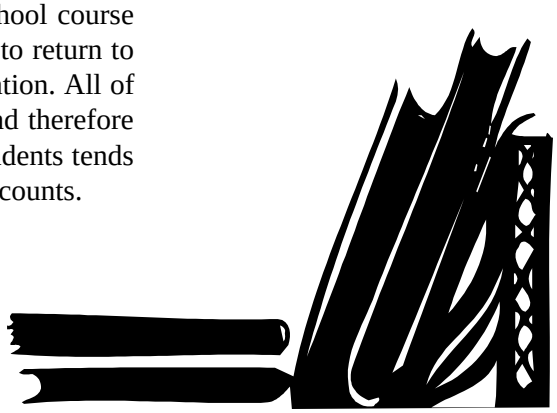
The current statewide longitudinal dropout rate does not comply with the legislative mandate.

Modify state policy requirements so that a "dropout" is defined as follows:

A student is defined as a dropout if the student enrolled in Texas public schools does not receive a high school diploma and for whom the state has no proof of re-enrollment in a school within or outside of Texas that has the authority to grant high school diplomas. The definition should not include students enrolled in Texas public schools who:

- are enrolled in school-based General Education Development (GED) programs,
- have successfully completed all high school course requirements but have not passed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), and
- are reported as having returned to their home country, but for whom there is no verification of enrollment by a receiving school.

Rationale: The current dropout definition *excludes* in the calculation of school dropouts students who receive a GED and students who have failed the TAAS but passed their high school course requirements, as well as students who were thought to return to their home country but for whom there is no verification. All of these students do not have a high school diploma and therefore should be defined as dropouts. Exclusion of such students tends to misrepresent and seriously understate the dropout counts.



Require each public school district in Texas, on a yearly basis, to report to the state education agency the number of students enrolled in Texas public schools who:

- are enrolled in school-based GED programs,
- have successfully completed all high school course requirements but have not passed the TAAS, and
- are reported as having returned to their home country, but for whom there is no verification.

These students should be reported separately and not be included in the dropout definition.

Rationale: It is currently difficult to determine exactly how many students fall into these categories and are not receiving their high school diplomas. In addition, the inclusion of these students in the dropout rate tends to overstate the actual high school completion rate in Texas schools.

Modify the state education agency procedure for computing the actual state longitudinal dropout rate. The following computation is an example of how the rate could be calculated:

The state longitudinal dropout rate is calculated by determining the total number of students enrolled in Texas public schools in seventh grade and subtracting the total number of those same students receiving a high school diploma five years later, excluding students who will not graduate but are still enrolled in the regular school program that leads to acquiring a high school diploma (such as students who were retained or do not have sufficient credits), divided by the number of pupils in the original seventh grade group and multiplying by 100 to determine the percentage.

Rationale: The current state longitudinal dropout rate is an *estimated* rate and must be an *actual* rate.

Require that a school district's longitudinal dropout rate be tied to the state's accountability system, the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS):

A school district must accurately report its longitudinal dropout rate for groups of individual students (cohorts) to the state education agency as it reports each year all other AEIS indicators, which are factored into the district's accountability rating.

Rationale: A school district cannot be deemed "acceptable," "recognized" or "exemplary" when it is failing more than 5 percent of its students.

Require that each local school district establish local dropout oversight committee(s) or task force(s) including parent representatives, private sector representatives and school staff.

These committees should regularly and systematically monitor the dropout identification, counting and reporting process and dropout prevention efforts at their campuses and districts. Such efforts should be part of the regular school program involving regular school staff.

Rationale: There is currently no local oversight committee to monitor the local dropout reporting or intervention. Schools and communities must be directly involved in addressing the issue.

Require that the state education agency establish a site monitoring team that is responsible for maintaining the integrity of the statewide dropout data.

A trigger mechanism should be developed for the team to review cases where the district attrition rate is more than 10 percent of their reported dropout rate.

Rationale: There is currently no "trigger mechanism" for reviewing discrepancies in district dropout rates. Limitations in agency review efforts preclude effective oversight and may contribute to gross underreporting.

Require that the state education agency collect information on the reasons students drop out of school in a way that significantly decreases the number of "unknown" reasons for dropping out.

Information should also include data on *school-related dropout factors* such as school retention rates, school faculty attrition, credentials and experience, and school per-pupil expenditures.

Rationale: There is currently no information on the reasons students drop out of school for approximately half of those students who are identified as dropouts.

Require that the state education agency collect and disseminate information on local districts' dropout prevention and recovery efforts.

This should include proven strategies used and evidence of effectiveness in lowering the dropout rate.

Rationale: Given the high number of dropouts, proven strategies for lowering dropout rates must be shared across districts.

Findings at a Glance

The latest Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) attrition findings reveal some alarming facts. Major findings include the following.

- From 1985-86 to 1997-98 more than 1.2 million students have been lost from Texas public schools to attrition.
- From 1986 to 1998, the state of Texas loses $319 billion in foregone income, lost tax revenues and increased criminal justice, welfare, unemployment and job training costs.
- Comparison of IDRA attrition trend data and Texas Education Agency (TEA) dropout estimates differ radically in the assessment of the state's dropout problem. This difference is not explained merely by differences in calculation procedures.
- Two of every five students (42 percent) enrolled in the ninth grade in Texas public schools during the 1994-95 school year failed to reach and/or complete the 12th grade in the 1997-98 school year.
- One of every two Hispanic students and African American students from the 1994-95 ninth grade class never reached the 12th grade, compared to one of every three White students.
- Racial and ethnic minority group students were more likely than White non-Hispanic students to be lost from public school enrollment. Nearly half of African American students (49 percent) and Hispanic students (54 percent) were lost from public school enrollment between the 1994-95 and 1997-98 school years compared to about 31 percent of White non-Hispanic students. African American students were 1.6 times more likely to be lost from enrollment than were White students, while Hispanic students were 1.7 times more likely to be lost from public high school enrollment than were White students.

More than 1.2 million students have been lost from Texas public schools to attrition (from 1985-86 to 1997-98).

The state of Texas loses $319 billion in foregone income, lost tax revenues and increased criminal justice, welfare, unemployment and job training costs (from 1985-86 to 1997-98).

"We must do whatever it takes to ensure equity and excellence in our schools. Our children, our public school system, our democracy, cannot survive without both. Excellence without equity is impossible. And equity without excellence is unacceptable. Schools cannot continue to work for some and not for others."

– Dr. María Robledo Montecel, IDRA executive director, November 16, 1997

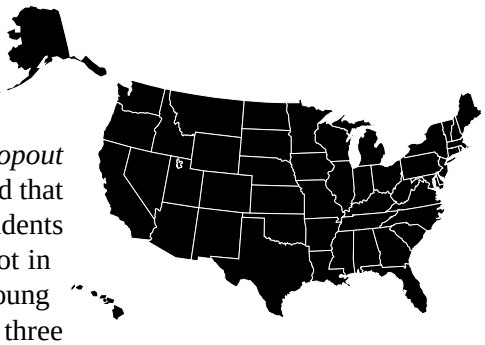
"Young people leave schools because they prefer active modes of learning, they want educational programs that connect school learning with adults and with the world beyond the classroom, and hope to find activities that are interesting. Our challenge, then, is to create educational environments that embrace these three components."

– Robert Shumer, "Focus on Active, Connected, Inspired Learning; Not Schooling," *NDPC Newsletter* (National Dropout Prevention Center, Winter 1994).

- More males than females were lost from public high school enrollment. Between the 1994-95 and 1997-98 school years, more males (45 percent) than females (38 percent) were lost from public high school enrollment.
- The attrition rate was highest in major urban districts (51 percent) and lowest in rural districts (28 percent) in the 1996-97 school year.
- Since 1986 (the 1985-86 to 1997-98 school years), the number of students (ninth grade through 12th grade) lost from public school enrollment has *increased*. The number of students lost from public school enrollment in Texas has increased from about 86,000 in the 1985-86 school year to about 151,000 in the 1997-98 school year.
- The statewide rate of attrition has increased by 27 percent (from 33 percent in the 1985-86 school year to 42 percent in the 1997-98 school year).

The National Picture

Recent national studies have shown that far too many students, particularly racial and ethnic minority students, are dropping out of school prior to graduation. Many reports show that despite the success of some dropout initiatives in some areas and the resultant increase in the number of students graduating from high school, the dropout picture remains troublesome.



On July 31, 1997, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released its report on dropouts in 1995 entitled, *Dropout Statistics for the United States: Who Drops Out?* NCES reported that one-half million of the 9.5 million 15-through 24-year old students dropped out in 1994-95. Nearly one in eight young adults is not in school. In 1995, Hispanic youth accounted for one out of seven young adults in the United States but accounted for one out of every three dropouts.

The NCES findings are consistent with IDRA's attrition analyses in Texas and IDRA's dropout study in the Dallas Independent School District (1989). IDRA's review of the NCES report found the following:

Poverty does not explain the high dropout rates among Hispanic students.

- Within each income level, Hispanic students are substantially more likely to drop out.

Immigration status does not explain the high dropout rates among Hispanic students.

- The dropout rate of Hispanic students born in the United States is 17.9 percent (more than double the 8.6 percent rate of White students and one and a half times the 12.1 percent rate of African American students).
- The event dropout rate (1995) of 12.4 percent for Hispanic students is three times the rate for White students and two times the rate for African American students.

Speaking Spanish does not explain the high dropout rates among Hispanic students.

- Hispanic students who speak Spanish at home and also speak English "well" or "very well" are as likely to remain in school as were their peers who speak only English.
- Two-thirds of the Hispanic young adults who reported limited English speaking ability reported receiving no English as a second language instruction.

In 1995, Hispanic youth accounted for one out of seven young adults in the United States but accounted for one out of every three dropouts.

On the same day, NCES released *America's Teachers: Profile of a Profession, 1993-94* that reports on the working conditions, salaries, instructional practices and qualifications of public and private teachers. According to the report, more than one-third of U.S. teachers lack college preparation in the main subject areas they teach. This finding, coupled with the increasing shortage of qualified bilingual education and English as a second language teachers, explains why many students drop out of school (NCES, 1997a).

Nearly one in eight young adults is not in school.

"The youth population has been misnamed the self-centered generation. There's a strong desire to serve others. The problem we face in America today is not a lack of willingness to serve or help others but to find the appropriate outlet for this."

– George Gallup, 1987

Texas: A Look Back

Prior to the early 1980s, the state of Texas practically ignored the fact that a significant percentage of its school-aged population was dropping out of school prior to graduation. Changes in economic trends and employee skill requirements resulted in an increasing interest in the dropout problem as the state moved into a technological and service-oriented labor market.

In the early 1980s, the Texas State Legislature passed the most extensive mandates for education reform in the state's history. Through House Bill 72, the legislature mandated broad and sweeping initiatives for education reform in the areas of instruction, assessment, staff development and dropout prevention.

House Bill 72 addressed two critical areas relating to the state dropout issue.

- It required school districts to calculate and include local estimates of the dropout rate in their annual performance reports.
- It mandated the Texas Department of Community Affairs (TDCA), later renamed the Texas Department of Commerce, to coordinate a study on the magnitude of the dropout problem on a statewide basis.

Following the mandate from the legislature, TDCA along with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) formed the *Texas School Dropout Survey Project* to research the dropout issue in Texas and, based on the research findings, provide recommendations to the legislature (Cárdenas, Robledo and Supik, 1986). In the spring of 1986, the TDCA in collaboration with TEA contracted with the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) to conduct three of the project's four research tasks:

- Measure the extent of the school dropout problem in Texas through valid and reliable dropout indices.
- Collect and analyze benefit-cost data on the impact of dropouts on the criminal justice and human services systems in Texas.
- Identify and evaluate in-school and alternative training programs for dropouts in Texas.

In October 1986, IDRA completed the first comprehensive study of school dropouts in Texas and released the research findings in a six volume series of the *Texas School Dropout Survey Project*. IDRA's report stirred up controversy with local education agencies based on the key finding that **33 percent of Texas students were dropping out of school during their high school years,** and that the dropout percentages for students in minority groups were much higher than for White students.

As a result of the study's findings, recommendations by TDCA

and TEA and discussions at several state and regional dropout-related conferences, Rep. Ramon Martinez and Sen. Chet Edwards of Houston drafted House Bill 1010, which became law in 1986. This legislation mandated increased involvement of school districts and their accountability for reducing the dropout rate and improving the levels of academic achievement of students.

One critical facet of HB 1010 was the mandate that TEA develop longitudinal and annual dropout rates for Texas. To facilitate the calculation of such a rate, the bill called for "standardized statewide record keeping, documentation of school transfers by students and follow-up procedures for students who drop out of school." The law also required the state education agency to calculate dropout rates by campus, district, county and region service center for each grade level from seven through 12 by race and ethnicity.

Since 1987, TEA has been calculating *annual* dropout rates, and during the last few years, longitudinal rates have been estimated. In the 1996 dropout data collection effort, TEA had the data necessary to calculate an *actual* longitudinal dropout rate but chose instead to explore the calculation and use of a school completion rate. This is in spite of the fact that the Texas Education Code mandates the calculation of a "longitudinal dropout rate."

Findings Examined

How Many Students are Dropping Out of Texas' Public Schools?

Since 1986, the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) has conducted an annual* attrition study to track the number and percent of students in Texas who are lost from public school enrollment prior to graduation. These analyses serve as a check-and-balance system for the reporting of dropout rates, rates that the state education agency and local school districts claim have declined over time. Despite the reported lower dropout rates by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and school districts, the attrition data by IDRA indicate that *increasingly high* numbers of students are lost from public school enrollment between the ninth and 12th grades.

IDRA's attrition study for the 1997-98 school year involved the analysis of enrollment figures for public high school students in the ninth grade during the 1994-95 school year and students enrolled in the 12th grade three years later. This period represents the time span during which a ninth grade student would be enrolled in school prior to graduation.

Attrition Rates By School Year, 1997-98

Race-Ethnicity Group	Percent of Students Lost to Attrition	Number of Students Lost to Attrition
Native American	42%	352
Asian/Pacific Islander	21%	1,730
African American	49%	26,938
White	31%	49,135
Hispanic	53%	72,810
Total	**42%**	**150,965**

Source: Intercultural Development Research Association, attrition files,

Enrollment data from TEA's Fall Membership Survey for the 1994-95 and 1997-98 school years were used for the analysis. The enrollment data from special school districts (military schools, state schools and charter schools) were excluded from the analysis since they are likely to have unstable enrollments and/or lack a tax base to support school programs.

The latest annual attrition study released by IDRA in October of 1998 reveals some alarming facts:

- Two of every five students (42 percent) enrolled in the ninth grade in Texas public schools during the 1994-95 school year failed to reach and/or complete the 12th grade in the 1997-98 school year.
- One of every two Hispanic students and African American students from the 1994-95 ninth grade class never reached the 12th grade, compared to one of every three White students.
- Racial and ethnic minority group students were more likely than White non-Hispanic students to be lost from public school

** Rates were not calculated for the 1990-91 and the 1993-94 school years due to unavailability of data. Study findings are presented in the IDRA Newsletter each year.*

enrollment. Nearly half of African American students (49 percent) and Hispanic students (54 percent) were lost from public school enrollment between the 1994-95 and 1997-98 school years compared to about 31 percent of White non-Hispanic students. African American students were 1.6 times more likely to be lost from enrollment than were White students, while Hispanic students were 1.7 times more likely to be lost from public high school enrollment than were White students.

- More males than females were lost from public high school enrollment. Between the 1994-95 and 1997-98 school years, more males (45 percent) than females (38 percent) were lost from public high school enrollment.
- The attrition rate was highest in major urban districts (51 percent) and lowest in rural districts (28 percent) in the 1996-97 school year.

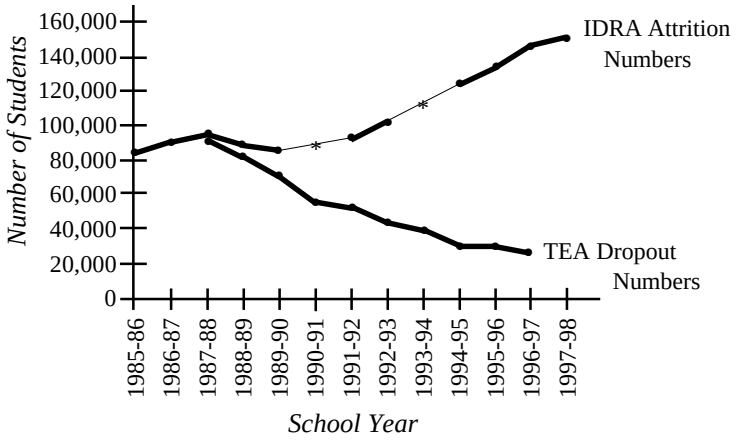
Two of every five students (42 percent) enrolled in the ninth grade in Texas public schools during the 1994-95 school year failed to reach and/or complete the 12th grade in the 1997-98 school year.

What the Numbers Reveal Over Time

Looking at the numbers since 1986 (the 1985-86 to 1997-98 school years) IDRA finds that:

- The number of students (ninth grade through 12th grade) lost from public school enrollment has *increased*. The number of students lost from public school enrollment in Texas has increased from about 86,000 in the 1985-86 school year to about 151,000 in the 1997-98 school year.
- The statewide rate of attrition has increased by 27 percent (from 33 percent in the 1985-86 school year to 42 percent in the 1997-98 school year).

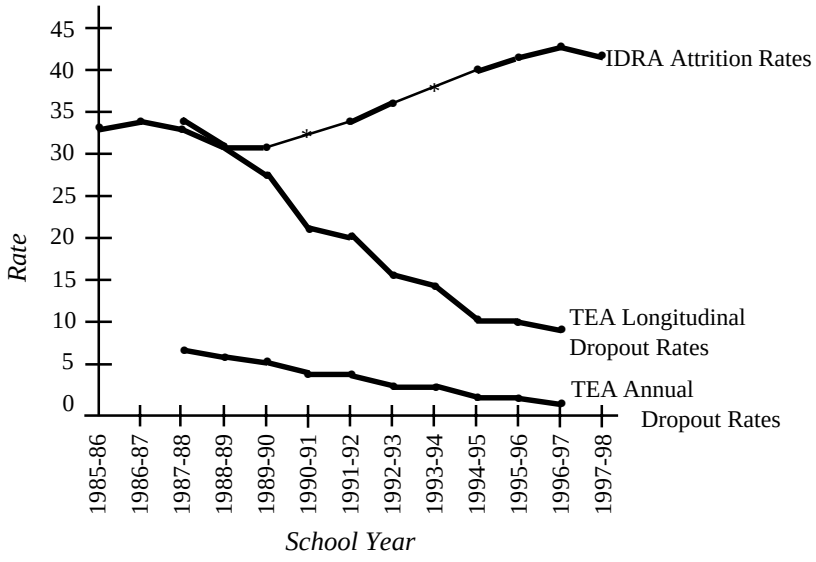
Number of Students Lost from Texas School Enrollment



	IDRA Attrition Numbers	TEA Dropout Numbers
1985-86	86,276	--
1986-87	90,317	--
1987-88	92,213	91,307
1988-89	88,538	82,325
1989-90	86,160	70,040
1990-91	*	53,965
1991-92	91,424	53,421
1992-93	101,358	43,402
1993-94	*	40,211
1994-95	123,200	29,918
1995-96	135,438	29,207
1996-97	147,313	26,901
1997-98	150,965	--

** Rates were not calculated for the 1990-91 and 1993-94 school years due to unavailability of data.*

Attrition and Dropout Rates



	IDRA Attrition Rates	TEA Long. Dropout Rates	TEA Annual Dropout Rates
1985-86	33	--	--
1986-87	34	--	--
1987-88	33	34.0	6.7
1988-89	31	31.3	6.1
1989-90	31	27.2	5.1
1990-91	*	21.4	3.9
1991-92	34	20.7	3.8
1992-93	36	15.8	2.8
1993-94	*	14.4	2.6
1994-95	40	10.6	1.8
1995-96	42	10.1	1.8
1996-97	43	9.1	1.6
1997-98	42	--	--

** Rates were not calculated for the 1990-91 and 1993-94 school years due to unavailability of data.*

✎ From 1985-86 to 1997-98 more than 1.2 million students have been lost from Texas public schools to attrition.

The statewide rate of attrition has increased by 27 percent (from 33 percent in the 1985-86 school year to 42 percent in the 1997-98 school year).

These numbers are in sharp contrast to the numbers that TEA reports. TEA reports a steady decline in the number of school dropouts over the last eight years (1998). In fact, the agency reports that the number of dropouts has declined by more than 70.5 percent from the 1987-88 school year (91,307) to the 1996-97 school year (26,901).

Relying on self-reported data from school districts across the state, TEA reports an annual dropout rate decline from a rate of 6.7 percent in the 1987-88 school year to a rate of 1.6 percent in the 1996-97 school year.

IDRA's analyses of the number of students lost from public school enrollment prior to graduation show a drastically different picture. Despite the many dropout initiatives and the success of some, IDRA's analyses of statewide and county enrollment data show that the percent of students lost from enrollment has increased.

Why the Discrepancy Between IDRA and TEA Numbers?

In order to understand the reason for the discrepancy between the reported numbers, it is important to first look at what the definition and methods are for identifying, counting and reporting dropouts.

At the end of each school year, school districts report the number of dropouts to TEA through the Public Education Information Man-

"Each year, the principal ordered me to keep manipulating the [district] dropout list until I got the list down to a 2 percent dropout rate when it was actually about 40 percent. This is the report that went to central office and to TEA."

– school district employee in Texas

agement System (PEIMS). Dropout information is collected for secondary school students in grades seven through 12.

The state definition for a dropout is:

> *A student is identified as a dropout if the individual is absent without an approved excuse or documented transfer and does not return to school by the fall of the following school year, or if he or she completes the school year but fails to re-enroll the following school year* (TEA, 1998).

The box below presents the state-defined criteria for the identification of a student dropout.

State of Texas Dropout Definition

Yes, Identified as a Dropout

Students who drop out as defined above (an individual who is absent without an approved excuse or documented transfer and does not return to school by the fall of the following school year, or if he or she completes the school year but fails to re-enroll the following school year) in or after the seventh grade

Students who enter the military before graduation

Students from special education, ungraded or disciplinary alternative education programs who leave school

Students who leave school and enter a program not qualifying as an elementary or secondary school (e.g., cosmetology school)

Students enrolled as migrants and whose whereabouts are unknown

No, Not Identified as a Dropout

Students who die

Students who drop out as defined above, before the seventh grade

Students who are out of school for temporary periods with an approved excuse

Students showing regular attendance at a state-approved alternative program

Students enrolled as migrants who have a subsequent school enrollment record (i.e., a Migrant Student Record Transfer System education record is available)

Students known to have transferred to another public school, adult or alternative education program, or home school

Students who move to another grade level

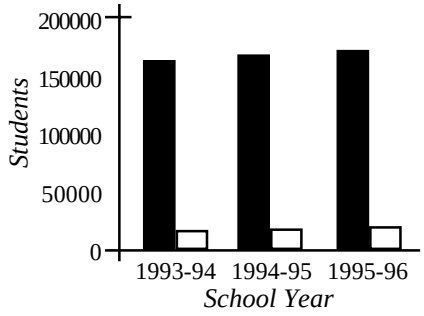
Students who enroll in college early

Students transferred or assigned to another public institution or state-approved educational program

Foreign students who return to their home country

Students who receive GED certificates are not included in dropout counts. The figure below shows the number of individuals receiving GEDs from 1993-94 to 1996-97. In 1995-96, TEA reported that 3,489 high school students received GEDs and were excluded from the state's dropout counts. Though GEDs may be counted as a form of school completion, research shows it does not carry the same weight as a high school diploma in higher education admissions or career options.

High School Graduates and GED Recipients in Texas



	Diplomas	GEDs
1993-94	163,191	18,038
1994-95	169,085	18,464
1995-96	171,844	19,313

The problem with this definition is that it excludes students who receive a GED, students who have successfully completed all high school course requirements but have failed the TAAS test and foreign students who are reported as returning to their home country but for whom there is no verification. This means that more than 100,000 Texas youths did not receive their high school diplomas but were not counted as dropouts.

What Has it Cost the State of Texas?

In 1986, IDRA's research showed that the estimated 86,000 students who had not graduated from Texas public schools that year cost the state of Texas $17 billion dollars in foregone income, lost tax revenues and increased criminal justice, welfare, unemployment and job training costs (Ramirez and Robledo Montecel, 1987).

IDRA calculated the estimated total earnings and tax losses to the state of Texas due to school attrition for the past 12 years, from 1985-86 to 1997-98. **The findings are staggering: the state of Texas loses $319 billion.** Losses in terms of human potential are immeasurable.

Earnings and Tax Losses in Texas Due to School Attrition

School Year	Number of Students Lost to Attrition	Total Lost Earnings and Taxes*
1985-86	86,276	$17.1
1986-87	90,317	$18.1
1987-88	92,213	$19.3
1988-89	88,538	$19.4
1989-90	86,160	$19.9
1990-91	n/a	n/a
1991-92	91,424	$23.1
1992-93	101,358	$26.3
1993-94	n/a	n/a
1994-95	123,200	$33.6
1995-96	135,438	$37.9
1996-97	147,313	$42.6
1997-98	150,965	$44.8
Total	**1,193,202**	**$319.0**

** in billions*

Why are Students Dropping Out?

TEA attempts to collect information on the reasons students drop out of school. For the 1996-97 school year, reasons students dropped out of school were available for 15,798 of the 26,901 reported student dropouts (59 percent). **The fact that the state does not know why it loses 41 percent of its youth is worsened by the biased "reasons" former students must select when indicating why they dropped out. All of the listed reasons place blame on the student.**

For example, of the 15,798 students who reported reasons for dropping out of school in TEA's *1996-97 Report on*

Public School Dropouts, 45 percent gave poor attendance as a reason; 17.8 percent said they entered an alternative program and were not going to pursue a diploma; 12.3 percent were pursuing a job; 6.8 percent had low or failing grades; 5 percent dropped out because of their age; 4.2 percent dropped out to get married; 4 percent of the girls dropped out of school due to pregnancy; 1.8 percent failed the exit TAAS or did not meet all graduation requirements; 1.8 percent were expelled from school; and 0.8 percent were homeless or were non-permanent residents (1998).

What is needed is a more accurate picture of why students drop out of school. It should include school characteristics that place a student at risk of dropping out, such as those who do not value the characteristics of *all* of their students, inadequately prepared teachers, a school culture that does not believe all students can and will achieve, and leadership that does not put this belief into practice.

What Is the State's Response?

In 1990-91, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) instituted an automated statewide recovery system for reported dropouts. The dropout recovery process removes dropouts from the dropout count if they:

- remain enrolled in a public school somewhere in the state, according to the school district attendance and enrollment information provided through PEIMS.
- receive a General Education Development (GED) certificate and appear on the GED information file at the time the recovery procedures are begun.
- graduated within the last year.
- were expelled for criminal behavior occurring on school property or at school related functions and were incarcerated.
- were identified as a dropout at any time since the 1990-91 school year (A student is counted only once as a dropout in his or her lifetime, even if the student drops out repeatedly in the future; First-time dropout identification applies to dropouts reported since the 1990-91 school year).
- met all graduation requirements but did not pass the exit-level Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test.
- withdrew to return to their home country.

In 1995-96, a total of 15,845 students were listed as being recovered through the dropout recovery process. Also, in 1995-96 the dropout recovery process was expanded to include students who:

- were attending approved alternative programs; or
- withdrew to attend college.

As the table on the next page shows, the dropout "recovery" rate

increased significantly from 7.62 percent in 1990-91 to 35.17 percent in 1995-96. Not surprisingly, as the "recovery" rate increased, the reported annual dropout rate decreased. The "recovery" of dropouts is in fact a recovery on paper only and is subject to the changes in who is counted as a dropout.

As it currently stands, if the state agency counts a Texas high school student as a dropout but finds him or her in jail, the student is moved from the dropout count and into the recovery count, no longer a dropout but a "recovered" student. This is also the case for any students who are earning their GEDs, have completed their high school course requirements but have failed the TAAS or may have returned to their "home" countries without verifiable evidence of their doing so. In all of these cases, these students have not received their high school diplomas yet are not defined as dropouts.

What is needed is a true recovery of dropouts through intervention strategies that are proven to be effective.

TEA Dropout Reporting Changes Over Time

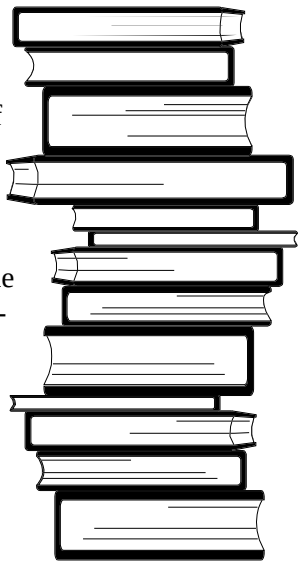
School Year	Reporting Changes	"Recovery" Rate	TEA Annual Dropout Rate
1987-88	Dropout data collection begins. Dropout numbers are computed directly from school district reports.	n/a	7%
1988-89	No change in methods.	n/a	6%
1989-90	No change in methods.	n/a	5%
1990-91	Dropout "recovery" begins. Statewide search of reported dropouts enrolled in other school districts in the state.	7.62% (4,452 are removed from the 58,417 dropout count)	4%
1991-92	No change in methods.	8.27% (4,839 are removed from the 58,503 dropout count)	4%
1992-93	Method of calculating dropout rate is changed, using cumulative enrollment instead of fall enrollment. "Recovery" process is changed to include students who received GEDs, graduated within the last year, were expelled for criminal behavior or were in jail, and were previously identified as dropouts.	16.08% (8,317 are removed from the 51,719 dropout count)	3%
1993-94	No change in methods.	19.03% (9,451 are removed from the 49,662 dropout count)	3%
1994-95	"Recovery" process is changed to include students who completed all high school graduation requirements but failed the TAAS, and who withdrew to their home countries.	26.82% (10,964 are removed from the 40,882 dropout count)	2%
1995-96	"Recovery" process is changed to include students who were attending approved alternative programs and withdrew to attend college.	35.17% (15,845 are removed from the 45,052 dropout count)	2%

A Closer Look

Successful Dropout Prevention

The Texas Education Agency's (TEA) recommendations for reducing the state's dropout rate include the following:

- continuing implementation of excellence and equity strategies for all students as well as increased parent involvement.
- using technology, specifically, providing funds for start-up programs, program expansion and program linkages.
- increasing the number of minority teachers and administrators to represent the state levels as well as providing information to schools about effective programs for children who are homeless.
- developing programs appropriate for migrant students as well as flexibility of the High School Equivalency Examination Pilot Program.
- standardizing entry and exit dropout criteria.
- increasing staff development days without decreasing instructional days.
- increasing parent involvement programs.
- continuing to research the dropout phenomenon to be better informed about how to allocate resources.
- developing alternative curriculum programs and support for expelled students.
- encouraging school districts to participate in extended year programs.
- providing counselors with continued staff development and support.
- requiring individual transition plans for all students.
- conducting ethnographic studies of successful schools and support school restructuring at all levels.



TEA's recommendations for reducing the dropout rate, along with a review of the research on effective dropout prevention strategies, including research by the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) own research over the past 12 years, shows

> *"This state has suffered from a focus on lowering the dropout numbers as opposed to lowering the number of dropouts."*
>
> *– Dr. María Robledo Montecel, IDRA executive director, January 7, 1999*

the following components are vital to successful dropout prevention:

- *All* students must be valued.
- There must be at least one educator in a student's life who is totally committed to the success of that student.
- Families must be valued as partners with the school, all committed to ensuring that equity and excellence is present in a student's life.
- Schools must change and innovate to match the characteristics of their students and embrace the strengths and contributions that students and their families bring.
- School staff, especially teachers, must be equipped with the tools needed to ensure their students' success, including the use of technology, different learning styles and mentoring programs. Effective professional development can help provide these tools.

One example of an effective dropout prevention strategy is provided in the following case study.

> *"The secret of education lies in respecting the student."*
>
> *– Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Case Study: IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program

These components have been demonstrated dramatically in IDRA's Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, an internationally-recognized cross-age tutoring program. Since its inception in 1984, the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has kept 5,500 students in school, young people who were previously at risk of dropping out. According to the Valued Youth creed, all students are valuable, none is expendable. This philosophy is helping more than 145 schools in 17 cities keep 98 percent of Valued Youths in school, keeping these young people in the classroom and learning.

The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program works by placing junior high school students in positions of academic responsibility as tutors of elementary school youngsters. Tutors are paid a minimum wage stipend for their work, reinforcing the worth of the students' time and efforts. Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program students consistently report that they feel better about themselves and their prospects.

They also improve their grades and stay in school. Another benefit of the program is its impact on families outside and in conjunction with the schools: improved communication between schools and families, lessened financial burden and renewed family pride. Family involvement is an integrated part of the program.

Coca-Cola Valued Youth are an inspiration to the children they tutor, positive leaders among their peers, motivated learners to their teachers, a source of pride to their parents, and contributors to their communities.

There is a story behind every Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program participant. The following story is told by a teacher who has witnessed first hand the impact of the program.

It was our second year with the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. John was in the eighth grade and was selected for the program because he had been absent a lot and had often been sent to the school office for discipline during the previous years.*

Now in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, he was tutoring young children in reading four days a week.

On Fridays, I had sessions with the tutors on tutoring skills and building their own self esteem.

On one of those Fridays, midway through the school year, John came to the classroom after all the other students had left. He stopped at the door and gave me a little black canister, a 35mm film canister. "Mr. Reyna, I would like you to have this."

The cap was on it so I said, "What is this John?" I started to open it.

He stopped me. "No, no don't open it, yet. Let me tell you about it first."

He had gotten home late the night before. Troubled by problems, he went straight to his room and closed the door. Alone in his refuge, distressed thoughts flooded his teenage mind. He looked around for something to drown out the thoughts, the worries, the loneliness.

He began to rummage through his trunk. As he dug through memories, he realized that none of them would distract him for long – until he came across his pistol. A gift from his uncle.

He picked it up, opened the revolving chamber and took out the bullets. Then he dropped all of the bullets back into the trunk, except one. He loaded that one back into the chamber and closed it.

"I used to like having people control my life,
but now I am more confident.

I used to think school was no good,
but now, thanks to school, I am what I am.

I used to believe I hated education,
but now, because of it, I'm reaching my goals.

I used to wish I was never born,
but now I'm thankful to God for giving me life."

– Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program middle school tutor

He spun the chamber a few times. Only heaven knew where the bullet would end up.

Feeling the weight of the gun, he lifted it and put it next to his temple. He pulled the trigger. He heard an empty click.

He lowered the gun and rested his arm for a few long minutes. Taking a deep breath, he lifted the gun up to his head again.

"I don't know Mr. Reyna," he told me. "You'll think I'm crazy. But as I was about to pull the trigger again, it was freaky…I saw you…just like a vision I guess."

His mind painted a picture. He saw me in our classroom with the other tutors, the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program group.

He heard us talking about life, how valuable and precious life is and that we should protect life at all times.

He thought about those young children who would be waiting for him on Monday to teach them their ABCs.

He stopped.

He threw the gun back into the trunk, shut it and went to sleep.

When he awoke the next morning, his mind was clearer. He didn't feel so alone anymore.

Curious, he went back to the trunk and took out the gun. He opened the revolving chamber again. The bullet was next in the firing chamber.

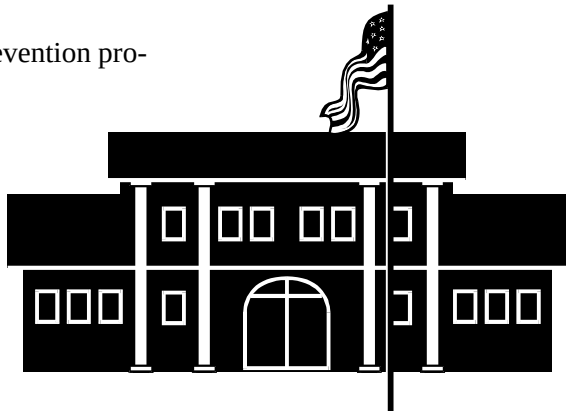
Had he pulled the trigger that second time, he wouldn't have heard a click.

"I want you to have the bullet," he told me. "I won't be needing it anymore."

Hearing that story, seeing John's quiet smile, confirmed to me the tremendous influence the program had on him. Sometimes it is so difficult for teachers to see the fruits of their labor, but in working in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, it is easy to see the positive changes in these kids. John is an excellent example.

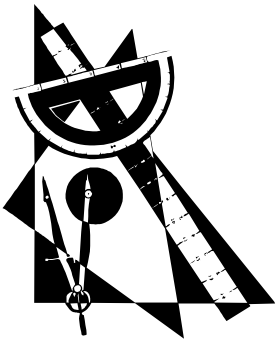
When I am invited to speak at meetings, I share this story. Every time I have a chance, I tell people, "If the program saved this life, it has been worth it."

This true story demonstrates how successful dropout prevention programs can make a difference for our youth.



**The student's name was changed to ensure confidentiality.*

Research Questions Used



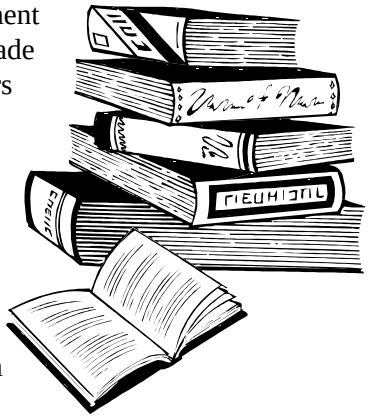
The research questions that guided this policy brief include the following:

- What are the reported attrition and dropout rates since the 1985-86 school year?
- How many students in Texas have dropped out of school before graduation from high school since the 1985-86 school year?
- What are the characteristics of those who drop out of school?
- How does the state define the term "dropout" and how does the state go about collecting, calculating and reporting dropout data?
- How accurate is the state's accountability system for counting and reporting dropouts?
- Why is there a discrepancy between IDRA and TEA numbers?
- What has the dropout problem cost the state of Texas?
- Why are students dropping out?
- What is being done to keep students from dropping out and what is being done to recover students who have dropped out of school?

Research Methods Used

The research methods used for this policy brief were primarily review and analysis of secondary data, i.e., the most recent research reports as well as archival documents that provided a historical and longitudinal look at the issue.

The methodologies employed by the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to obtain the estimates of the number of students who leave school prior to graduation are different. IDRA conducts ***attrition analyses*** of enrollment figures at two points in time (ninth grade and 12th grade enrollment four years later). This allows for increases and decreases in a district's enrollment figures since district enrollment may vary from school year to school year. TEA reports ***dropout data*** for each school year provided by school districts through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS).



The attrition rate is calculated by: (1) dividing the high school enrollment in the end year by the high school enrollment in the base year; (2) multiplying the result from Calculation 1 by the ninth grade enrollment in the base year; (3) subtracting the result from Calculation 2 from the 12th grade enrollment in the end year; and (4) dividing the result of Calculation 3 by the result of Calculation 2.

Glossary

The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is the principal federal agency responsible for the collection, analysis and reporting of data on the condition of education in the United States. Dropout data from NCES examines rates within racial and ethnic groups, across gender groups, and across states and geographical regions. NCES defines the various types of dropout rates as follows.

- ***Event rates*** describe the proportion of students who leave school each year without completing a high school program. This type of dropout rate describes the number and percent of students who drop out of school on an annual basis.

- ***Status rates*** provide cumulative data on dropouts among young adults within a specified age range (usually: 15 to 24 years of age, 16 to 24 years of age, or 18 to 24 years of age). These rates, which are higher than event rates because they include all dropouts, reveal the extent of the dropout problem in the population.

- ***Cohort rates*** measure what happens to a cohort of students over a period of time. Furthermore, these rates provide repeated measures of a group of students starting at a specific grade level over time. These rates provide longitudinal data on a specific group of students, including background and contextual data.

- ***High school completion rates*** describe the proportion of students who receive a high school diploma and/or alternative methods of school completion, namely the GED certificate.

In addition, ***attrition rates*** measure the number of students lost from enrollment between two points in time (e.g., ninth grade and 12th grade enrollment four years later). Attrition data are similar to cohort data.

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Missing: Texas's Youth –
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