6 Policies & Practices that Lead to Higher Dropout Rates

Children First IDRA Transforming Education

Exclusionary Discipline

Suspension and other exclusionary disciplinary practices are associated with a higher likelihood of dropping out or not graduating on time. Students of color, particularly Black students, and students with disabilities are disproportionately subject to exclusionary discipline practices. Exclusionary discipline does not make schools safer, but pushing students out of the classroom only hinders their learning.

In-grade Retention

Students who are held back are 11 times more likely to drop out. Despite good intentions, grade retention is inherently discouraging to children. Students who are retained do not receive long-term benefits and usually perform more poorly than low-achieving peers who were not retained. Students of color and students from low-income families are more likely to be held back than their peers.

Low Funding & Insufficient Support for English Learners

English learner students are among the most likely to drop out and be unprepared for college. They are the fastest-growing segment of students, but they are one of the lowest academically performing, and the achievement gap widens as students progress through school. Bilingual education is typically significantly underfunded and has consistently had a shortage of fully certified teachers.

Unfair & Insufficient Funding

To be effective, schools must have quality teaching and rigorous, up-to-date curricula. Schools depend on fair funding to serve all of their students each school day. Equitable funding makes a difference. In Texas, for example, poor school districts have had attrition rates that were more than double those of high-wealth districts.

Watered-Down, Non-College Prep Curricula

Expectations of students' abilities to succeed are vital to their education. For example, students whose parents did not attend college are themselves three to six times more likely to enroll in college if they have taken rigorous, higher-level math courses in high school. One district that took high expectations district-wide by considering all students college-material and teaching them accordingly cut dropout rates in half and increased college-going rates.

Testing that is High-Stakes

Testing is a piece of a larger pie to ensure schools are educating all students. It should guide instruction, inform school improvement and identify student support needs. But one test should never be used as a sole criterion for high-stakes decisions about students (in-grade retention, diploma denials or state takeovers). Tests can play an important role in this kind of school accountability – one that accepts the responsibility that schools and the state have toward students and communities.