

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IMPROVING THE GRADUATION RATE FOR MAINE STUDENTS WITH AN EMPHASIS ON STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: DROPOUT PREVENTION STRATEGIES

JULY 1, 2003 – JUNE 30, 2004 PROJECT

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The “Final Report,” *Improving the Graduation Rate for Maine Students with An Emphasis on Students with Disabilities: Dropout Prevention Strategies*, was prepared by staff from the Institute for the Study of Students At Risk, College of Education and Human Development, The University of Maine: William E. Davis, Ph.D., Director and Roxanne M. Lee, Administrative Assistant II. The Institute is sponsored and funded by the *Division of Special Services*, Maine Department of Education, and the *College of Education and Human Development*, The University of Maine. This study was conducted as a component of the Institute’s activities related to its contract with the Maine Department of Education for the July 1, 2003 – June 30, 2004 project period, and submitted to this agency as part of the Institute’s “Final Report.”

This *Executive Summary* is intended to provide readers with a *general* overview of the (1) background and rationale, (2) objectives, (3) major results and findings, and (4) selected recommendations related to this study, including suggestions for further research. The *Final Report* consists of a 386-page document, which includes a comprehensive review of the national literature involving student dropouts. A limited number of copies of this entire document will be available by September, 2004. Individuals interested in obtaining a copy of the complete document should contact the Maine Department of Education. Also, it is our intention to make the complete document available electronically via the Institute’s website www.ume.maine.edu/cofed/research/atrisk.html during the fall of 2004.

Increasing the secondary school completion rate for Maine students, while simultaneously reducing their dropout rate, has been a major goal of policymakers and educators for many years. Historically, compared with other states, Maine has compiled a very strong record with respect to both the high number and percentage of its students who complete high school with a standard diploma each year and also the number and percentage its students who drop out of school. Nevertheless, despite Maine’s widely recognized “good performance” with respect to its student high school completion and dropout rates, a legitimate concern persists that far too many of our youth fail to complete their high school requirements and leave school each year lacking the necessary skills to become self-fulfilled, productive members of society.

A strong body of research evidence suggests that dropping out of school results in negative outcomes (economic, personal, and social) for most students who leave school without completing their high school requirements. For example, school dropouts experience higher unemployment rates and lower earnings than high school graduates. Research evidence also strongly suggests that students who drop out of school generally experience more negative personal and social outcomes than students who complete high school, such as poorer health, increased level of participation in criminal activity, substance abuse and antisocial behavior, and reduced participation in civic and community activities.

The costs and negative consequences of dropping out generally are viewed as not affecting solely those persons who have dropped out but also extending to the larger community and nation. Among the most widely

cited social consequences (at the local, state, and national levels) are increased demand for social services, and lost tax revenue.

While the negative outcomes associated with dropping out of school have been well-documented and have constituted a major concern for policymakers, educators, and the general public for many years, it appears that current economic, social, and educational conditions in the United States have resulted in creating a “spotlight” on the dropout issue as well as a sense of unprecedented urgency involving the “student dropout problem.”

In Maine, interest in the student dropout issue has been significantly heightened in 2004 as a direct result of current educational reform efforts at both the national (*No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001*) and state (*Maine’s System of Learning Results*) levels. Each of these reform efforts arguably has placed unprecedented emphasis upon high student academic achievement standards, comprehensive student and school assessment measures, and stringent high school graduation requirements.

Of particular concern to policymakers, educators, parents, and students in Maine are the implications that the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* may (will) have upon Maine students and Maine schools. The *Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)* provision of this Act requires that states specifically describe the amount of student academic progress in reading and mathematics expected each school year. States are required to include a third indicator for *AYP* calculations. As its “third indicator,” Maine has chosen to include average daily attendance for elementary schools and graduation rates for high schools.

NCLB requires that states use the cohort on-time graduation rate as an additional indicator besides assessment results when making *AYP* determinations. This indicator applies to grades 9-12 and it *cannot include* students who complete their education with a General Educational Development (GED) certificate or with an IEP diploma (certificate of completion). These students *will be counted as dropouts*. Further, under *NCLB*, should a student move out of the school district and no transcript is requested, that student is regarded as having “unknown status” and he/she *is considered to be a dropout*. *NCLB* does not require states to establish a goal or target for dropout rates, Clearly, however, graduation rates and dropout rates are linked.

For many years, a great deal of effort and financial resources have been devoted to “identifying students who are likely to drop out of school” and providing them with a wide variety of instructional and support services that are designed to keep them in school so that they may graduate. A common practice among school personnel at both the national and state levels to identify future dropouts has been to utilize some sort of “dropout predictor scale” to determine which students are at greatest risk for dropping out of school and, then, to target those particular students with programming interventions.

Another approach to student dropout prevention has been to “target entire schools” with dropout prevention strategies and interventions rather than focusing upon “specific identified students.” And, some schools employ *both* individual student and school-wide dropout prevention strategies.

Unfortunately, despite the long-term interest in reducing student dropouts, very little empirical data exist to provide policymakers and practitioners with solid information regarding (1) which students are at greatest risk for dropping out, and (2) which dropout prevention interventions and programs have been demonstrated as being the most effective.

In brief, in 2004, despite decades of research on the topic, our knowledge base with respect to the overall issue of “student dropouts” is fairly limited. We certainly have clues and hunches – along with some fairly solid student profile, school profile, and broad demographic data that appear to possess reasonably strong predictive value regarding “who is more likely to drop out.” However, the “dropout issue” is extremely complex. Many factors and conditions interact, and they need to be considered when attempting to determine which particular strategies and interventions schools should employ in their efforts to keep students in school.

Concerns involving the high school graduation and dropout rates for students with disabilities likewise has received a good deal of attention in recent years. Historically, the percentage of students with disabilities who drop out of school consistently has been higher than for their non-disabled peers. Similarly, the percentage of students with disabilities who graduate with a regular high school diploma consistently has been lower than for their non-disabled peers. However, there has been an improvement in both categories in recent years. For example, during the 1999-2000 school year, the *national dropout rate* for all students with disabilities age 14 and older was 29.4 percent. In 1993-1994, the dropout rate for this population was 34.5 percent. Similarly during this same period the *national high school graduation* rates for all students with disabilities age 14 and older demonstrated improvement – from 51.9 percent in 1993-1994 to 56.2 percent in 1999-2000 (*24th Annual Report to Congress, 2002*).

Precise comparisons between disabled and non-disabled students with respect to both high school completion and dropout rates are not possible due to the differences in which these rates are calculated for each group. Nevertheless, for the purpose of providing a general comparative view of the differences in high school completion and dropout rates between these two groups of students, both the national high school completion and dropout rates for *all* students has held fairly constant for several years – approximately 86 percent and approximately 5 percent respectively.

Graduation and dropout rates for students age 14 and older with disabilities generally have been shown to vary by individual disability category. For example, at the national level during the 1999-2000 school year [the most recent data available] approximately one-half (51.4%) of all students identified within the *Emotional Disturbance* category dropped out of school. Students within the *Specific Learning Disability* category dropped out at the next highest rate (27.6%), followed by students within the *Mental Retardation* (26.0%) and *Speech/Language Impairment* (24.6%) categories respectively (*24th Annual Report to Congress, 2002*).

Graduation rates at the national level for students age 14 and older with disabilities (those graduating with a standard high school diploma) during the 1999-2000 school year (the most recent data available) also

varied significantly by disability category. Students with *Visual Impairments* graduated at the highest rate (73.4%), followed by students with *Hearing Impairments* (68.4%) and students with *Other Health Impairments* (67.7%). Students within the *Mental Retardation* (39.5%) and *Emotional Disturbance* (40.1%) categories were least likely to graduate with a standard high school diploma (*24th Annual Report to Congress*, 2002).

During the July 1, 2002 –June 30, 2003 project period, the Institute of the Study of Students At Risk conducted a comprehensive study, *Reducing the Dropout Rate for All Maine Students with a Particular Emphasis Upon Students with Disabilities Who Drop Out of School*. The major focus of the Institute’s research and policy analysis activities during the current project period, July 1, 2003 – June 30, 2004, has been to enhance and expand upon this body of research. It is the goal of the Institute to continue to build upon this research base involving “school dropouts in Maine” in future years.

Objectives of Current Study

This study had *nine* major objectives:

1. To update and expand upon the Institute’s national database involving student dropouts (all students) including both current year and trend data - - and to conduct an analysis of the same. The services of a staff member from the Center for Research and Evaluation with particular expertise in the development of databases will be subcontracted to assist in this activity.
2. To conduct a comprehensive literature review of the professional literature dealing with school dropouts, including “all students” and “students with disabilities.” This review is designed to update and to expand upon the literature review completed as part of last year’s project. Particular emphasis will be upon the specific factors and conditions that are commonly associated with “students dropping out of school” along with an analysis of the relevant literature related to the efficacy of national dropout prevention approaches and strategies.
3. To update and expand upon the Institute’s national database involving dropout and graduation rates for students with disabilities.
4. To update and expand upon the Institute’s State of Maine database involving student dropouts and school completers (all students) including both current year and five-year trend data – and to conduct an analysis of these data. Data will be analyzed and reported by individual high schools.
5. To establish a State of Maine database involving student dropout numbers and percentages for students with identified disabilities, including both current year and five-year trend data – and to conduct an analysis of these data.
6. To collect and analyze the most current Maine students with disabilities dropout and school completion data (2002-2003) by both total disability and individual disability category. Data will be collected and reported by individual SAU. Data will be collected and interpreted utilizing the same descriptors as employed in last year’s study, allowing for a comparison of dropout and school completion data for the past four year periods (1999-2000, 2000-2001, 2001-2002, and 2002-2003).

7. To conduct a *specific study* to assess the current status of “Dropout Prevention Committees” (DPCs) in all Maine SAUs. This study will involve the development of a survey instrument to be completed by dropout prevention committee contact persons (identified by Superintendents) within all Maine SAUs. Among the information to be collected are (1) membership and organizational components; (2) student protocols collected and used to identify potential dropouts (e.g., how do they identify students considered to be at high risk for dropping out?); (3) student dropout “tracking procedures;” (4) perceptions relative to the most common factors, characteristics, or conditions that are associated with Maine students dropping out of school; (5) perceptions related to the efficacy of specific programs, strategies, and interventions for “keeping Maine students on track for graduation and not dropping out;” (6) perceptions related to the current status of programming for “at risk” students within their schools as well as their perceptions involving current dropout prevention efforts within their school districts; (7) perceptions involving selected contemporary education reform efforts that conceivably could have an impact upon current and future students in Maine public schools with respect to their dropping out; and (8) copies of school districts’ dropout prevention plans.
8. To provide suggestions and recommendations, based upon study’s major findings, regarding the development of more effective student dropout prevention programs and strategies in Maine public schools – for all students, with a particular emphasis upon those programs and strategies that serve students with disabilities; and
9. To provide consumers with a listing of selected resources and materials that directly deal with student dropout issues and concerns.

DATA EXPLANATIONS

A. *Data Sources*

The following data sources were utilized for this study:

- Maine Department of Education EF-S-05 Reports, December 1, 2003 Child Count, State Totals Report by Disability and Age
- Maine Department of Education EF-S-05 Reports, December 1, 2003 Child Count, State Totals Report by Exit Data and Age
- Maine Department of Education EF-M-40 Fall School Statistical Report as of October 1, 2003
- Maine Department of Education EF-M-35a Year End Report for School Systems/Selected Private Schools Part II – Dropouts
- Maine Department of Education EF-S-05 Reports, December 1, 2002 Child Count, State Totals Report by Disability and Age
- Maine Department of Education EF-S-05 Reports, December 1, 2002 Child Count, State Totals Report by Exit Data and Age
- Maine Department of Education EF-S-05 Reports, December 1, 2001 Child Count, State Totals Report by Exit Data and Age

- Maine Department of Education EF-S-05 Reports, December 1, 2000 Child Count, State Totals Report by Exit Data and Age
- Maine Department of Education EF-M-11 Report, October 1, 2002, Resident Enrollment

B. Data Management

Data contained in the above-listed reports as well as “raw data” involving Maine students with disabilities were obtained electronically from the Maine Department of Education. These extracted data then were used by University of Maine researchers to construct a comprehensive database involving relevant exit data for Maine students with disabilities. This database was designed to accommodate the specific parameters of the study’s major research questions.

C. Data Calculation Methods, Rationale, and Explanations of Key Terms and Descriptors

A variety of methods commonly are used to calculate student dropout and graduation rates. In this study, the formula employed to calculate these rates is identical to the formula that is used by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Data Analysis (DANS) in its *Annual Reports to Congress*. It was decided to use these specific calculation formulas in an effort to be totally consistent with the reporting mechanisms used in federal reports. Further, these particular calculation formulas are viewed by many researchers as representing the most valid and reliable method for determining student dropout and graduation rates. In this study dropout and graduation rates were calculated as follows:

Dropout Rate: The number of students with disabilities, age 14 and older, who dropped out were divided by the number of students with disabilities, age 14 and older, who are known to have left school (i.e., graduated with a standard diploma, graduated through certificate/fulfillment of I.E.P. requirement, reached the maximum age for services, died, or dropped out).

Graduation with Diploma Rate: The number of students with disabilities, age 14 and older, who graduated with a standard diploma were divided by the number of students with disabilities, age 14 and older, who are known to have left school (i.e., graduated with a standard diploma, graduated through certificate/fulfillment of I.E.P. requirement, reached the maximum age for services, died, or dropped out).

Graduation Through Certificate/Fulfillment of I.E.P. Requirement Rate: The number of students with disabilities, age 14 and older, who graduated through certificate/fulfillment of I.E.P. requirement were divided by the number of students with disabilities, age 14 and older, who are known to have left school (i.e., graduated with a standard diploma, graduated through certificate/fulfillment of I.E.P. requirement, reached the maximum age for services, died, or dropped out).

It should be noted that the dropout and graduation rates calculated for the purposes of this study do *not* include the following categories listed in the Maine Department of Education’s EF-S-05 Exit Data Reports:

Parents Refuse Services; Moved, Not Known To Be Continuing; Moved Out-Of-District, Known To Be Continuing; Exited to School Age Special Education Services; Status Unknown; or Exited to Regular Education. These categories were *not* included in this study's rate calculation formula because they are *not included* in federal rate calculations for dropouts and graduates.

Leavers: The term *Leavers* is used throughout the study to refer to those students with disabilities, age 14 and older, who are known to have left school (exited) via one of the following means: graduated with a standard diploma, graduated through certificate/fulfillment of I.E.P. requirement, reached the maximum age for services, died, or dropped out. *Leavers* represent the *denominator* in all dropout and graduation rate calculations. This term was chosen to distinguish those students who exited special education services through the means/categories listed above from those students who exited special education services but who were not known to leave school (e.g., *Parents Refuse Services; Moved, Not Known To Be Continuing; Moved Out-Of-District, Known To Be Continuing; Exited to School Age Special Education Services; Status Unknown; or Exited to Regular Education*).

School Administrative Units (SAUs): In this report SAUs consisted of Cities or Towns with Individual Supervision, School Administrative Districts (SADs), Community School Districts (CSDs), and Unions or Towns (School Unions).

A City or Town with individual supervision is a single municipality. A school committee administers the education of all grades in the city or town through a superintendent of schools.

A School Administrative District (SAD) is a combination of two or more municipalities who pool all their educational resources to educate all students. One school committee (comprised of representatives from each of the municipalities) administers the education of grades K-12 through a superintendent of schools.

NOTE: There are a few SADs comprised of one town because of unique situations. Data contained in this report reflect all systems within a specific SAD.

A Community School District (CSD) is a combination of two or more municipalities and/or districts formed to build, maintain, and operate a school building or buildings to educate any or all grades. For example, a CSD may be formed to build and operate a grade 7-12 school for all towns in the CSD. These same towns will maintain individual control (or belong to a union) for the education of their K-6 students. A community school district may also include education of all grades K-12. The CSD school committee is comprised of members of each town's local school committee if one exists. Data contained in this report reflect all systems with a specific CSD.

A Union is a combination of two or more school administrative units joined together for the purpose of sharing the costs of a superintendent and the superintendent's office. Each member school administrative unit maintains its own budget, has its own school board, and operated in every way as a separate unit except for the sharing of superintendent services. Data contained in this report reflect all systems within a specific School Union.

Definitions of SAUs were extracted from: www.state.me.us/education/eddir/saundef.htm.

SUMMARY OF SELECTED MAJOR RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Study Findings Re: All Maine Public School Students

- The 2002-2003 Maine statewide public secondary school dropout rate was 2.79 percent (1,704 students were considered as “dropouts” out of a secondary school enrollment of 62,340 students). In addition, 102 students were considered as “dropouts” from Maine’s 11 private secondary schools (60% publicly-funded students) which represents a 1.90 percent dropout rate out of an enrollment of 5,374 students. Of Maine’s three state-funded schools, only two reported dropout data, showing that no students had dropped out (enrollment – 162 students). Thus, taking into consideration all three reporting categories, the statewide totals for 2002-2003 show a secondary enrollment of 67,876 students, with 1,842 dropouts, and a dropout rate of 2.71 percent. The Maine statewide dropout rate has shown a steady decline each year from 1998-1999 (3.33%) to the current (2002-2003) 2.79 percent rate.
- Student dropout rates in Maine varied by county in 2002-2003, ranging from a high of 4.54 percent (*Piscataquis*) to a low of 1.18 percent (*Aroostook*). In addition to *Piscataquis* county’s highest dropout rate of 4.54 percent, representing 32 dropouts out of a secondary school enrollment of 708 students, other Maine counties reflecting high dropout rates in 2002-2003 were *Hancock* (4.03%, 93 dropouts; enrollment, 2,310 students); *Sagadahoc* (3.90%, 82 dropouts; enrollment, 2,101 students); *Waldo* (3.69%, 54 dropouts, enrollment, 1,645 students); and *Franklin* (3.47%, 57 dropouts, enrollment, 1,399 students). Conversely, Maine counties reflecting the lowest student dropout rates during 2002-2003 were *Aroostook* (1.18%, 50 dropouts, enrollment 4,249 students); *Washington* (2.36%, 33 dropouts, enrollment, 5,619 students); and *Kennebec* (2.44%, 137 dropouts, enrollment, 2,439 students).
- The statewide *average* public secondary school completion rate for the class of 2003 (excluding private secondary schools and state-funded schools) was 87.2 percent, with a range from 69.7 percent to 100 percent among Maine high schools.
- For the class of 2003, those students who failed to complete and who were reported as dropouts the largest number of dropouts occurred during the *junior* year (510 students, 28.2%). Almost equal numbers and percentages of students dropped out during the senior year (482, 26.7%) and the sophomore year (492, 27.2%). Three hundred and twenty-four (324) students dropped out during the freshman year (17.9%). This finding suggests that students who might be viewed as posing a *high risk* for eventually dropping out of school require close monitoring – along with the provision of appropriate interventions and supports -- early in their school careers (45% of those students who were reported as dropouts had already dropped out of school prior to entering their junior year).
- Female students in Maine complete their secondary school programs at a slightly higher rate than do male students. The statewide *average* public secondary school completion rate for the class of 2003 (excluding private secondary schools and state-funded schools) for *males* was 85.7 percent and for *females*, 88.9 percent. For the class of 2003, those students who failed to complete and who were reported as dropouts, the largest number of dropouts for both males and females occurred during the *junior* year. For the class of 2003, 291 males dropped out during the junior year, representing 28.1 percent of all males who dropped out of school between 1999-2000 and 2002-2003. For the class of 2003, 219 females dropped out during the junior year, representing 28.4 percent of all females who dropped out of school between 1999-2000 and 2002-2003.

An almost equal number and percentage of both male and female students dropped out during their sophomore and senior years. For male students, 291 dropped out during their sophomore year (28.1%), while 286 males dropped out during their senior year (27.6%). For female students, 201 dropped out during the sophomore year (26.1%) while 196 dropped out during the senior year (25.4%). One hundred and sixty-nine (169) males in the class of 2003 dropped out during their freshman year, representing 16.3 percent of all males who dropped out of school between 1999-2000 and 2002-2003, while 155 females dropped out during the freshman year for the same time periods (20.1%).

It is suggested that several implications might be drawn from these data. While female students drop out of school at a slightly lower rate than do male students, both males and females tend to follow a very similar pattern with respect to “when they leave school.” For both groups, the junior year represents the most common time for dropping out of school. Also, female students tend to drop out earlier than do male students, with 20.1 percent of all female student dropouts occurring during the freshman year, compared with only 16.3 percent of male student dropouts.

Study Findings Re: Maine Public School Students with Disabilities

- The *dropout rate* for Maine students with disabilities, age 14 and older, who were known to leave school [according to the definition of *leaver* employed in this study] between December 1, 2002 and December 1, 2003 (December 1, 2003 Child Count Exit Data) was 24.0 percent. According to the most recent data available (1999-2000 school year), the *national* dropout rate for students with disabilities (all disabilities) was 29.4 percent.
- The school completion rate [graduation with a standard diploma] for Maine students with disabilities, age 14 and older, who were known to leave school [according to the definition of *leaver* employed in this study] between December 1, 2002 and December 1, 2003 (December 1, 2003 Child Count Exit Data) was 71.0 percent. According to the most recent data available (1999-2000 school year), the *national* school completion [graduation with a standard diploma] rate for students with disabilities (all disabilities) was 56.2 percent.
- Of all disability categories, Maine students identified within the *Emotional Disability* category recorded the highest dropout rate (49.3%) between December 1, 2002 and December 1, 2003. Students identified within the *Other Health Impairment* category recorded the second highest dropout rate (28.6%), followed by *Multiple Disabilities* (20.0%) and *Speech/Language Impairment* (20.0%), *Specific Learning Disability* (19.4%), and *Traumatic Brain Injury* (18.2%). Students identified within *Hearing Impairment*, *Mental Retardation*, and *Autism* categories recorded the lowest dropout percentage rates – 13.3%, 11.6%, and 9.5% respectively (December 1, 2003 Child Count Exit Data).
- The dropout rate (*total disabilities*) for Maine students with disabilities has steadily declined between 1999-2000 and 2002-2003. In 2000, 29.8 percent of students (all disability categories combined) dropped out; in 2001, 29.3 percent dropped out; in 2002, the total disabilities dropout rate *decreased* to 27.5 percent; and in 2003, the dropout rate *decreased* to 24.0 percent. Thus, the dropout rate in Maine (*all disabilities combined*) *decreased* 19.5 percent between 2000 and 2003.
- The dropout rate for Maine students identified within the *Specific Learning Disability* category *decreased* 28.4 percent during the four-year period between 2000 and 2003. During this timeframe, the dropout rate for students identified within the *Emotional Disability* category *decreased* 3.5 percent; *Speech/Language Impairment* *decreased* 14.9 percent; *Multiple Disabilities* *decreased* 34.6 percent; and *Other Health Impairment* *decreased* 2.0 percent.

- Wide variance exists among Maine SAUs with respect to student dropout rates – involving both total disabilities and individual disability categories, ranging from 100 percent to zero percent.
- A comparison of Maine’s students with disabilities dropout data between 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 suggests that progress is being made in reducing the *overall* dropout rate for students with disabilities. The student dropout rate (*total disabilities*) in 2002 was 27.5 percent. In 2003, the dropout rate (*total disabilities*) was 24.0 percent. Thus, *during the past two years, Maine’s total disabilities dropout rate has decreased 12.7 percent.*
- All major individual disability categories [those which had the largest number of *leavers*], the following categories reflected a *decrease* in the percentage of Maine students who dropped out between 2002 and 2003: *Emotional Disability*, 53.7% to 49.3% (a 8.0% *decrease*); *Speech/Language Impairment*, from 29.8% to 20.0% (a 32.8% *decrease*); *Other Health Impairment*, from 31.5% to 28.6% (a 9.2% *decrease*); and *Multiple Disabilities*, from 26.3% to 20.0% (a 23.9% *decrease*).
- Seventy-one percent (71.0%) of all Maine students with disabilities, age 14 and older, who were known to leave school [according to the definition of *leaver* employed in this study] graduated with a standard school diploma between December 1, 2002 and December 1, 2003. According to the most recent data available (1999-2000 school year), the *national* graduation (standard diploma) rate for students with disabilities (all disabilities) was 65.2 percent.
- Between December 1, 2002 and December 1, 2003 the graduation rates (standard diploma) *overall* were highest for Maine students identified within the *Hearing Impairment* (86.7%), *Autism* (85.7%), *Specific Learning Disability* (78.3%), and the *Speech/Language Impairment* (77.6%) disability categories. However, relatively few students *overall* were represented in the *Hearing Impairment* (15) and the *Autism* (21) categories. Students identified within the *Emotional Disability* category recorded the lowest graduation (standard diploma) rate (47.0%) (December 1, 2003 Child Count Exit Data).
- Students identified within the *Emotional Disability* category, among all disability categories, with very few exceptions, consistently represented the lowest graduation with regular diploma rate across all SAUs in Maine.
- The graduation with standard diploma rate (*total disabilities*) for Maine students with disabilities has steadily *increased* between 1999-2000 and 2002-2003. In 2000, 65.2 percent of students (all disability categories combined) graduated with a standard diploma; in 2001, 65.9 percent graduated; in 2002, the total disabilities graduation rate *increased* to 68.3 percent; and in 2003, the graduation rate *increased* again to 71.0 percent. Thus, the graduation with standard diploma rate in Maine (*all disabilities combined*) *increased* 8.9 percent between 2000 and 2003.
- For the four-year period (2000-2003) the graduation with diploma rate *increased* for students identified within each of the major disability categories. During this four-year period, students identified within the *Specific Learning Disability* category reflected the largest increase in graduation with diploma rate (8.6%), from 72.0 percent in 2000 to 78.3 percent in 2003.
- A comparison of Maine’s students with disabilities graduation with a standard diploma data between 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 suggests that progress is being made in improving the *overall* school completion rate for students with disabilities. The student school completion rate (*total disabilities*) in 2002 was 68.3 percent. In 2003, the student school completion rate (*total disabilities*) was 71.0 percent. Thus, *during the past two years, Maine’s total disabilities graduation with a standard diploma rate has improved 3.9 percent.*

- Wide variance exists among Maine SAUs with respect to student dropout and student graduation with regular diploma rates -- for both total disabilities and individual disability categories.
- Very few students with disabilities in Maine graduate with a certification of completion or by fulfilling their I.E.P. requirement. Only 70 students (3.3 percent) of all Maine students with disabilities, age 14 and older, who were known to leave school [according to the definition of *leaver* employed in this study] graduated with a certificate of completion or by fulfilling their I.E.P. requirement between December 1, 2002 and December 1, 2003.

The following tables (Table 21, Table 30, and Table 37) abstracted from the Final Report provide four-year trend data (2000-2003) re: Maine students with disabilities *dropout*, *graduation with regular diploma*, and *graduation with certificate* rates.

TABLE 21
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, AGE 14 AND OLDER, FOUR-YEAR DROPOUT TRENDS (2000-2003):
TOTAL DISABILITIES AND INDIVIDUAL DISABILITY CATEGORIES

	Dropout Numbers	Leavers	Dropout Rate	Percent Rate Change
<u>Total Disabilities:</u>				
2002-2003	506	2,105	24.0%	-12.7%
2001-2002	542	1,968	27.5%	-6.1%
2000-2001	540	1,840	29.3%	-1.7%
1999-2000	539	1,807	29.8%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				-19.5%
<u>Emotional Disability:</u>				
2002-2003	149	302	49.3%	-8.2%
2001-2002	154	287	53.7%	-2.2%
2000-2001	163	297	54.9%	7.4%
1999-2000	157	307	51.1%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				-3.5%
<u>Specific Learning Disability:</u>				
2002-2003	204	1,052	19.4%	-10.6%
2001-2002	223	1,028	21.7%	-9.2%
2000-2001	235	984	23.9%	-11.8%
1999-2000	258	953	27.1%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				-28.4%
<u>Speech/Language Impairment:</u>				
2002-2003	33	165	20.0%	-32.8%
2001-2002	42	141	29.8%	-7.7%
2000-2001	41	127	32.3%	37.4%
1999-2000	31	132	23.5%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				-14.9%
<u>Other Health Impairments:</u>				
2002-2003	62	217	28.6%	-9.2%
2001-2002	62	197	31.5%	-4.8%
2000-2001	42	127	33.1%	13.3%
1999-2000	38	130	29.2%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				-2.0%
<u>Multiple Disabilities:</u>				
2002-2003	40	200	20.0%	-23.9%
2001-2002	41	156	26.3%	27.0%
2000-2001	31	150	20.7%	-32.3%
1999-2000	41	134	30.6%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				-34.6%

TABLE 21, CONT'D
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, AGE 14 AND OLDER, FOUR-YEAR DROPOUT TRENDS (2000-2003):
TOTAL DISABILITIES AND INDIVIDUAL DISABILITY CATEGORIES

	Dropout Numbers	Leavers	Dropout Rate	Percent Rate Change
<u>Mental Retardation:</u>				
2002-2003	12	103	11.6%	-7.2%
2001-2002	13	104	12.5%	-44.0%
2000-2001	21	94	22.3%	92.2%
1999-2000	12	103	11.6%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				0.0%
<u>Traumatic Brain Injury:</u>				
2002-2003	2	11	18.2%	-40.9%
2001-2002	4	13	30.8%	54.0%
2000-2001	3	15	20.0%	-70.0%
1999-2000	1	15	66.7%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				-72.7%
<u>Hearing Impairment:</u>				
2002-2003	2	15	13.3%	0.0%
2001-2002	2	15	13.3%	0.0%
2000-2001	0	10	0.0%	0.0%
1999-2000	0	7	0.0%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				0.0%
<u>Visual Impairment:</u>				
2002-2003	0	5	0.0%	0.0%
2001-2002	0	6	0.0%	0.0%
2000-2001	1	9	11.1%	-22.4%
1999-2000	1	7	14.3%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				-100.0%
<u>Autism:</u>				
2002-2003	2	21	9.5%	-23.4%
2001-2002	1	13	7.7%	-69.2%
2000-2001	3	12	25.0%	0.0%
1999-2000	0	9	0.0%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				0.0%

TABLE 30
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, AGE 14 AND OLDER, FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION WITH
STANDARD DIPLOMA TRENDS (2000-2003): TOTAL DISABILITIES AND
INDIVIDUAL DISABILITY CATEGORIES

	Graduation Numbers	Leavers	Graduation Rate	Percent Rate Change
<u>Total Disabilities:</u>				
2002-2003	1,495	2,105	71.0%	3.9%
2001-2002	1,345	1,968	68.3%	3.6%
2000-2001	1,212	1,840	65.9%	1.1%
1999-2000	1,179	1,807	65.2%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				8.9%
<u>Emotional Disability:</u>				
2002-2003	142	302	47.0%	9.5%
2001-2002	123	287	42.9%	8.1%
2000-2001	118	297	39.7%	-11.6%
1999-2000	138	307	44.9%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				4.7%
<u>Specific Learning Disability:</u>				
2002-2003	824	1,052	78.3%	3.2%
2001-2002	778	1,028	75.9%	2.6%
2000-2001	728	984	74.0%	2.6%
1999-2000	687	953	72.1%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				8.6%
<u>Speech/Language Impairment:</u>				
2002-2003	128	165	77.6%	13.9%
2001-2002	96	141	68.1%	3.0%
2000-2001	84	127	66.1%	-9.1%
1999-2000	96	132	72.7%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				6.7%
<u>Other Health Impairments:</u>				
2002-2003	147	217	67.7%	.3%
2001-2002	133	197	67.5%	9.9%
2000-2001	78	127	61.4%	-8.2%
1999-2000	87	130	66.9%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				1.2%
<u>Multiple Disabilities:</u>				
2002-2003	131	200	65.5%	3.1%
2001-2002	99	156	63.5%	-1.8%
2000-2001	97	150	64.7%	33.4%
1999-2000	65	134	48.5%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				35.0%

TABLE 30, CONT'D
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, AGE 14 AND OLDER, FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION WITH
STANDARD DIPLOMA TRENDS (2000-2003): TOTAL DISABILITIES AND
INDIVIDUAL DISABILITY CATEGORIES

	Graduation Numbers	Leavers	Graduation Rate	Percent Rate Change
<u>Mental Retardation:</u>				
2002-2003	69	103	67.0%	-3.2%
2001-2002	72	104	69.2%	14.2%
2000-2001	57	94	60.6%	-9.5%
1999-2000	69	103	67.0%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				0.0%
<u>Traumatic Brain Injury:</u>				
2002-2003	6	11	54.5%	-11.4%
2001-2002	8	13	61.5%	-7.8%
2000-2001	10	15	66.7%	-28.5%
1999-2000	14	15	93.3%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				-41.6%
<u>Hearing Impairment:</u>				
2002-2003	13	15	86.7%	0.0%
2001-2002	13	15	86.7%	-13.3%
2000-2001	10	10	100.0%	0.0%
1999-2000	7	7	100.0%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				-13.3%
<u>Visual Impairment:</u>				
2002-2003	5	5	100.0%	20.0%
2001-2002	5	6	83.3%	7.1%
2000-2001	7	9	77.8%	-9.2%
1999-2000	6	7	85.7%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				16.7%
<u>Autism:</u>				
2002-2003	18	21	85.7%	1.3%
2001-2002	11	13	84.6%	12.8%
2000-2001	9	12	75.0%	575.7%
1999-2000	1	9	11.1%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				672.1%

TABLE 37
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, AGE 14 AND OLDER, FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION WITH
CERTIFICATE TRENDS (2000-2003): TOTAL DISABILITIES AND
INDIVIDUAL DISABILITY CATEGORIES

	Graduate w/ Certificate Numbers	Leavers	Graduate w/ Certificate Rate	Percent Rate Change
<u>Total Disabilities:</u>				
2002-2003	70	2,105	3.3%	10.0%
2001-2002	59	1,968	3.0%	3.4%
2000-2001	54	1,840	2.9%	-19.4%
1999-2000	66	1,807	3.6%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				-8.3%
<u>Emotional Disability:</u>				
2002-2003	9	302	3.0%	7.1%
2001-2002	8	287	2.8%	40.0%
2000-2001	6	297	2.0%	-31.0%
1999-2000	9	307	2.9%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				3.4%
<u>Specific Learning Disability:</u>				
2002-2003	13	1,052	1.2%	-25.0%
2001-2002	17	1,028	1.6%	23.1%
2000-2001	13	984	1.3%	88.6%
1999-2000	7	953	.7%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				71.4%
<u>Speech/Language Impairment:</u>				
2002-2003	2	165	1.2%	-42.8%
2001-2002	3	141	2.1%	162.5%
2000-2001	1	127	.8%	-73.3%
1999-2000	4	132	3.0%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				60.0%
<u>Other Health Impairments:</u>				
2002-2003	3	217	1.4%	180.0%
2001-2002	1	197	.5%	-87.2%
2000-2001	5	127	3.9%	387.5%
1999-2000	1	130	.8%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				75.0%
<u>Multiple Disabilities:</u>				
2002-2003	20	200	10.0%	29.9%
2001-2002	12	156	7.7%	-3.7%
2000-2001	12	150	8.0%	-40.3%
1999-2000	18	134	13.4%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				-25.4%

TABLE 37, CONT'D
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, AGE 14 AND OLDER, FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION WITH
CERTIFICATE TRENDS (2000-2003): TOTAL DISABILITIES AND
INDIVIDUAL DISABILITY CATEGORIES

	Graduate w/ Certificate Numbers	Leavers	Graduate w/ Certificate Rate	Percent Rate Change
<u>Mental Retardation:</u>				
2002-2003	19	103	18.4%	27.8%
2001-2002	15	104	14.4%	-10.0%
2000-2001	15	94	16.0%	-13.0%
1999-2000	19	103	18.4%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				0.00%
<u>Traumatic Brain Injury:</u>				
2002-2003	2	11	18.2%	0.0%
2001-2002	0	13	0.0%	-100.0%
2000-2001	1	15	6.7%	0.0%
1999-2000	0	15	0.0%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				0.0%
<u>Hearing Impairment:</u>				
2002-2003	0	15	0.0%	0.0%
2001-2002	0	15	0.0%	0.0%
2000-2001	0	10	0.0%	0.0%
1999-2000	0	7	0.0%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				0.0%
<u>Visual Impairment:</u>				
2002-2003	0	5	0.0%	-100.0%
2001-2002	1	6	16.7%	-78.5%
2000-2001	7	9	77.8%	0.0%
1999-2000	0	7	0.0%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				0.0%
<u>Autism:</u>				
2002-2003	1	21	4.8%	-37.7%
2001-2002	1	13	7.7%	0.0%
2000-2001	0	12	0.0%	-100.0%
1999-2000	7	9	77.8%	
Between 99-00 and 02-03:				-93.8%

Study Findings: “An Analysis of the Current Status of Student Dropout Prevention Programs and Strategies in Maine Public Schools”

- Although, required by state statute, formal Dropout Prevention Committees (DPCs) currently are operating in approximately only one-half (50.6%) of all Maine SAUs.
- DPCs in Maine appear to be formally organized and fully operational within some SAUs; yet, in many others they appear to be very loosely defined and organized and lacking in any clear purpose. In several Maine SAUs, Student Assistance Teams (SATs) essentially function as the DPC (42.9%). Student dropout prevention efforts in Maine SAUs tend to be building-based rather than district-wide.
- The work of DPCs in Maine primarily serves students at the high school level (97.5%). However, DPCs also serve students at the middle/junior level (57.5%) and at the elementary level (50%).
- *School guidance counselors* (87.5%), *classroom teachers* (82.5%), and *principals* (70%) are most commonly represented on Maine DPCs, while *students* (50%) and “*student dropouts*” (42.5%) are under-represented.
- Substantial variance currently exists among Maine DPCs relative to the duration of their existence, the frequency of their meetings, and what they apparently perceive to be their major responsibilities. Only 40 percent of DPCs annually submit a written plan of action to their school boards for improving the school completion rate for their students.
- *School counselors* (95%) most commonly identify or “red-flag” students considered to be at risk for dropping out of school. *Individual teacher(s)* identification (90%), *principal* identification (87.5%), and *parent* identification (75%) also are common. The use of a *formal student screening/identification process* is not commonly employed to identify at risk students (25%).
- The most frequently cited characteristic of an “at risk student” [a factor, characteristic or condition viewed as placing a current student “at risk for dropping out of school” or of those students who dropped out during the past two years] is *poor academic performance/course failure* (96.2%). *Excessive absences* is viewed as the second most common characteristic of an “at risk student” (92.4%), followed by *lack of motivation for the traditional school curriculum* (90.4%) and *disciplinary/behavioral issues or problems* (90.1%). Also viewed as common characteristics are *low self-esteem/low aspirations* (86.5%), *family issues or problems* (84.8%), and *limited participation in school co-curricular activities* (82.9%).
- Considered to be the most effective programs, strategies, or interventions to “keep at risk students in school” are (1) *vocational education programs* (69%); (2) *alternative education programs* (61%); (3) *individual teacher efforts to establish personal relationships with students* (58%); and (4) *special education programs* (55.1%).
- In current efforts to adequately meet the needs of Maine students considered to be at risk for dropping out of school, *insufficient financial resources* and the *lack of adequate programs* are viewed as constituting the most significant obstacles, with the *unavailability of and/or insufficient professional support personnel* considered to be a minor obstacle. *Inadequately trained staff* is not generally viewed as a significant obstacle in this regard.
- Substantial apprehension and concern currently exist involving the required mandates of *No Child Left Behind* and *Learning Results*, and the negative outcomes that these educational reform policies are perceived to likely have for many Maine students considered to be at risk for dropping out of school. Approximately 75% of the study respondents indicated that they believe that the requirements of these

mandates likely will *increase the number and percentage of Maine students who will drop out of school before completing their secondary education requirements.*

- Currently in Maine insufficient time, effort and resources are being directed toward both student dropout prevention efforts (60.7% agree) and also efforts to contact students who have already dropped out of school for the purpose of encouraging them to re-enter the educational system to complete their secondary education requirements (47.6% agree).

SUMMARY OF SELECTED STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Based upon the findings obtained in this study, several recommendations are offered, including suggestions for further research. The first set of recommendations are designed to improve the high school graduation rate, as well as to reduce the dropout rate, for *all* Maine public school students, including those students with disabilities. The second set of recommendations is specifically designed to help improve the high school graduation rate, as well as to reduce the dropout rate, for Maine students with disabilities.

A. *Recommendations for School Board Members, Administrators, Teachers, and Professional Support Personnel in Maine Public Schools – Especially Members of Dropout Prevention Committees Re: Preventing School Dropouts Among All Maine Students*

It is the intention of the authors of this study to prepare a comprehensive *Student Dropout Prevention Guidebook* that will be made available to all Maine SAUs by October 31, 2004. It is anticipated that this *Guidebook* will contain specific information, suggested strategies, recommendations, and resources related to dropout prevention policies and practices. It is anticipated that this *Guidebook* will be helpful not only to *Dropout Prevention Committee* members but also to others within Maine school/communities who are interested in student dropout prevention programs and strategies. Thus, the following recommendations are intended to be fairly general in scope. More comprehensive and more specific recommendations will be contained in the forthcoming *Guidebook*.

- The extent to which the requirements of current national and state education reform policies, *No Child Left Behind* and *Learning Results*, ultimately will have on increasing or decreasing both dropout and school completion rates for Maine students clearly is speculative at this point in time. Nevertheless, substantial interest in student dropout prevention policies and practices within Maine SAUs appears to have been triggered by these standards-based movements. Dropout Prevention Committees (DPCs) in Maine school districts likely will be required to assume a more active role than ever before with respect to identifying students viewed as being “at risk” for dropping out of school -- along with implementing effective programs to keep these students in school.

As the results of this study show, wide variance exists among Maine SAUs with respect to the actual existence of formal DPCs. It can be assumed that formal DPCs currently are operating in only one-half of Maine school districts. Also, for those DPCs that presently are in operation, wide variance exists among them related to their specific roles, responsibilities, and activities. It is recommended that

Superintendents and their School Boards within every Maine SAU review the current status of their respective DPCs and take whatever actions that are necessary to improve and to strengthen them.

- It is suggested that the relationship between Dropout Prevention Committees and Student Assistance Teams (SATs) needs to be clarified within many SAUs regarding their respective roles in student dropout prevention activities. It is recognized *that most SATs are involved either directly or indirectly with students who might be considered* to be at risk for dropping out of school. It is further recognized that within many Maine SAUs, the SATs already function as the most visible and most viable group to deal with student dropout issues. However, it appears that within many Maine SAUs it is *assumed* that because SATs exist that this obviates the need for the establishment of a more comprehensive Dropout Prevention Committee. As required by state statute, DPCs have much broader responsibilities involving student dropouts than do SATs. Certainly, DPCs and SATs can, and should, collaborate closely. However, it is important that the broader responsibilities of the DPC involving the study of the student dropouts not be ignored, even in those districts that have strong and effective SATs.
- Dropout Prevention Committees should review their current membership constituencies to ensure as broad representation as possible. In particular, the results of this study show that current students and former students who have dropped out of school are very much under-represented on DPCs. It is suggested that students can offer an important, and often a very unique perspective, related to dropout issues and concerns. It is important that their input be obtained, valued and respected.
- It is recommended that Maine DPCs make a concerted effort to collect valid, reliable, and useful data in order to make the most informed decisions involving the development and implementation of effective dropout prevention policies, programs, and practices. Among the most important information and data that should be collected at the local level are (1) *which* students drop out, (2) *when* they drop out, and most critically (3) the reasons *why* they drop out.

Also, it is strongly recommended that Maine DPCs make a much more concerted effort to initiate and maintain contact with students who already have dropped out of school. Students leave school for a variety of reasons, and many of them may desire to continue their education but they may need encouragement to do so. DPCs should establish a clear and consistent student re-entry policy and plan for those students who have dropped out.

- DPCs should view “student dropout prevention” as consisting of two broad approaches: (1) *comprehensive school improvement* (improving the instruction, curriculum, and learning climate for *all* students); and (2) *targeted programs* designed to (a) prevent students from dropping out of school, and (b) recover students who have already dropped out and encourage to re-enter the educational system.
- At the local school district level, dropout prevention should be viewed as requiring three major approaches: (1) supplemental and support services (e.g., mentoring, tutoring, counseling, social support services, student after-school programs, etc.) for students considered to be at risk; (2) the provision of a variety of alternative education programs designed to provide different learning environments for those students who do not do well in conventional schools or in traditional classes (including off-campus alternative schools, separate alternative schools on campus, and alternative programs within conventional schools); and (3) school-wide restructuring efforts that focus on changing schools so that they are more interesting and more responsive learning environments for *all students*, especially for those students considered to be at risk for dropping out.
- It is recommended that DPCs, in their study of the “student dropout issue,” pay particular attention to *transition periods* that been shown to be especially difficult for many students – and which ultimately may

increase their chances for dropping out of school. The transitions from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school frequently are difficult for many students. DPCs should encourage the development of specific programs and interventions that are designed to produce easier transitions for students, especially those students considered to be most vulnerable and at highest risk for dropping out. Also, students who transfer into a new school frequently find the transition difficult, and they may be vulnerable.

Several programs and interventions have been shown to be effective in easing transition periods for students considered to be “at risk.” For example, orientation programs for incoming freshmen and transfer students can be helpful. These programs generally are much more comprehensive, more focused, and more student-specific than are the typical “freshmen orientations” that are held within many schools. In Maine, it is very common, especially in the more rural areas, to find students from several different communities [often many miles apart from each other] entering a new high school. As many, if not most, of these students do not know one another, the transition for many of these students into a new school/community and school culture can be extremely difficult. It is recommended that DPCs pay close attention to “students from sending towns” and encourage that programs and interventions be developed to help these students during transition periods and to assist them to “feel more connected” within their new educational environment.

Two other programs and interventions that have proved to be effective involving easing “student transitional periods” are freshman advisory and mentoring programs, and the initiation of a collaborative student mentoring program for middle school students transitioning to high school.

- It is recommended that DPCs utilize the “cohort method” for most accurately calculating their students’ dropout rate. Although admittedly time-consuming and labor-intensive, the cohort method is suggested as yielding the most useful and valuable data regarding student dropout trends at the local school district level. This method also allows a school district to “closely track” its students and to identify students considered to be at risk for dropping out – and to intervene on their behalf before it is too late for many of them. The cohort model generally is regarded as the best model to track individual students from the end of the eighth grade to the end of the twelfth grade.

Cohort rates measure what happens to a group of students over a specific period of time. They are based on the number of graduates within a group of students who begin at the same time. Typically, a cohort dropout rate is the percentage of students who begin grade 9 in a given year but drop out of school before receiving a regular diploma, usually in a 4-year period (until the end of grade 12).

It is recommended that the “academic trajectory” of *every student* be monitored *every quarter*. This method will allow for developing and implementing interventions and student supports before many students begin to feel totally overwhelmed and that they feel that they have no chance of passing specific subjects.

- It is suggested that one of the most important things that Dropout Prevention Committees can do to reduce their student dropout rate is to advocate strongly that teachers be fully supported in their efforts to develop and maintain personal relationships with their students, especially those students viewed as being the most vulnerable for dropping out of school. As shown in this study, *individual teacher efforts to establish personal relationships with students* was identified as one of the most effective interventions to “keep at risk students in school.” In the current educational climate of increased student and school academic accountability, and high stakes testing, teachers need to be encouraged – and supported – in their efforts to develop personal relationships with individual students.

- Dropout prevention efforts must begin *early* and they must be *comprehensive*. Some students manifest behaviors very early during their school experience (beginning, in some cases when they very first enter school) that suggest that they may be *at risk* for eventually dropping out of school at some point. Thus, arguably dropout prevention efforts must be initiated during the early elementary school years even, as suggested by some, during the pre-school years. Typically, dropout prevention programs are implemented at the high school level. For many students, this is too late. Early identification and early intervention are the keys to success in most dropout prevention programs.

At the same time, dropout prevention efforts *cannot be episodic or isolated*. To be effective, they need to be as *comprehensive* as possible – involving the family and the entire school community. School personnel alone cannot be expected to solve the dropout problem. The factors and conditions that contribute to why students drop out of school are multiple and complex, and they require comprehensive, multi-faceted interventions. These efforts must represent a true collaboration among school personnel, students, peers, families, social service, and mental health agencies within the community, and the general public at large within any given community. School personnel should make a concerted effort to reach out to the *entire community* and to make the argument that *dropout prevention must be a shared responsibility* and that their active participation in this effort is necessary.

- Dropout prevention efforts need to take into consideration *that students drop out of school for different reasons at different times*. Thus, the “one size fits all” dropout prevention approach doesn’t work. Strategies and programs, in order to be effective, must be varied and take into consideration “local conditions” and they must be sensitive to individual student characteristics and needs. For some students, signs are evident from early on that they may be at high risk for eventually dropping out of school (e.g., poor academic grades, behavioral and disciplinary problems, frequent absences, etc.). For these students, their difficulties appear to be more chronic in nature, and they likely are viewed as being more easily predictable as “future dropouts.”

For other students, however, there are few, if any, early signs that would appear to predict that they would drop out of school. Yet, they do. For many of these students, the reasons why they leave school are very situation-specific, and they may be the result of negative behavioral patterns – or even, in some cases, a specific event or situation -- that do not emerge until very late within their secondary school years -- possibly even during their senior year of high school. Thus, dropout prevention strategies and programs need to be *flexible* and *diversified*, taking into consideration the differences that research studies have identified between “early dropouts” and “late dropouts.”

- In their efforts to most efficiently and most accurately identify those students that would most likely benefit from dropout prevention strategies and programs, as well as to avoid possibly targeting the “wrong students,” it is suggested that dropout prevention committees “cast as broad net as possible.” They should look at four types of information, as suggested by Gleason and Dynarski (1998): (1) *ecological characteristics*, such as neighborhood conditions or peer group effects; (2) *unobserved psychological factors* (e.g., persistence, resilience, optimism); (3) *measure of the persistence of specific characteristics over time* (characteristics or factors that lead to dropping out may have a more *cumulative* effect; performing poorly in school one year may lead to temporary disappointment and an increased resolve to do better; however, performing poorly in school for several years in a row may lead students to become detached from school and to believe that they are failures, eventually leading them to drop out – thus risk factors that measure student performance over several years may be better predictors of dropping out than those that measure performance over a single year); and (4) *transitory events that occur closer to the time that students decide to drop out* (some students may drop out not because of the cumulative effects of poor academic performance but because of an unexpected event that severely affects them, such as having a child, being arrested, initiating drug use, or experiencing serious personal problems at home).

- Determining a student’s “risk status” for dropping out of school is a complex, multi-stage process that involves several components, factors, conditions, and perspectives. *Dropout prevention committees need to recognize that no one single model for predicting future dropouts has been shown to be totally effective.* However, it is suggested that the “student risk determination model” [SARS: Institute for the Study of Students At Risk, 2003] may be helpful to Dropout Prevention Committee members in their efforts to initiate and/or to expand upon dropout prevention programs and processes within their schools.
- It is recommended that a specific research study be conducted during 2004-2005 project period by Institute for the Study of Students At Risk staff – one that will build upon and enhance the findings of the current study involving the status of student dropout prevention programs and strategies in Maine public schools. The proposed study will be designed to (1) further explore the efficacy of dropout prevention efforts in Maine SAUs for all students, including those students with disabilities, and (2) collect and analyze relevant data and information that will be useful to policymakers, school board members, school administrators and teachers, school support personnel, parents, and students in their collective efforts to help more Maine students remain in school and to graduate with a standard high school diploma.

The proposed study, which will allow for the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, will involve the selection of four SAUs (two with a record of “high” student dropout rates for all students, including those with disabilities – and two with a record of “low” student dropout rates for all students, including those with disabilities). In selecting these SAUs, five-year trend data with respect to student dropout and school completion rates will be utilized. Demographic and school profiles of each SAU will be developed. Among the specific type of information to be collected and analyzed will be the following: SES data; student achievement data; teacher experience and educational attainment data; relevant parent and community data; school configuration data; school programming and curriculum data; support personnel data; “Dropout Prevention Committee” data; and specific student dropout prevention program strategies and interventions.

On-site visits will be conducted within all four sites. It is anticipated that these on-site visits will allow for the collection and analysis of valuable quantitative, but especially qualitative, data and information. In particular, this component of the study (which will include comprehensive interviews with students, teachers and administrators, school support personnel, and students themselves) will be designed to yield information with respect to the following questions: What specific factors and conditions are contributing to the student dropout and school completion rates? Which programs, strategies, and interventions are the “most (and least) successful” with respect to keeping students in school? Which specific strategies and mechanisms are employed to identify those students considered to be “at risk” for dropping out of school – and who is involved in this process? What specific student re-entry efforts are in place and how effective are they? Which specific “school climate” conditions and factors are viewed as the *most* and *least helpful* with respect to keeping students in school? etc.

The major objective of this study will be to compare and contrast factors and conditions within both “*high* and *low* student dropout SAUs” that appear to be contributing to their student dropout rates – and, based upon an analysis of this information, to provide specific suggestions to Maine public school personnel related to how they might improve their student school completion rates. Specific questions and concerns related to this study (including the specific types of information to be generated) will be discussed with Maine Department of Education personnel prior to the conducting of the study.

B. Recommendations Specifically Involving Maine Students with Disabilities

It is recommended that Maine public school personnel who are particularly interested in reducing the dropout rate for students with disabilities view this issue from both broad and very focused perspectives. First, it is suggested that the “students with disabilities dropout issue” needs to be placed in the larger context. *It is suggested that, at times, the reason and/or reasons why some students with disabilities drop out of school may have little, if anything, to do directly with their disability per se.* These students often leave school early for the same reasons that other non-disabled students drop out (e.g., personal, family, school, and community related factors and conditions). Clearly, having a disability may, for some students, exacerbate their difficulties and problems, thus increasing their likelihood for dropping out of school. However, for other students, their disability appears to have minimal, if any, direct connection to the reasons why they leave school.

Therefore, it is suggested that *school personnel, in their efforts to keep students with disabilities in school, should view this issue through a broader lens and to become actively engaged in dropout prevention programs and strategies for all students.* It is suggested that this will allow them to be more effective in their efforts to ensure more positive outcomes for their students with disabilities. Nevertheless, it is clear that (1) students with disabilities drop out of school at a higher rate than do their non-disabled peers, and (2) often the reason or reasons why these students leave school may be directly, or indirectly, related to their disability. Thus, it is critical that *specific efforts at the local school level* also need to focus on preventing these students [students identified as having disabilities] from dropping out.

It is suggested that dropout prevention efforts targeted specifically at students with disabilities will become increasingly important in the coming years as the requirements of *No Child Left Behind* take full effect – especially those related to its *Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)* student and school performance indicators, specifically involving students with disabilities.

Following are some specific recommendations regarding this population of students:

- 1) During the past two years, the Institute for the Study of Students At Risk has been able to establish a comprehensive database involving Maine students with disabilities who drop out of school – with a particular emphasis on individual SAU-level data. For the first time, it is now possible to analyze relevant trend data with respect to both student dropout and student school completion information. It is suggested that this type of information can be very useful to school personnel in their efforts to better understand the “student dropout issue” involving Maine students with disabilities and to develop and implement specific strategies to improve the school completion rate for their students. However, it is further suggested that this type of trend data analysis, in order for it to be truly useful in the long-term, needs to be continued and enhanced on a yearly basis. Thus, it is recommended that the Institute conduct a similar study in this regard during the 2004-2005 project period as one of its major research activities. This study will build upon all research previously conducted and it will allow for the further enrichment and enhancement of its “Maine students with disabilities dropout and school completion database” – to be shared with all relevant Maine stakeholders.

- 2) Of all disability categories, Maine students within the *Emotional Disability* category continue to drop out of school at the highest percentage rate. Approximately one-half (49.3%) of the students, age 14 and older, identified within this category who were known to leave school between December 1, 2002 and December 1, 2003 dropped out. This particular finding is consistent with disability dropout data at the national level which, for several years, repeatedly has shown that students within the *Emotional Disability* category are far more likely than students within any of the other disability categories to drop out. What is encouraging in this respect, however, is that results yielded in the current study show that the dropout rate for Maine students identified within the *Emotional Disability* category *decreased* 8.2 percent from the previous year, 2002. Despite this optimistic finding, it is, nevertheless, clear that dropout prevention efforts in Maine must be specifically target this population of students.

In an effort to continue to reduce the dropout rate for students identified within the *Emotional Disability* category, it is recommended that the following actions be taken. First, continued review and analysis of the *overall programs* in which these students are currently participating within our public schools needs to occur. This review and analysis was initiated during the current project and resulted in the collection of some useful data. However, given the complex scope of this endeavor, it is important that expanded research efforts continue in this regard – designed to identify the *specific strengths* and *weaknesses* within these programs – as well as to identify the *specific strategies* needed to improve the overall educational service delivery system for these students.

Second, it is recommended that those specific public school programs in Maine which have been identified in this study, as well as in other studies, as having earned an especially strong “track record” with respect to successful programming for students within the *Emotional Disability* category [e.g., high student graduation with diploma rate] be further studied to identify the *specific reasons* for their apparent efficacy. This investigation was initiated during the current project and resulted in some suggested “important and relevant findings.” However, it is recommended that this research be further enhanced and expanded during the 2004-2005 project period in order to provide more rich and conclusive data that arguably will be even more useful and generalizable. It is suggested, based upon findings generated from the current study in this regard, that the essential components and characteristics of these particular programs can serve as *effective models* for other schools in Maine who are struggling in their efforts to provide appropriate and meaningful programs for their students who are identified within the *Emotional Disability* category.

Third, it is suggested that the Maine Department of Education assume the lead in sponsoring a conference or symposium that focuses specifically on *strategies for decreasing the dropout rate for students with Emotional Disability*. It is suggested that this type of conference or symposium could be extremely beneficial by serving not only as a clearinghouse for the exchange of important information but also as an effective vehicle for highlighting the need for immediate and comprehensive action involving this particular population of students. This recommendation was made last year and preliminary steps were initiated to implement this particular activity. However, because of both time constraints and a “shifting of priorities” required by MDOE personnel, this activity was not fully implemented. Nevertheless, it is strongly recommended that this type of conference or symposium be held during the 2004-2005 year.

- 3) Consistent with a recommendation offered in last year’s “Final Report” it is recommended that all Maine SAUs, with guidance and support from the Maine Department of Education, continue

in their efforts to develop and implement more effective mechanisms to “track” students with disabilities who are known to have left school without completing their high school education. These “tracking mechanisms” should include those students who are routinely reported in Maine’s EF-S-05 Child Count Exit Data Reports as (1) *dropped out*, (2) *moved, not known to be continuing*, and (3) *status unknown*. These categories represent relatively large numbers of Maine students who are known to exit each year – and yet, little is known relative to their *true status*. The most recent state-wide Maine Child Count Exit Data (December 1, 2003) indicate that for Maine students with disabilities, age 14 and older, 194 students were reported in the “status unknown” category, while 210 students were reported in the “moved, not known to be continuing” category.

It is conceivable that many of those students that are represented in either of the latter two categories listed above may indeed have dropped out of school but they are not being reported as such. This situation not only serves to underestimate the *true dropout rate* but, more importantly, arguably it allows for the situation to persist in which many students who might be encouraged to remain in school and complete their high school education, do not – primarily because no-one is aware of their *true status* and, therefore, no efforts conceivably have been made to encourage them to remain in school.

Regarding Maine students with disabilities who are *known dropouts*, it is recommended that local school districts continue in their efforts to better “track” these particular students on a yearly basis. This “tracking system” holds the potential for yielding important information regarding *specific reasons why individual students with disabilities drop out of school*. This information, then, could be used in two ways: (1) to possibly help those individual students return to school, if this is considered to be feasible, and (2) to analyze the information collected to explore ways to prevent other students from dropping out. While it appears that some progress has been made at the local level in this regard during the current year, given the anticipated impact of *No Child Left Behind* related to this issue, it is important that increased efforts be devoted to “tracking student dropouts.”

- 4) Findings generated from this study, as well as last year’s study, suggest the need for several studies to be conducted (some of them mentioned in earlier recommendations) including a series of related research studies that focus on the *specific reasons why individual students with disabilities, within a specific school environment, drop out of school*. It is suggested that in order to significantly improve the chances for many students with disabilities to complete school we need to discover much more about not only the specific reasons why many of these students drop out, but also we need to learn a great deal more about their individual school cultures and programs. These studies should be conducted in a sample of schools throughout Maine that reported higher than average student dropout rates (for both total disabilities and individual disability categories). They should involve comprehensive analyses of programs and staff, and in-depth qualitative student interviews involving both current students and students who already have dropped out.