

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT STATUS OF STUDENT DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAMS AND STRATEGIES IN MAINE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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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.

A. *Background and Rationale for Current Study*

For many years, Maine has developed an enviable record with respect to the high number and percentage of its students who complete high school with a standard diploma as well the low number and percentage of its students who drop out of school. Compared with other states, Maine consistently has ranked at, or very near, the top involving each of these student and school performance measures. In 2002-2003, Maine's public secondary school event dropout rate was 2.8 percent, and its public secondary school completion rate was 87.2 percent. In 2000 (most recent data available), the nation's public school event dropout rate was 4.8 percent, and its high school completion rate was 85.7 percent (1998-2000 average – most recent data available) (EF—M-35a, and EM-F40, Maine Department of Education, 2003; U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Policymakers, educators, and parents generally have expressed high levels of satisfaction with the overall accomplishments of Maine students and Maine schools regarding these widely recognized measures of success.

Nevertheless, despite Maine's "very good performance" relative to its students' graduation and dropout rates, concern persists that far too many of Maine's students each year still fail to complete their secondary school requirements and drop out of school. This situation is widely viewed as most often resulting in negative outcomes not only for these students themselves but also for their families, their communities, and the state of Maine as a whole. Reducing the number of Maine students who drop out of school continues to be a major goal of policymakers, the Maine Department of Education, and public school administrators, teachers, and support personnel. Interest in this issue has been significantly heightened as a result of current national and state educational reform efforts (*No Child Left Behind Act* and *Maine's System of Learning Results*) which place unprecedented emphasis upon high student academic achievement standards, comprehensive student and school assessment measures, and stringent student high school graduation requirements.

Of particular concern to educators are the implications that the federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (*NCLB*) may 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 math expected each school each year. States also 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 an I.E.P. diploma (certificate of completion) or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. These students must be counted as *dropouts*. Also, 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*. While *NCLB* does not require states to establish a goal or target for dropout rates, obviously graduation rates and dropout rates are linked.

NCLB clearly has placed a much greater focus and a sense of urgency on reducing the student dropout rate in all states, including Maine with its traditionally low student dropout rate. Graduation and dropout rates increasingly will be used as a measure of a school’s accountability. Thus, it is expected that Maine schools must now pay more attention to its student dropout and graduation rates, track individual students even more closely than they have in the past, and further, implement strategies and programs designed to keep students in school and “on track toward graduation.”

Since 2000, the major policy analysis and research efforts of the Institute for the Study of Students At Risk have focused on issues involving “Maine students dropouts” and “alternative education programs in Maine” (*Current Status of Alternative Education Programs in Maine: Impact Upon Policies and Practices for Students with Disabilities and Students Considered To Be “At Risk”* (2001); *Alternative Education Programs in Maine: A Further Investigation of Their Impact Upon Serving Students Considered To Be “At Risk” and Students with Disabilities* (2002); *An Analysis of Training and Staff Development Needs For Current and Future Alternative Educators in Maine* (2003); and *Reducing the Dropout Rate For All Maine Students with a Particular Emphasis Upon Students with Disabilities Who Drop Out of School* (2003).

Also during this timeframe, ongoing discussions have taken place with members of the Maine Department of Education’s Office of Truancy, Dropout, Reintegration, and Alternative Education Advisory Committee [on which we serve as members] related to the specific information that was needed in an effort to assess the current status and functioning of *Dropout Prevention Committees (DPCs)* in Maine School Administrative Units. Further, during these discussions with Advisory Committee members [as well as many other discussions with public school educators throughout Maine] it was determined that a study that focused on obtaining specific information relative to “identifying the factors and conditions that commonly are viewed as placing Maine students at risk for dropping out – along with identifying the programs and strategies that are perceived to be most helpful in keeping these students in school” – would be extremely useful. Thus, in an effort to meet these perceived needs, the current study was developed.

The overall purpose of this study is to obtain and analyze important information that will be helpful to policymakers, Maine Department of Education personnel, school administrators and teachers, counselors, and parents in their collective efforts to prevent Maine public school students from dropping out of school before they are able to complete their secondary education requirements. This study focuses on “Dropout Prevention Committees” (DPCs) in Maine School Administrative Units (SAUs). It also assesses the perceptions of Maine

educators (who were identified as being actively involved with student dropout prevention policies and practices at the local level) regarding several relevant issues and concerns related to “at risk students” and dropout prevention strategies within their local school districts.

According to Title 20-A, Section 5103, Subchapter III (Ferdico, 2003), *each superintendent, with school board approval, shall annually establish a separate dropout prevention committee for each individual school unit under the superintendent’s supervision*. Specific committee membership constituencies and specific committee responsibility requirements are included in Section 5103. It is required that *dropout prevention committees (DPCs)* meet at least annually to review their dropout prevention plans and to make recommendations to the school board.

B. Objectives of Study

This study had four major *objectives*:

- 1) To assess the current status of Dropout Prevention Committees in Maine SAUs (e.g., the extent to which they are in active operation throughout Maine public schools; how they are organized and operated; their membership constituencies and major responsibilities; grade levels served; duration and frequency of meetings; and strategies and mechanisms utilized to identify students considered to be at risk for dropping out of school);
- 2) To assess the perceptions of Maine educators (actively involved with student dropout policies and practices at the local level) relative to the most common factors, characteristics, or conditions that are associated with students dropping out of school (“characteristics of at risk students”);
- 3) To assess the perceptions of Maine educators (actively involved with student dropout policies and practices at the local level) relative to the efficacy of specific programs, strategies, and interventions with respect to “keeping their at risk students in school” (which specific programs within their school district are viewed as having the most positive impact for preventing school dropouts?); and
- 4) To assess the perceptions of Maine educators (actively involved with student dropout policies and practices at the local level): (a) related to the current status of programming for at risk students within their school districts (and what prevents them from effectively meeting the needs of these students); (b) their perceptions involving both current dropout prevention efforts within their schools; and (c) their perceptions involving selected contemporary education reform efforts that conceivably could have an impact upon current and future students with respect to dropping out of school.

SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGY, SELECTED RESULTS, AND SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS

The instrument employed in the study was a questionnaire, *Student Dropout Prevention Survey (SDPS)*. The instrument consisted of four major parts: (1) *Current Status of Dropout Prevention Committees in Maine Public Schools*; (2) *Perceptions Related to Major Factors and Conditions That Place Maine Students “At Risk” for Dropping Out of School [Characteristics of “At Risk” Students]*; (3) *Perceptions Related to the Most Effective Programs, Strategies, and*

Interventions for Preventing Student Dropouts in Maine Schools; and (4) Perceptions Related to Selected Contemporary Issues, Concerns, and Policies Involving Students Considered To Be At Risk for Dropping Out of School.

Potential respondents to the SDPS instrument were identified as follows: letters co-signed by Robert A. Cobb, Dean, College of Education and Human Development, and William E. Davis, Director, Institute for the Study of Students At Risk, were sent to all 148 Maine Superintendents of School, requesting that they provide the names of those persons who currently function as chairpersons for each Dropout Prevention Committee (DPC) for each individual school unit under their supervision.

Of the 148 Letters that were sent to Maine superintendents, 133 responses ultimately were obtained, representing a 90 percent response rate. The 133 responses identified *in total* the names of 154 persons who were viewed as the appropriate individuals to whom to send the SDPS. Of the 154 SDPS questionnaires which were sent to potential respondents, 84 ultimately were returned, which represented 55 percent of the total population of potential respondents who were sent the SDPS instrument. Thus, the study sample for this study consisted of 84 respondents (n = 84).

Following are some of the major findings of the study:

- Although, required by state statute, formal 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).

Based upon an analysis of the major findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered. It is suggested that the study’s findings have implications for representatives from several groups and constituencies in Maine who are interested in improving the school completion rate for Maine students, while simultaneously reducing the student dropout rate in Maine. In particular, it is suggested that the findings of this study may be helpful to, and have implications for, policymakers, the Maine Department of Education, members of local school boards, school administrators and teachers, counselors, parents, and most importantly for Maine students themselves.

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 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).

For a copy of the full study, *An Analysis of the Current Status of Student Dropout Prevention Programs and Strategies in Maine Public Schools*, please contact Roxanne M. Lee at the Institute for the Study of Students At Risk, College of Education and Human Development, The University of Maine, 5766 Shibles Hall, Room 324, Orono, ME 04469-5766 [207-581-2440 or e-mail, roxanne.lee@unit.maine.edu].

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