High School Graduation Rates in the United States: Implications for the Counseling Profession

Rebecca Powell Stanard

This article reviews a troubling report of a nationwide study of U.S. public high school graduation rates conducted by J. P. Greene (2001) of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. The statistics revealed that fewer students were graduating from high school in the United States than is being reported by school districts, states, and the National Center for Education Statistics. They also revealed that graduation rates were much lower for African American and Latino students than for White students. The author summarizes the research on the consequences of dropping out of school and discusses the implications of these findings for counselors and the counseling profession.

In November 2001, J. P. Greene of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research published a report titled *High School Graduation Rates in the United States*. The report was commissioned by the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) because of perceived discrepancies between anecdotal information regarding graduation rates and data reported by the U.S. Department of Education. The BAEO was determined to examine the effectiveness of the nation's schools and the educational achievement of its children. Graduation rates are an important measure of the performance of the public school system; however, there is less emphasis on their importance than on other indicators such as test scores. This lack of attention, according to Greene, is due to the "confusing, inconsistent, and sometimes misleading way in which the rate of high school completion is measured" (p. 1). Greene's report used a simple, reliable, straightforward way to report high school graduation rates.

METHOD FOR CALCULATING GRADUATION RATES

Greene (2001) discussed his method of calculating graduation rates. The study identified the eighth-grade enrollment for each jurisdiction and for each subgroup (White, African American, and Latino/Latina) from the fall of 1993. Then, information was collected on the number of regular high school diplomas awarded in the spring of 1998 when those same eighth-graders should have graduated. Adjustments were made based on population changes for that jurisdiction and on each ethnic/racial subgroup between the 1993–1994 and 1997–1998 school years, to avoid any distortion of the rate due to students moving. The formula used was the following: *Graduation rate = regular diplomas from 1998/adjusted eighth-grade enrollment from 1993*.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Using the aforementioned formula, the nationwide graduation rate for the class of 1998 was 74%. By subgroup the rates were White students 78%, African American students 56%, and Latino students 54%. Results of the study were then broken down by state and by the 50 largest school districts. At the state and district level, there was considerable variation both in overall graduation rate and graduation rate for each subgroup.

State Results

Data were reported for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Results indicated that Georgia had the lowest overall graduation rate in the nation with 57% of students graduating. Georgia also had the lowest rate for White students (61%) and for Latino students (32%), and it was third worst in graduation of African American students (44%). Six states graduated fewer than half of their African American students: Wisconsin, Minnesota, Tennessee, Nevada, Ohio, and Oregon. Seven states graduated fewer than half of their Latino/Latina students: Alabama, Tennessee, North Carolina, Nevada, Oregon, Colorado, and Arkansas.

Rebecca Powell Stanard, *Counseling and Educational Psychology Department, State University of West Georgia. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rebecca Powell Stanard, State University of West Georgia, College of Education, Counseling and Educational Psychology Department, Carrollton, GA 30118 (e-mail: rstanard@westga.edu).*

 pp. 217–221

Iowa had the highest overall graduation rate at 93%, followed by Wisconsin, North Dakota, and Nebraska. Three of these states— Iowa, Wisconsin, and Nebraska—had the highest rates for White students. West Virginia had the highest graduation rate for African American students at 71%, followed by Massachusetts, Arkansas, and New Jersey. Of states with a significant Latino population, Maryland and Louisiana had the highest Latino graduation rates.

Greene (2001) discussed disparities between White and minority graduation rates and noted that many of the states with high White student graduation rates (Wisconsin, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Iowa) had some of the lowest minority student graduation rates. He stated, "Interestingly all four of these states are predominantly rural, white states with concentrated, smaller minority and urban populations. This may reveal that the problem of low graduation rates is really an urban problem" (p. 4).

District Results

Data were reported for the 50 largest school districts in the country. Results demonstrated that Cleveland, Ohio, had the lowest overall high school graduation rate at 28%, followed by Memphis, Tennessee; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Columbus, Ohio. At 87%, Fairfax County, Virginia, had the highest overall rate, followed by Montgomery County, Maryland; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Boston, Massachusetts.

Cleveland, Ohio, also had the lowest high school graduation rate among African American (29%) and Latino (26%) students. Fifteen of the 45 districts for which there were sufficient data graduated fewer than 50% of African American students. Latino/Latina students again fared worse, with fewer than 50% graduating in 21 of 36 districts for which there were sufficient data. Only four districts—Boston, Massachusetts; Fairfax County, Virginia; Prince Georges County, Maryland; and Montgomery County, Maryland—graduated more than 75% of their African American students. Only five districts graduated more than two thirds of their Latino/Latina students: Montgomery County, Maryland; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Prince Georges County, Maryland; Boston, Massachusetts; and El Paso, Texas.

Districts with low high school graduation rates for African American and Latino/Latina students also tended to have low graduation rates for White students, with a few exceptions. For example, New York City; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Dekalb, Gwinnett, and Cobb Counties in Georgia had large disparities between graduation rates for White and minority students. Greene (2001) proposed that these districts had shortcomings particular to minority students, while in other districts the problems transcended race and ethnicity.

Comparing Graduation Rates With Other School Dropout and High School Completion Statistics

Greene discussed four types of statistics used to describe the rate at which students drop out of or complete high school (event dropout rates, status dropout rates, high school completion rates, and promoting power) and compared methods of computing those statistics with the method used to calculate the graduation rates in his 2001 study. Graduation rates as calculated by the method in Greene's study should be closest to high school completion rates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the national high school completion rate was 86% in 1998, whereas the rate in Greene's study was 74%. Greene attributed the difference to several factors.

First, the NCES report included in its statistics equivalent credentials such as the GED. Greene offered some compelling arguments against counting GED recipients as high school graduates. He maintained that the purpose of calculating a graduation rate is to measure the success of high schools at graduating students and that the GED is not equivalent to a regular high school diploma. Continuing to count them in statistical reports masks the true graduation rate. When GEDs were removed from the NCES statistics, the numbers for White and Latino/Latina graduates were similar to the rates reported by Greene; however, they continued to remain very different for African American students. Possible explanations were offered for this discrepancy including *coverage bias* and *self-report bias* in the Current Population Survey (CPS) from which the NCES rates were calculated. Coverage bias refers to the difficulty in reaching low-income minorities among whom dropouts are disproportionately represented. The CPS also relies on self-reported educational status rather than on hard data, and some people may report inaccurately to hide embarrassment or to avoid discrimination. Greene cited several advantages of using the graduation rates as opposed to other statistics: These rates rely directly on enrollment and diploma numbers that (a) are not affected by sample coverage bias or exclusion of certain populations, (b) measure the performance of school systems in an area more directly than do surveys of young adults in the area who may not have attended school there, and (c) are not affected by self-report bias or confusion about who has a GED or a regular high school diploma.

Greene's report also discussed the *event dropout rate* (the percentage of students who drop out of school in a given year) reported by the states to the NCES. Thirty-seven states reported the statistic, and 26 of those 37 stated that they had adhered to the standard definition and collection procedures. Greene noted that the frequency of missing data and data that could not be compared make it difficult to use event dropout rates when comparing the graduation rates of different states.

Greene's report concluded by characterizing its results as the beginning of the discussion. It did not attempt to answer the "whys" or to compare current rates with those from the past. Greene called for an examination of successful school systems to see if there are strategies that can be imported by other districts to improve graduation rates, and he urged openness to new ideas to improve the effectiveness of the public school system.

Consequences of Dropping Out of School

Research has consistently shown that the failure of students to graduate from high school has serious individual and so-

cial consequences. Fifty-six percent of high school dropouts were unemployed or were not enrolled in college as opposed to 16% of high school graduates ("High School Graduates," 2000). Those who drop out of high school can expect to earn considerably less money, achieve lower levels of academic achievement, and experience poorer mental and physical health than do high school graduates (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). The estimated cost of high school dropouts to the United States is approximately $250 billion in social services, lost wages, and taxes (Lunenburg, 1999). Dropouts constitute 52% of welfare recipients, 82% of the prison population, and 85% of juvenile justice cases, and drug use among 17- to 22-year-olds is highest among high school dropouts (Hodgkinson, 1998; "Youth Substance Use," 1997).

Why Students Drop Out of School

The key to designing effective prevention and intervention programs is understanding why students drop out of school. This is a difficult task because it is a complex problem that is influenced by a number of direct and indirect factors related to the individual, family, school, and community that interact and influence the decision over a long period of time. Dropping out of school should be viewed as a process rather than an event, and interventions must be developed to address the problem on multiple levels. Intervention and prevention strategies must be comprehensive, flexible, and culturally specific and must begin early in students' academic careers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING

School counselors are in a prime position to have a positive impact on the problem of high school dropouts. Because of the nonacademic problems associated with poor school performance, at-risk students are also frequently involved with community counselors. School and community counselors, in collaboration with school administrators, parents, and other community leaders, can implement both systemic and programmatic changes in schools and communities to prevent students from dropping out of high school.

Systemic Interventions

Systemic interventions reduce the dropout rate on a large scale by improving the environmental factors in families, schools, and communities that contribute to the problem. Counselors, serving as advocates for students, can play a leadership role in bringing about these systemic changes. Working collaboratively with school administrators, counselors can educate politicians and the public about strategies, such as the Coalition Campus Schools Project (CCSP), that have been shown by research to reduce dropout rates and improve academic performance. CCSP created 11 new high schools from 2 of the high schools with the lowest performance and highest dropout rates in New York City, resulting in improved graduation rates and lowered dropout rates. The characteristics and practices of these schools that seemed to make the greatest difference were small school size, small class size, low student–teacher ratio, clear expectations, portfolio-based performance assessment, and staff commitment to the school's ideas and values (Ancess & Wichterle, 2001). Although counselors may not be in a position to bring about such a drastic change as restructuring a school system, they are in a position to implement the practices that contributed to the success of these programs in their own schools and communities.

Counselors should be involved in school policy and procedure development to ensure that these policies and procedures do not exacerbate the problems. Problematic behaviors of students often lead to punitive measures like poor or failing grades, retention, suspension, and expulsion. These measures offer little incentive for students to come to school or to do schoolwork, and they begin to see themselves as incapable of succeeding in school (Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999). Male African American students are most affected because they are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than students in other groups (Jordan & Lara, 1996). Retention has similar effects. Even in the lower elementary grades, retention significantly increases the likelihood that a student will drop out of high school (Lunenberg, 1999). Collaborative efforts between counselors, parents, teachers, and school administrators should focus on developing policies and procedures to manage problematic student behaviors and to foster the success of these students rather than dealing with the problem by pursuing policies that seem to be pushing at-risk students out of school.

Obviously the most efficient strategy is to prevent the students' problems rather than to try to resolve them. Students exhibiting extreme behaviors are already experiencing a sense of alienation from school. The problematic attitudes and behaviors of students at risk of dropout appear as early as elementary school, therefore, evaluations and prevention strategies can and should be implemented as early as possible (Rumberger, 2001). Counselors, school administrators, and faculty must engage in an honest evaluation of their schools to determine the factors leading to this alienation and to determine if they are doing everything they can as early as possible for these students.

Collaborative efforts between school and communities must be established to address the issues outside of the school that affect school performance and retention. There are examples of outreach programs in which law enforcement, social services, and community agencies team with school personnel to deal with the problem of truancy (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1999). Counselors play a key role in working with students and their parents to determine the issues that are contributing to the child's truancy and to resolve them through strategies, like individual and family counseling, that focus on conflict resolution and parenting skills.

Programmatic Interventions

School and community counselors can work together to develop programs that help children to stay in and succeed in school. These programs may be delivered as supplemental services within an existing school program or as alternative school programs, either in the existing school or in a

separate facility. Key components of successful programs are the ability to identify at-risk students and to provide them with both academic and personal support. Individual and group guidance and counseling services, attendance outreach, after-school academic and social support programming, increased parental involvement, increased extracurricular activity opportunities, and mentoring are just a few activities that have been shown to improve school performance and reduce the risk of a student dropping out of school.

Counselors must know how to use data so that at-risk students can be identified early in their academic career and appropriate strategies can be implemented. At-risk students can be identified as early as elementary school by using existing data such as absenteeism, grades, and retention records. Preventative measures targeting these students can be implemented. Small, counselor-led support groups that consist of both high- and low-risk students and that focus on assertiveness , social skills, time management, study skills and habits, survival skills, decision making, and stress reduction have been effective in school dropout prevention (Praport, 1993).

The disparities in graduation rates for White and minority students suggest that prevention programs should be designed and implemented from a multicultural perspective. There are culturally specific models of dropout prevention programs that offer promise of success. One such program is Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS) in Los Angeles (Larson & Rumberger, 1999). ALAS differed from traditional dropout prevention efforts because it focused on at-risk students in middle school, the period during which more than half of Latino boys drop out of school. ALAS focused not only on the individual adolescent, but also on the family, school, and community with strategies to increase the effectiveness of individuals within each context as well as to improve collaboration between them (Rumberger, 2001). ALAS had a significant impact while students were receiving the intervention; however, the effects were not sustained after the program ended, which suggests that school dropout prevention efforts need to be ongoing (Rumberger, 2001). Counselors can play a role in development and implementation of these culturally appropriate strategies and in training faculty and staff to work with multicultural populations.

Counselor Education

Counselor educators play a crucial role in understanding and reducing the problem of school dropouts. They are responsible for transforming the work of the school counselor, not only by training new counselors for their expanded role but also by working collaboratively with school systems to train counselors currently working in the field. Counselor education programs must be designed so that mental health, community, and school counselors learn to work collaboratively and to understand the issues in communities and schools that affect students and families. Collaborative efforts between school systems and universities should be established to train practicing counselors to collaborate, use data, and serve as leaders and advocates for all students. Counselor educators can encourage more uniform and rigorous methods for defining and counting school dropouts. They can conduct and encourage research into the causes and remedies for school failure for students in all cultural groups. The results of such research should be reported not only in the professional literature but also to the public and politicians as an advocacy effort.

CONCLUSION

The failure of students to complete a high school education is a problem that has serious consequences not only for the individual but also for society. If it is to be resolved, society must acknowledge that our children are not failing in school—our schools are failing our children, and our communities are failing our schools. It is a problem that calls for critical self-evaluation and a proactive, rather than reactive stance. It is a problem than cannot be solved by piecemeal approaches or by any one group of individuals. It calls for a comprehensive, collaborative effort on the part of families, schools, and communities supported by state and federal government. As counselors, we are in a position to assume a leadership role in bringing about effective change. To do so will require stepping out of traditional roles. We must be prepared not only to work with individual students but also to work to address the problems from a systemic view. Counselors can insist on accurate data gathering and reporting to identify those at risk, spearhead collaborative efforts, broker services, and advocate for students. School and community counselors can work collaboratively with parents, teachers, school administrative staff, and state and community leaders to design and implement effective strategies to help all students to stay in and succeed in school. Counselor educators can take a leadership role by preparing school and community counselors for these nontraditional roles. They should also conduct and encourage research into the causes of and solutions for students' failure in school. Results of that scholarly inquiry can then be used to educate the public and politicians so that public policies that support effective educational reform can be implemented.

REFERENCES

Ancess, J., & Wichterle, S. O. (2001, January). *Making school completion integral to school purpose and design.* Paper presented at the Harvard University conference "Dropouts in America," Boston. Retrieved January 14, 2002, from http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/dropouts/call_dropoutpapers.php

Greene, J. P. (2001). *High school graduation rates in the United States.* Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute . Retrieved January 16, 2002, from http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo.htm

High school graduates about twice as likely as dropouts to work or go to school. (2000, Summer). *Occupational Outlook Quarterly, 44,* 40–41.

Hodgkinson, H. L. (1998). *Predicting demographics in the nation's schools.* Washington, DC: Center for Democratic Policy, Institute for Educational Leadership.

Ingersoll, S., & LeBoeuf, D. (1999). Reaching youth out of the mainstream. *The Prevention Researcher, 6*(3), 4–7.
Jordan, W. J., & Lara, J. (1996). Exploring the causes of early dropout among race-ethnic and gender groups. *Youth and Society, 28*(1), 62–95.
Jordan, W. J., McPartland, J. M. & Lara, J. (1999). Rethinking the causes of high school dropout. *The Prevention Researcher, 6*(3), 1–4.
Larson, K. A., & Rumberger, R. W. (1999). Dropout prevention for highest-risk Latino students. *The Prevention Researcher, 6*(3), 7–9.
Lunenburg, F. C. (1999). Helping dreams survive: Dropout interventions. *Contemporary Education, 71*, 9–14.
Praport, H. (1993). Reducing high school attrition: Group counseling can help. *The School Counselor, 40*, 309–312.
Rumberger, R. W. (2001, January) *Why students drop out of school and what can be done*. Paper presented at the Harvard University conference "Dropouts in America," Boston. Retrieved January 14, 2002, from http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/dropouts/call_dropoutpapers.php
U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1992). *Workers with low earnings*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
Youth substance use varies by education. (1997, February 24). *Alcoholism & Drug Abuse Weekly, 9*(8), 8–9.