

YOUTH & YOU

Oregon Youth Development Council

Re-engaging Oregon's High School Dropouts

2016

Bill T. Hansell, M.S.
Youth Development Policy Analyst
Youth Development Council

RE-ENGAGING OREGON'S HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Oregon's Dropout Rate

The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) calculates a yearly event dropout rate for public high school students. The yearly event dropout rate is an unduplicated count of students, grades 9 – 12 as defined in [ORS 339.505](#), who have enrolled for the current school year or were enrolled in a previous school year and did not attend during the current school year, are not high school graduates, have not received a GED certificate, and have withdrawn from school. As a yearly event count, students are counted as dropouts each year that they drop out. For example, a student who drops out during the spring of the 2013-14 school year and then re-enrolls during the fall of the 2014-15 school year only to drop out again in the spring of that same school year will have been counted as a dropout in both the 2013-14 and 2014-15 school year dropout rates. Thus, for the purposes of estimating characteristics of older high school dropouts in the general population, it will be most telling to examine the characteristics of 12th grade students who drop out, as they are the least likely to re-enroll. Additionally, 12th grade students who drop out are typically a larger group of students than in all of the other high school grades combined.

Demographics

Over the course of the 2014-2015 school year, 7,649 students dropped out of high school in Oregon with an overall rate of 4.26%. According to official ODE counts and categories, these students were 74.13% combined disadvantage (explained below), 58.92% male, 53.93% economically disadvantaged, 19.98% students with disabilities, 14.63% homeless, and 8.82% English learners. Of the 7,649 students who dropped out, 4,631 were in the 12th grade, which means that over 60% of last year's dropouts were in what is typically considered to be the last year of high school before graduation. The remaining dropouts consisted of 439 students in 9th grade, 896 in 10th grade, and 1,683 in 11th grade. Effectively, the number of students who drop out doubles from 9th to 10th

RE-ENGAGING OREGON'S HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

grade, nearly doubles again from 10th to 11th grade, and then nearly triples from 11th to 12th grade.

Racial and Ethnic Disparities

The educational achievement gap is clearly reflected in the dropout rates. Every under-served minority group is over-represented as dropouts; they drop out at a higher rate than would be expected based on their percentage of the total high school population. Under-served races/ethnicities represent 25.39% of the high school population yet they comprise 33.42% of the dropouts. Students who are Hispanic/Latino comprise 25.42% of all dropouts, nearly five full percentage points over their representation in the high school population. Students who are African American are over-represented by over 1%, as are students who are American Indian/Alaska Native. Conversely, White and Asian students are under-represented as dropouts, by over five and two percentage points respectively.

Racial and ethnic disparities are even more concerning when examined by gender. Males comprise 51.49% of high school students yet represent 58.92% of dropouts. Males represent 66.3% of Asian dropouts, 63.7% of African American dropouts, and 62.1% of Hispanic/Latino dropouts. Only White and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander comprise a smaller proportion of male dropouts, but still well above the percentage of male high school students.

A greater proportion of female dropouts from under-served minority groups are economically disadvantaged in comparison with their male counter parts. Among female African American dropouts, 61.2% are economically disadvantaged, 61.6% of female Hispanic/Latino dropouts are economically disadvantaged, and 63.3% of female Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders are economically disadvantaged.

RE-ENGAGING OREGON'S HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Key Findings

In our analysis of youth who dropped out of Oregon high schools during the 2014-15 school year, an astounding 74.3% are students in the combined disadvantage category. The category refers to combining all student groups that are considered to be disadvantaged. Specifically, ODE defines the combined disadvantage category as students who are in any one or more of the following groups: Economically Disadvantaged, English learners, Students with Disabilities, Black (not of Hispanic origin), Hispanic/Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. In other words, nearly three quarters of the students who dropped out last year are either from an under-served race/ethnicity group, are economically disadvantaged, are students with a disability, do not speak English as their primary language, or any combination. Quite simply, the overwhelming majority of the students who drop out of Oregon high schools represent vulnerable and marginalized populations of society.

It is crucial to consider these figures in context to understand how dire the current findings indicate Oregon's high school student dropout numbers to be. Both the number of students who dropped out last year (7,649) and the dropout rate (4.26%) are higher than any other year in the last decade. Given that both the rate and count increased, it is not possible that these numbers represent an artifact of increased student enrollment.

Another critical finding is that increasing graduation rates and increasing dropout rates are not mutually exclusive. To state it plainly: an increase in graduation rates does not automatically lead to a decrease in dropout rates. Oregon's dropout and graduation rates are different, albeit related, issues. In fact, Oregon has improved its graduation rate over 5% from 68.66% in 2012-2013, which was the lowest rate of any reporting state

RE-ENGAGING OREGON'S HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

that year, to 73.82% in 2014-2015. Despite this improvement in graduation rate, Oregon currently has more dropouts and a higher dropout rate than it did in 2012-2013.

It seems logical that if the graduation rate increases the dropout rate would decrease and if the dropout rate decreases the graduation rate would increase, but that is not the case for several reasons. The dropout rate is an event count that considers all unduplicated dropout events in 9th through 12th grades in a given school year divided by the number of high school students enrolled in the fall. The graduation rate considers members of a cohort based on the first year of high school and counts how many graduated within 4 years divided by the number who did not, adjusted for various forms of attrition (transfers out of state, transfers out of the country, death, etc.).

Thus, dropout rates can increase or decrease in grades that do not comprise the graduation cohort. Consider this extreme example for purposes of illustration only: the same number of students could drop out as did last year, but not a single student from grades 9, 10, and 11. All 7,629 dropouts would be from the graduating cohort. If every other student in the cohort graduated, the dropout rate would remain unchanged at 4.26%, but the 4-year cohort graduation rate would increase by over 9% from 73.8% to 83.11%, likely moving it into the top half of all states.

Statement of Need

Nationally, it is estimated that for any single dropout aged 16-24 who remains disengaged from school and work, society experiences an immediate tax burden of \$13,900 per year, with an immediate social burden of \$37,450 per year in 2011 dollars (Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012). In addition, if a lasting re-engagement to school or work is not made prior to the age of 25, it is estimated that any single dropout will impose an additional future lifetime tax burden of \$170,740 and future lifetime social

RE-ENGAGING OREGON'S HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

burden of \$529,030 in 2011 dollars (Belfield et al., 2012). The tax and social burden that dropouts pose to Oregonians is immense.

The need represented by the young people who drop out of school is immediate and dire. There are simply too many dropouts. The most recent data available from the American Community Survey (ACS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2014 estimated that among 18 to 24 year olds living in Oregon, between 42,506 and 56,458 had not earned a high school diploma or a recognized equivalency. Whether the number is 7,649 (students who dropped out last year), 3,018 (dropouts in grades 9 to 11), 4,631(dropouts in grade 12), or 42,506 (young adults age 18 to 24 estimated to have dropped out): the number is too high.

Lost Human Capital

As sobering as these figures are, they do not take into account the loss in terms of human capital, which is harder to quantify but equally, if not more, important.

Dropping out of school significantly increases the chance of problem drug and alcohol use, and commission of violent crime in early adulthood (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). Disparities among dropouts along racial and ethnic lines have been found to be negatively related to health and prosperity measures across the life course (Woolf, 2007). Dropping out of high school significantly increases the likelihood of criminal activity and incarceration for all males, but the effect is greater for young men of color (Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Moretti, 2005). Western and Wildeman (2009) found a nearly 70 percent chance that an African American male without a high school diploma will be incarcerated by his mid-30s. Even when controlling for economic status, age, and race, dropping out of high school was found to be positively related to arrest through age 25 (Thornderry, Moore, & Christenson, 1985).

RE-ENGAGING OREGON'S HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Pregnancy is the number one reason for dropping out given by female students (Shuger, 2012). Nationally, 34% of students who become pregnant drop out and the rate is even higher for African American and Hispanic/Latina students (Perper, Peterson, & Manlove, 2010). Research indicates that dropouts have dramatically lower earnings over their lifetimes and substantially poorer health-related outcomes (Muennig, 2005; Rouse, 2005).

The need is urgent. The opportunity is now. Last year 7,649 students dropped out of Oregon high schools. Last year alone, 7,649 students increased their risk for a range of negative outcomes, from incarceration to poor health and disproportionately so. The need is dire, and more importantly, preventable.

Youth Development Council's Mandate

The Oregon Legislature has charged the Youth Development Council (YDC) with overseeing a unified, seamless system that provides services to school-age children through youth 24 years of age in a manner that supports positive youth development toward educational and career success. Specifically, the YDC advocates for the provision of services to Opportunity Youth ages 16-24 who are disengaged from the educational system and the workforce, and for Priority Youth, ages 6-15 who are at risk of disengaging and becoming Opportunity Youth. Students who have dropped out of high school are, by definition, at the very core of YDC's legislative mandate and positive youth development advocacy. Dropouts are at risk of engaging several state systems including juvenile justice, public health, and corrections, all of which can be the starting point for re-engagement efforts. Ideally, other systems and community based organizations can help mitigate the risk dropouts face and facilitate a full re-engagement with educational and workforce opportunity. The Youth Development Council is uniquely situated, and indeed mandated, to oversee the seamless delivery of

RE-ENGAGING OREGON'S HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

a coordinated statewide effort to re-engage Oregon's dropouts successfully with education and career.

Evidence-Based and Emerging Practices

There are numerous practices that research indicates are effective in re-engaging youth, and those highlighted below are but a few. An exhaustive list is beyond the scope of this paper, but the critical takeaway is that re-engagement is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Re-engagement efforts can and should be tailored to the unique needs of the individual. The following are some practices to consider:

Provide Low-Literacy Support: Low literacy skills are a major predictor of high school failure. Because literacy skills are so important to academic success, many educational options for out-of-school youth have minimum literacy requirements for participants (Balfanz, Herzog & MacIver, 2007).

Include Accelerated Learning and Credit Recovery: Students who are over age and severely under credited cannot spend multiple years earning a diploma. The task is daunting and unrealistic (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007).

Incorporate Connections to Postsecondary Education/Training: Successful re-engagement programs prepare students for well-paying, high-skilled jobs through postsecondary education and workforce training programs.

Have a Variety of Options to Address the Unique Needs of Dropouts: Students leave high school for numerous reasons and dropouts have unique needs and circumstances. Examples include providing non-traditional hours, providing year-round education, and having access to online learning (Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, 2015).

Employ a Positive Youth Development Approach: Increase resiliency factors which in turn increase positive outcomes (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Guerra & Bradshaw 2008).

RE-ENGAGING OREGON'S HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Return on Investment

As noted earlier, national estimates show that for each dropout 16 through 24 years of age who remains disengaged from school and work, society experiences an immediate tax burden of \$13,900 per year, and an immediate social burden of \$37,450 per year, in 2011 dollars (Belfield et al., 2012). Based on this estimate, the 7,649 students who dropped out of high school last year represent an immediate yearly tax and social burden of \$392,776,150. At a cost of \$2,000 per student, re-engaging last year's dropouts would cost \$15,298,000 for a yearly savings of over \$350 million. The return on investment regarding human capital is beyond financial measure.

Investing in the positive development of vulnerable and marginalized youth is an investment in families, schools, communities, local businesses, the state itself, and ultimately in future generations of Oregonians. The investment in re-engaging dropouts sends a strong and clear message: all of Oregon's youth have inherent value. Systems that allow youth to fall through the cracks in such large numbers are broken systems that impact all Oregonians. The mandate is clear: creating more opportunity to re-engage these youth is both a fiscal and moral imperative.

Actionable Policy Recommendations

It is critical that efforts to re-engage students who have dropped out and to improve on-time graduation rates be understood as distinct. As is currently the case, graduation rates can be improved while an increase in students dropping out co-occurs. Therefore, it is imperative that re-engagement efforts be expanded across the entire state. The legislature should approve funding for the Youth Development Council to oversee the creation of regional re-engagement centers and to provide further expansion of re-engagement efforts currently underway, primarily in the Portland metro area.

RE-ENGAGING OREGON'S HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Additionally, current policy and statutes must be analyzed with regard to the unintended consequences that make school and district re-engagement efforts prohibitive. Washington State recently examined such policies and enacted legislation that removed existing statutory barriers and perceived consequences that discouraged school districts from re-engagement efforts.

Successful re-engagement efforts will require cross systems' collaboration between community-based organizations, higher education, employment, and public health, to name a few. Therefore, it is critical that the Youth Development Council's legislative mandate to oversee a statewide unified system providing supports to Opportunity Youth be fully realized. To ensure the seamless delivery of equitable statewide re-engagement services, the Youth Development Council must coordinate these efforts.

References

- Alliance for Excellent Education. (2007). *About the crisis*. Retrieved from http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis/students
- Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., & Mac Iver, D.J. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist, 42*, 223-235.
- Belfield, C., Levin, H., & Rosen, R. (2012). *The economic value of opportunity youth*. Washington, DC: Corporation for National and Community Service and the White House Council for Community Solutions. Retrieved from <http://www.dol.gov/summerjobs/pdf/EconomicValue.pdf>
- Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. A. (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington DC: National Research Council.
- Guerra, N. G., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2008). Linking the prevention of problem behaviors and positive youth development: Core competencies for positive youth development and risk prevention. In N. G. Guerra & C. P. Bradshaw (Eds.), *Core competencies to prevent problem behaviors and promote positive youth development. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 122*, 1-17.
- Henry, K. L., Knight, K. E., & Thornberry, T. P. (2012). School disengagement as a predictor of dropout, delinquency, and problem substance use during adolescence and early adulthood. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 41*(2), 156-66.
- Lochner, L., & Moretti, E. (2004). The effect of education on crime: Evidence from prison inmates, arrests, and self-reports. *American Economic Review, 94*(1): 155-89.

RE-ENGAGING OREGON'S HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

- Moretti, E. (2005). Does education reduce participation in criminal activities? In H. M. Levin (Chair), Symposium on the social costs of inadequate education conducted at Teachers College. New York: Columbia University.
- Muennig, P. (2005). Health returns to education interventions. In H. M. Levin (Chair), Symposium on the social costs of inadequate education conducted at Teachers College. New York: Columbia University.
- Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. (2015). *Life as a teenager*. Retrieved from http://www.papartnerships.org/reports/droppingbackin/youth_reengagement.pdf
- Perper, K., Peterson, K., & Manlove, J. (2010). *Diploma attainment among teen mothers* (Child Trends Fact Sheet). Washington, DC. Retrieved from http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/child_trends-2010_01_22_FS_diplomaattainment.pdf
- Rouse, C. E. (2005). The labor market consequences of an inadequate education. In H. M. Levin (Chair), Symposium on the social costs of inadequate education conducted at Teachers College. New York: Columbia University.
- Shuger, L. (2012). *Teen pregnancy and high school dropout: What communities can do to address these issues*. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.
- Thornberry, T. P., Moore, M., & Christenson, R. L. (1985). The effect of dropping out of high school on subsequent criminal behavior. *Criminology*, 23(1), 3–18.
- Western, B., & Wildeman, C. (2009). The black family and mass incarceration. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 621, 221–42.

RE-ENGAGING OREGON'S HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Woolf, S. H. (2007). Giving everyone the health of the educated: An examination of whether social change would save more lives than medical advances. *American Journal of Public Health, 97*, 679–683.