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# When dropouts return to high school: not all students who drop out vanish from school enrollment rosters for good. This study sheds new light on the challenges students and districts face when dropouts re-enroll

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Public demands to increase high school graduation rates have put the nation's dropout crisis in the spotlight. More than one million students do not complete high school with their classmates each year. In California, fewer than 75 percent of grade 9 students graduate within four years of entering high school, mirroring the national picture.

The statistics are even more troubling for black and Hispanic students, who in many urban districts have a less than a 50 percent chance of graduating.

But what about those dropouts who try to re-enroll and make up their graduation requirements?

While considerable research and media attention focuses on dropouts as a group, comparatively little is known about those who return to high school. The conventional wisdom is that when students drop out they vanish from enrollment rosters for good. As it

turns out, this is only a partial picture of the complex dropout story.

The other part is described for the first time in a recent study, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences, which finds that dropping out is not necessarily a permanent outcome.

Our study provides scholars and policymakers with evidence to support what school leaders and dropouts have known for years--that, despite the obstacles, some dropouts return to high school and, among them, some earn their diploma. It sheds new light on these students and looks at the challenges districts face when dropouts reenroll.

Our study traces the enrollment trajectory of each first-time grade 9 student over five years, beginning in 2001 in San Bernardino City Unified School District, California's seventh largest district.

This longitudinal tracking, coupled with interviews of school leaders and re-enrollees themselves, allowed us to answer several previously overlooked questions: How many dropouts return to school and why? Which students drop out permanently and which ones re-enroll? And what are the academic and graduation outcomes for re-enrollees during the conventional four--or five-year high school time frame?

#### What we learned

Several important findings emerge from this study, which creates a baseline of understanding about both dropouts who reenroll and district challenges when these students return.

##### 1. About a third of dropouts return.

The study starts out in 2001-02 with 3,856 first-time grade 9 students enrolled in the district's seven high schools. Five years later, 1,735 of these students (45 percent) were standard graduates, having remained continuously enrolled and earning a regular high school diploma. But for 1,352 students, 35 percent of this grade 9 cohort, enrollment was interrupted by at least one dropout event.

Yet dropping out of high school was not necessarily a permanent outcome. Among the dropouts, 419 (31 percent) eventually re-enrolled in a district high school, and 77 (6 percent) graduated by 2005-06. Some 769 students in the cohort transferred out of the district before graduating or dropping out and were not tracked.

##### 2. Diverse circumstances affect dropping out and re-enrolling.

The reasons students drop out of high school are complex. Research shows that dropping out is less a singular event than a gradual process of disengagement from school that encompasses years of academic and behavioral difficulties. Interviews with students who had dropped out but then returned to school revealed both the "push" and "pull" factors

motivating their choices.

To explain dropping out, they told of experiences that push students out of school before graduation--academic struggles, boredom, and limited ways to make up failed course credits; or life circumstances that pull them in directions that stall completion--family crises, employment, pregnancy, untreated mental illness and gang pressure.

Similarly, these students revealed a few key turning points for re-enrolling. The primary reason for returning to school was their failure to secure employment. Without a diploma, dropouts were often pushed out of the labor market, motivating them to reenroll in school. It was the caring and persistence of school leaders who offered to immediately re-enroll and support them with counseling and academic assistance that pulled these dropouts back to high school.

### 3. Re-enrollment rates vary.

Our study also looked at re-enrollment rates by student background characteristics. Of particular interest, low re-enrollment rates were found for Hispanic students (28 percent), English language learners (26 percent), students older than age 14 in 2001 (24 percent for students 15 years old and 12 percent for students 16 years and older), and male students (28 percent), even though these subgroups were also more likely to drop out than other students.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

For these subgroups, low re-enrollment rates meant that dropout events became permanent exits from district high schools during the period covered by the study. In contrast, the highest re-enrollment rates were found for grade 9 dropouts (49 percent), black dropouts (43 percent), female dropouts (35 percent), and student dropouts not classified as English language learners (34 percent). The higher re-enrollment rates show how dropout events can be a temporary interruption rather than a permanent high school outcome.

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