

Brief 1: Tough Questions for Policymakers to Consider in Addressing the Dropout Problem

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This brief presents several of the questions that policymakers should consider when addressing the dropout problem. While there are no right or wrong answers, it is useful to recognize how differing priorities may shape individual approaches to addressing the problem.

1. Why lower the dropout rate?

Why do we want to lower the dropout rate? Is making sure students graduate from high school the same thing as making sure those students are educated and productive citizens? If not, which is more important?

2. What is our primary goal?

Do we care about dropouts, diplomas, education levels or all three? Most countries whose education systems are said to be better than that of the United States require fewer years of schooling. Instead they concentrate resources to ensure students can read and do basic math by middle school and then offer students good vocational options instead of mandatory high school.

3. What is driving our concerns?

What aspect of the dropout problem do we really want to fix? Is it the sheer magnitude that bothers us, or are the racial, ethnic and class disparities our primary concern? The answer may have a significant impact on what we do. Would we be satisfied if the overall rate decreased but the disparities remained (or even increased)?

4. What is the impact of education policy?

How much does education policy really affect a

student's decision to drop out, as compared to parental, peer, societal and economic factors? Is it possible to devise legislation to effectively drive down the dropout rate? Might we do more for North Carolina by focusing on making sure every student can read and knows basic math facts by third grade?

5. What kinds of programs would we endorse?

- a. Would we support a program that increased the overall graduation rate by focusing resources on kids who are on the margin of dropping out and "giving up" on more problematic kids?
- b. If it were proven that providing "problem" kids with material incentives (such as \$50 a week, gift certificates for music or movies, etc.) prevented them from dropping out, would we endorse such a program?
- c. Suppose research showed that shifting resources away from extracurricular activities, art and music classes, or Advanced Placement classes to remedial reading and math classes either increased or decreased the dropout rate, would we endorse such a change in the education policy?

6. What are the consequences of raising the compulsory attendance age?

What would be the unintended consequences of inducing marginal students to stay in school to graduate or of raising the age at which students were allowed to leave school from 16 to 17 or 18? Might greater numbers of marginal students have a negative impact on higher performing students or on teacher retention? It is possible

that keeping more of these students in traditional school settings will sap time and effort of teachers who could otherwise engage in more productive activities with higher achieving students. Is that acceptable?

7. Are there acceptable alternatives to high school diplomas?

It could be that high school students in other countries do better than ours (and fewer drop out) because they only let “good” students go to regular high schools. Instead of trying to raise the graduation rate, might we be better off if we lowered the mandatory education age, became more selective about who we let into high school and created more opportunities for vocational training?

8. How much flexibility can we allow in practice?

What type of programs do we prefer?
Accountability-type systems where we set clear educational goals and criteria and allow teachers and administrators to come up with strategies?
Or do we want legislation that mandates specific strategies that are proven to have a positive result?

9. What are we willing to pay?

How much are we willing to pay for programs that reduce the dropout rate? Are we willing to raise taxes or take existing dollars from other kinds of programs? How much should we spend? Or do we believe it can be done within the current budget at no additional cost?

10. How do we define success?

What amount of dropout reduction would we consider a “success?” In North Carolina, only 68 percent of the students who entered ninth grade in 2002-2003 graduated four years later. What if, as the result of new legislation, the percentage increased to 75 percent? To 80 percent? To 90 percent? What would satisfy you? What would satisfy your constituents?