



TRUANCY AND DROPOUT PREVENTION POLICIES: STRATEGIES FOR VIRGINIA'S YOUTH

**Virginia Family Impact Seminar
The Public Policy Center
Virginia Commonwealth University
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Executive Summary

Dropping out of school before graduating has been an issue in American high schools and communities for generations. Historically, dropouts were able to work on the land or get jobs in factories that kept them economically competitive with other workers. Over time, however, changes in the workforce and the overall economy have led to fewer fiscally viable options for people without a high school degree.

As options for dropouts have decreased, teachers, school administrators, communities and policy makers have sought to understand the factors that lead to dropping out of school.

Understanding what causes truancy (often the precursor to dropping out) and dropouts could lead to interventions that might work to keep youth in school. Most researchers agree that the decision to drop out of school is made in response to a combination of factors over the student's lifetime. We've learned that the factors that influence a student's decision to dropout are associated with the student's family, such as

- Living in poverty or in a lower socioeconomic group
- Large family size
- A chronically unstable home environment as well as out of home placements, such as foster care
- High family mobility and multiple school changes
- A dropout history of one of the parents or a sibling
- Parent's lack of engagement with the educational process

Other factors linked to the decision to drop out of high school are more closely tied to the individual student, and include

- A failure to master elementary mathematics and reading
- Grade retention at any level
- Truancy and other delinquent behaviors
- Pregnancy or fathering a child while in school
- Substance use
- Disengagement from school

School related factors are also influential to the process of dropping out and research has noted the following school-based concerns, many of which are related to one another

- The transition from middle school to high school
- Large schools and high student-teacher ratios
- Curriculum issues
- Increased emphasis on standardized testing

Finally, dropping out of high school comes at a great cost to the individual student and the larger community. Namely, compared to those who have graduated or earned a GED, high school dropouts are

- More likely to be unemployed or under-employed
- More likely to be living in poverty
- More likely to be receiving public assistance such as cash assistance and medical assistance
- More likely to commit crimes or be incarcerated
- Less likely to contribute to the labor force in terms of productivity

This briefing book presents a look at current research on truancy and dropout prevention with an eye towards interventions and their potential impacts in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

- In **Brief 1**, Judge Frank Somerville provides a contextual view of the truancy and dropout problem, setting the stage for
- **Brief 2**, in which Professor John Tyler examines dropout prevention programs explaining “what works.”

- In **Brief 3**, MRDC education expert, Janet Quint, addresses five challenges to implementing school reform.
- These briefs are followed by a summary of information about Virginia and the work that the Virginia Commission on Youth is doing to address the truancy and dropout prevention problem in the Commonwealth.
- Also included in the briefing book is a short summary of studies in other parts of the nation that have addressed this common problem followed by a glossary of terms that are encountered in documents that address trancies and dropouts.

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