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MAKING DROPOUT VISIBLE:
ASSESSING THE PROBLEM & CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGE
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Weak Promoting Power, Minority Concentration, & High Schools with Severe Dropout Rates in Urban America

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Abstract

This paper examines the location and characteristics of high schools with severe dropout rates in urban America. It uses a measure called promoting power--which compares the number of seniors in a school to the number of freshmen four year earlier--to identify high schools in which the majority of freshmen in the classes of 1993, 1996, and 1999 did not make it to 12th grade on time. The analysis presented in this paper strongly suggests that about half of the high schools in the nation's 35 largest cities have severe dropout rates. It further shows that big high schools with weak promoting power and by implication high dropout rates are found in almost all of the largest cities but they are particularly concentrated in Midwestern and Northern industrial cities and Texas. In these districts more than half of the high school students attend schools in which the senior class has 50% or fewer members than the entering class three or four years earlier. Urban minorities are disproportionately found in high schools with weak promoting power and by inference high drop-out rates. Throughout the 1990s in the nation's largest 35 cities, if a school was large (more than 900 students) and attended almost exclusively by minorities (90% or more) in two out of three cases it had weak promoting power. In 29 of the nation's largest 100 cities 50% or more of minority students in the class of 99 attend schools that had 50% or fewer seniors than freshmen. In eleven of these cities the figure climbs to 75% or more of minority students. The analysis suggests that major inroads could be made into reducing the urban and minority drop-out rate if between 300 to 400 schools located primarily in 20 to 25 cities are transformed from failing high schools into strong and transformative learning institutions. Reforming, redesigning, and dramatically improving 400 high schools is a considerable challenge but it is not beyond the bounds of human agency. It would, however, entail a far greater concentration of both human and financial resources in a relatively small number of districts than is currently being contemplated on the state and federal level.

Introduction

High Schools with high dropout rates in the United States often go unnoticed. This in part is caused by how dropout statistics are reported, in part results from the fact that more attention is often paid to test scores as the ultimately indicator of school success, and in part reflects a wider belief that few students dropout. In urban America, however, dropping out of high school remains a common phenomenon, particularly among minority students. This quiet crisis fuels the urban underclass. Unemployment rates for young adults in the nation's major cities who do not have a high school diploma can reach 50%. The majority of young adults who are incarcerated in urban America pass through high poverty neighborhood high schools in which drop-ping out is often the norm. In order to reverse this phenomenon it is essential to know where to target reform efforts and understand the magnitude and type of resources that are needed. The first step in the process is to identify the high schools in urban America which have high drop-out rates. We attempt to further this process and extend our earlier work by first examining the number, location, and student populations of high schools that had weak promoting power or 50% fewer seniors than freshmen throughout the 1990's in the nation's major cities. It then uses the greater New York metropolitan area as a case study to further explore the relationship between minority concentration and weak promoting power, and to detail the level of educational challenge faced by high poverty non-selective high schools with high dropout rates.

Balfanz/Legers, 5/29/03

Table 4: Number and Percent of Sampled High Schools with Promoting Power of 50% or less by District:

Class of 1999 in 100 Largest Cities-

*Excludes Plano, TX; Glendale, AZ; and Miami and Hialeah, FL.

SCHOOL DISTRICT	CITY	STATE	POPULATION RANK	Total # of Sampled High Schools	# of Sampled High Schools w/ PP <50%	% of Sampled High Schools w/ PP <50%
INDIANAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS	Indianapolis	IN	12	5	5	100.0
ST LOUIS CITY	St. Louis	MO	49	8	7	87.50
CLEVELAND CITY SD	Cleveland	OH	33	15	13	86.67
BIRMINGHAM CITY	Birmingham	AL	71	9	7	77.78
HOUSTON ISD	Houston	TX	4	25	19	76.00
DALLAS ISD	Dallas	TX	8	24	18	75.00
MILWAUKEE SCH DIST	Milwaukee	WI	19	15	11	73.33
ATLANTA CITY	Atlanta	GA	39	11	8	72.73
DETROIT CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT	Detroit	MI	10	25	18	72.00
ROCHESTER CITY SD	Rochester	NY	79	7	5	71.43
CADDO PARISH SCHOOL BOARD NEW	Schreveport	LA	88	10	7	70.00
YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	New York	NY	1	105	70	66.67
RICHMOND COUNTY	Richmond County	GA	97	9	6	66.67
PHILADELPHIA CITY SD	Philadelphia	PA	5	34	22	64.71
CITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST	Chicago	IL	3	61	39	63.93
CINCINNATI CITY SD	Cincinnati	OH	54	8	5	62.50
OKLAHOMA CITY NASHVILLE-DAVIDSON SD	Oklahoma City	OK	29	8	5	62.50
DAVIDSON SD	Nashville-Davidson	TN	25	13	8	61.54
AUSTIN ISD	Austin	TX	16	10	6	60.00
JERSEY CITY	Jersey City	NJ	72	5	3	60.00
TOLEDO CITY SD	Toledo	OH	56	7	4	57.14
PINELLAS COUNTY SCHOOL DIST	St. Petersburg	FL	68	15	8	53.33
BALTIMORE CITY	Baltimore	MD	17	16	8	50.00
DENVER COUNTY	Denver	CO	24	10	5	50.00
OAKLAND UNIFIED	Oakland	CA	41	6	3	50.00