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Why High School Students Leave School Early: Risk Factors

The most important student outcome measure for senior high schools is graduation rate. Most current national estimates place high school graduation rate at approximately 70 percent with lower rates occurring in inner city schools attended by predominately minority student populations. This Information Capsule examines reasons why students leave school early and do not graduate on time. Trends in dropout and retention rates are also examined.

Research Services has prepared a series of three research reports concerning high school graduation. These reports address the interrelated areas of graduation rate, dropout rate, and grade retention. This particular Information Capsule examines trends in dropout rates and retention rates.

Many Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) students who fail to graduate from high school in four years do so because they either drop out of senior high or are retained prior to graduating. As shown in Table 1 and Table 2, Black, Non-Hispanic and Hispanic students drop out of high school and are retained in grades 9 -12 at higher rates than White, Non-Hispanic students. These trends correspond to what is observed nationally.

Districtwide dropout rates have generally declined over the past three cohort groups (e.g., 2001-2005, 2002-2006, and 2003-2007) across all three of the major racial/ethnic student groups. In fact, the dropout rate for the last two cohort groups declined substantially or by two percentage points (i.e., from 14.1% to 12.1%) for Hispanic students and by 2.5 percentage points (i.e., from 14.4% to 11.9%) for Black, Non-Hispanic students.

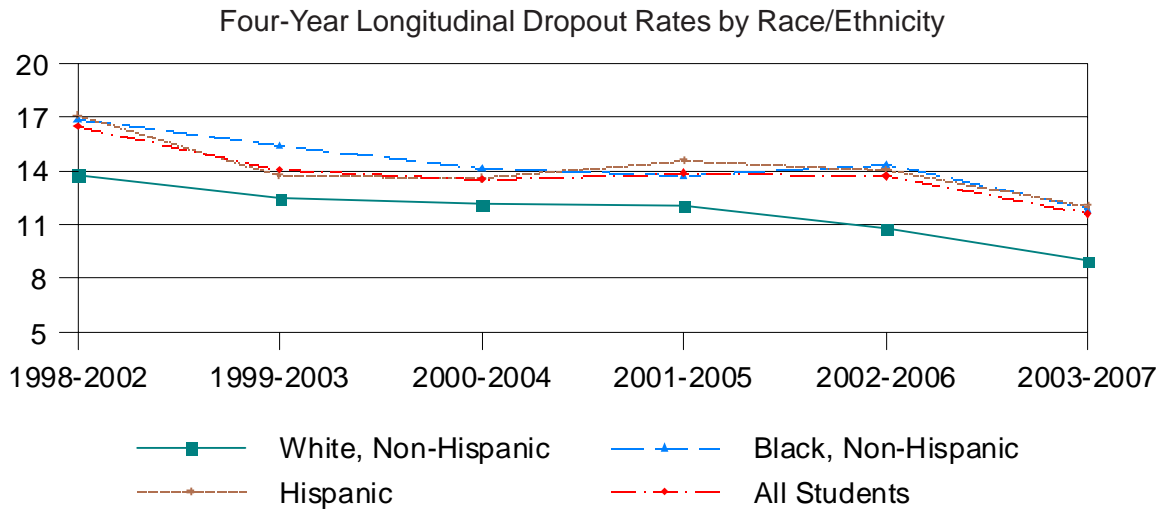
Table 1

Four-Year Longitudinal Dropout Rates by Race/Ethnicity for the Past Six M-DCPS Cohorts

Group	1998-2002	1999-2003	2000-2004	2001-2005	2002-2006	2003-2007
White, Non-Hispanic	13.8	12.5	12.2	12.1	10.8	9.0
Black, Non-Hispanic	16.9	15.4	14.2	13.8	14.4	11.9
Hispanic	17.1	13.8	13.6	14.6	14.1	12.1
All Students	16.5	14.1	13.5	13.9	13.7	11.6

Source: Miami-Dade County Public Schools, *Dropout and Graduation Rates*; May 2004, May 2005, February 2006, March 2007, February 2008, Office of Assessment, Research, and Data Analysis.

Figure 1



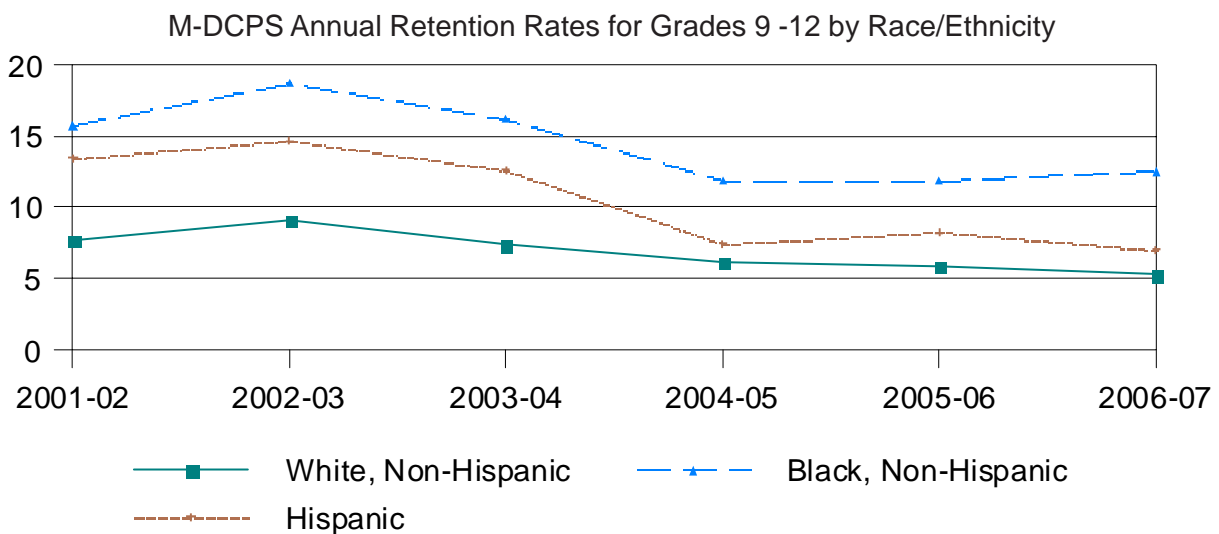
The majority of students retained in grades 9 through 12 are retained while in 9th grade. The transition from 9th to 10th grade has been reported to be a particularly vulnerable time for students. It has been estimated that over one-third of all dropout occurs between 9th and 10th grades (Hupfeld 2007).

Table 2

M-DCPS Annual Retention Rates for Grades 9 -12 by Race/Ethnicity

Group	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
White, Non-Hispanic	7.7	9.1	7.3	6.1	5.8	5.2
Black, Non-Hispanic	15.7	18.7	16.2	11.8	11.9	12.5
Hispanic	13.4	14.6	12.6	7.4	8.2	7.0

Figure 2

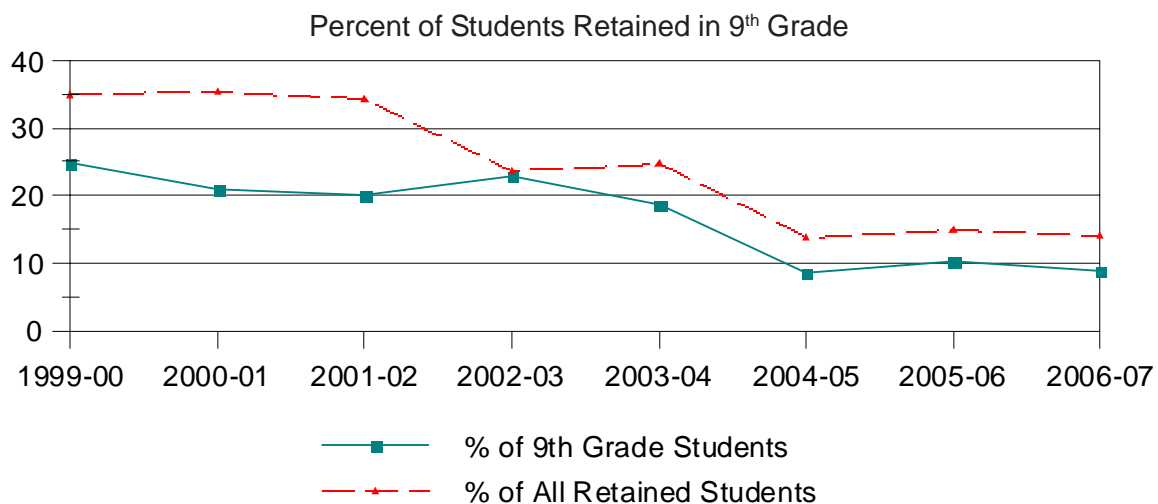


The proportion of 9th grade students retained in grade has decreased dramatically over the past eight years from a high of 24.9 percent or 7,823 students in 1999-00 to a low of 8.7 percent or 3,109 students in 2004-05 (Table 3). The contribution these 9th grade students made to the total of all retained students districtwide has also decreased since the Florida Department of Education instituted the 2002-03 law requiring 3rd grade students to read at or above FCAT Level 2 for promotion purposes. Prior to 2002-03, 9th grade students comprised approximately one-third of all retained students annually and after 2002-03 this declined substantially given the large number of third grade students who were retained in the district. Although 9th grade students are less likely to be retained currently, retaining students in any grade can have negative effects especially considering the dire consequences grade retention has on school dropout. Factors contributing to low graduation rates will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Table 3
Percent of Students Retained in 9th Grade

Group	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
% of 9 th Grade Students	24.9	20.9	20.0	22.9	18.6	8.7	10.2	8.8
% of All Retained Students	35.1	35.6	34.4	23.7	24.8	14.0	15.1	14.2

Figure 3



Risk Factors and Prediction

Leaving school before graduating is described in the literature as a long developmental or insidious process of disengagement from school which can start very early in life and builds over time. The final act of dropping out is rarely due to a single factor but rather to a pattern of circumstances that may begin with inadequate parental care and end with absenteeism and below average academic performance.

In 2007, the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University examined 25 years of research literature published from 1980 to December 31, 2005. The resulting report, "Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report" provides one of the most thorough treatments of the subject. The report discusses disengagement from school as being related to four facets of a student's life including individual, family, school, and community factors. The four school and family factors found to significantly impact dropouts in all three educational levels (i.e., elementary, middle, and senior high) most included low achievement, retention/overage for grade, poor attendance, and low socioeconomic status (SES).

Some readers may object to the inclusion of low SES as a contributing factor to leaving school early. However, it has been one of the most enduring findings from the available research on the subject of dropout over the years. Rothstein (2008) commented, "It's no cop-out to acknowledge the effects of socioeconomic disparities on student learning. Rather, it's a vital step to closing the achievement gap." He went on to list a few of the associated obstacles and how poverty can impede learning.

- no health insurance nor routine preventative medical and dental care results in more school absences
- lower birth weight and greater incidence of lead poisoning, and iron-deficiency anemia negatively effects cognition and academic performance
- higher residential mobility rate yields diminished continuity of instruction
- less verbal stimulation at a young age can yield decreased reading readiness
- single-parent families can provide less adult attention and fewer adult role models which may interfere with the socialization process
- greater incidence of asthma leading to sleeplessness, irritability, and less exercise

Based on these findings, Rothstein drew the following conclusion relative to education policy.

"Closing or substantially narrowing achievement gaps requires combining school improvement with reforms that narrow the vast socioeconomic inequalities in the United States. Without such a combination, demands (like those of No Child Left Behind) that schools fully close the achievement gaps not only will remain unfulfilled, but also will cause us to foolishly and unfairly condemn our schools and teachers."
(p. 8)

Table 4 contains information regarding the other 24 most significant risk factors identified in the 2007 literature review conducted by the National Dropout Prevention Center.

A number of other factors associated with dropping out of school were identified in the 2007 National Dropout Prevention Center report in addition to those factors listed in Table 4 and they are provided below.

- High mobility or changing and/or attending multiple schools by virtue of multiple residences
- High family stress levels due to financial or health problems, substance abuse, etc.
- Minimal monitoring of child's every day, homework, and school-related activity
- Large school size particularly for low SES schools that risk becoming "dropout factories"
- Percentage of low achieving students in math
- Standards-based reforms and high-stakes testing which can produce an increased number of students retained in grade particularly for the most at-risk students
- Lack of a relevant and interesting high school curriculum
- School policies resulting in increased failing grades, expulsions or suspensions

Table 4
Significant Factors by School Level*

Risk Category and Risk Factor	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Individual Background Characteristics			
• Has a learning disability or emotional disturbance		✓	✓
Early Adult Responsibilities			
• High number of work hours		✓	✓*
• Parenthood			✓*
Social Attitudes, Values, & Behavior			
• High-risk peer group		✓*	✓
• High-risk social behavior		✓*	✓
• Highly socially active outside of school			✓
School Performance			
• Low achievement	✓*	✓*	✓*
• Retention/over-age for grade	✓*	✓*	✓*
School Engagement			
• Poor attendance	✓*	✓*	✓*
• Low educational expectations		✓*	✓*
• Lack of effort		✓	✓
• Low commitment to school		✓	✓*
• No extracurricular participation		✓	✓*
School Behavior			
• Misbehavior	✓	✓	✓*
• Early aggression	✓	✓	
Family Background Characteristics			
• Low socioeconomic status	✓*	✓*	✓*
• High family mobility		✓*	
• Low education level of parents	✓	✓	✓*
• Large number of siblings	✓		✓
• Not living with both natural parents	✓	✓	✓*
• Family disruption	✓		
Family Engagement/Commitment to Education			
• Low educational expectations		✓*	
• Sibling has dropped out		✓	✓
• Low contact with school		✓*	
• Lack of conversations about school		✓*	✓

Key: ✓ indicates that the risk factor was found to be significantly related to dropout at this school level in one study. ✓ indicates that the risk factor was found to be significantly related to dropout at this school level in two or more studies.

Taken from: National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University and Communities in Schools (2007). Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report, College of Health, Educational, and Human Development, Clemson University.

Since dropping out of school is a developmental process there are red flags along the way that should warn school administrators. The National Dropout Center at Clemson University found that students who dropped out of school became alienated from school approximately three years before actually dropping out. Seventy percent of the students reported they lost interest in school by 9th or 10th grade. They began not being able to get up in the morning, they skipped classes, took three-hour lunches, etc.

Early-warning systems can identify potential dropouts or at-risk students early in their educational careers. Such systems should include social background, academic performance, and educational engagement indicators similar to those discussed in this and other Information Capsules and Research Briefs distributed by Research Services. Students identified by the early warning system can participate in dropout prevention programs to increase their chances of graduating from high school.

In conclusion, the failure to graduate is generally a long path of gradual disengagement from school which can begin with inconsistent parental care during the preschool years to low school achievement and eventual grade retention. It is up to schools to identify students on such a path as early as possible with preschool not being too early. Intervention should target social skills and school readiness before entrance to school. Two encouraging signs for students attending public schools in Miami-Dade County has been the decline in dropout rates and decreasing numbers of students retained in ninth grade. A subsequent Information Capsule will address prediction and dropout intervention strategies in greater detail.

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