

Examining Dropout Policies and Trends for Students with and without  
Disabilities in Nebraska Secondary Schools

By

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DISSERTATION TITLE

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Examining Dropout Policy and Trends for Students with and without  
Disabilities in Nebraska Secondary Schools

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University of Nebraska, 2003

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Reducing dropout rates for students with and without disabilities represents a major challenge for public schools. According to national statistics, students continue to drop out of school at an alarming rate, and students with disabilities are of particular concern. It is difficult to determine the precise extent of dropouts because individual schools, school districts, and State Departments of Education often use different definitional criteria and calculation methods. These disparities result in contradictory interpretations of how many students drop out of school. Nevertheless, there is consensus that many students are dropping out of school; although specific reasons for them doing so remains elusive. Finally, there is minimal research validating dropout prevention programs that decrease dropout rates for students with and without disabilities.

This purpose of this study was to survey Nebraska secondary school principals (n = 293) to examine how they calculated dropout rates, risk factors associated with students who dropout of school, and prevention strategies used to decrease dropout rates. This information was gathered for students with and without disabilities who drop out of school.

Results indicated that most principals used the event method to calculate dropout rates. Academic failure, lack of involvement in extracurricular activities, and excessive absenteeism were major predictors that influenced a student's decision to drop out of school. These results were the same for students with and without disabilities; however, the impact they had on each population was slightly different. Principals also reported that they used the same dropout prevention strategies for students with and without disabilities: (a) counseling, (b) career awareness and (c) preparation activities, and vocational education/technical training. However, strategies were implemented at slightly different rate for each of the groups.

These results may form the basis for Nebraska schools adopting a common dropout definition and calculation method. In addition, results may provide greater understanding as to why students drop out of school and effective prevention strategies to decrease dropout rates for students with and without disabilities.

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An unknown author once said, "A wise person knows that there is something to be learned from everyone."

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PREVIEW



## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Reducing the number of high school dropouts represents a major challenge facing not only the educational system, but also society as a whole. Researchers have reported that students who drop out of school are at least 40% more likely to be unemployed than high school graduates and face a lower lifelong earning potential (Bachman, O'Malley, & Johnson, 1978; Sinclair, 1994). In addition to the impact of low employability, the probability of adjudication is 220% more likely for youth offenders who have a learning disability and who have dropped out of school (Murray, 1976). Sinclair (1994) reported that 73% of students identified with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) who dropped out of school were arrested within three to five years compared to 33% of those students who had graduated. Similarly, Croninger and Lee (2001) found that students who dropped out of school had a higher incidence of criminal activity and had a greater likelihood of health problems than those who graduated from high school. The financial consequences associated with this phenomena run in excess of \$145 billion dollars each year and is reflected in both lost tax dollars and increased social service costs in our country (Bartnick & Parkay, 1991; Rumberger, 1987).

In an effort to address this issue, educational reform and academic excellence became political buzzwords in the 1980s and a greater emphasis than ever before was placed on reducing the number of students dropping out of

school (Phelan, 1987). In 1990, the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) began addressing the issue of students with disabilities who dropped out of school by requiring state-level reporting on how many students were leaving school prior to graduation (Thompson-Hoffman & Hayward, 1990). Former President Bush initiated federal legislation to establish a national goal of 90% high school graduation rate by the year 2000 (Thompson-Hoffman, & Hayward, 1990) and the Council of Chief State School Officers set an even loftier goal of 100% high school graduation rate by the year 2000 (Sinclair, 1994).

School dropout rates have varied across the United States and tended to be higher in areas associated with specific risk factors. These risk factors included youth populations from large urban centers, lower income families, minority backgrounds, single parent households, and those identified with a disability (Sinclair, 1994). The majority of these risk factors are difficult to address systematically through improved educational policies and procedures.

Students with disabilities have dropped out of school at a greater rate than their non-disabled peers (Lichtenstein, 1993; Mitchell, 1997; Sinclair, 1994; Thompson-Hoffman & Hayward, 1990; Wagner, 1991). Sinclair (1994) reported data from three studies between 1992 and 1993 that showed students with disabilities were on average 11% more likely to dropout of school than students without disabilities. This information is not surprising because the ethnographic risk factors are more prevalent among students with disabilities than those without disabilities (Butler-Nalin & Padilla, 1989). Wagner (1991) collected

longitudinal data for a National Transitional Study of Special Education Students and found that 60% of students dropping out of school had disabilities. Of particular concern were students with high incidence disabilities, including behavioral disorders, learning disabilities, mild mental disabilities, and speech and language impairments. Students with behavioral disorders and learning disabilities had the highest dropout rates with 50% and 32%, respectively. In a follow up study, Sinclair (1994) found even higher figures with 59% of students with behavioral disorders and 36% of students with learning disabilities dropping out of school. The dropout rate for students in other high incidence areas included 36% for students identified with mild mental disabilities and 33% for students with speech and language impairments (Bulter-Nalin & Padilla, 1989). Bulter-Nalin and Padilla (1989) also reported that deaf and blind students, who are considered to have a low incidence disability, dropped out at a significantly lower rate (8%) but tended to have one of the highest age out rates (49%). They defined age out as a special education student who exceeded the maximum age of attendance, which is through the 21<sup>st</sup> year.

#### *Calculation Methods*

It is difficult to determine the severity of the dropout problem without establishing a uniform calculation method (Bartnick & Parkay 1991; Ernst, 1978; Hammack, 1986; Morrow, 1986; Phelan, 1987; Rumberger, 1987; Sinclair, 1994). Data cannot be compared and strategies evaluated without using a consistent calculation method. In addition, without a common definition of a dropout, the

calculations schools use to generate dropout rates may be manipulated to represent almost any result the school desires (Sinclair, 1994).

There are three calculation methods, noted in the literature, used for computing dropout rates: event, cohort, and status (Bulter-Nalin & Padilla, 1989; Rumberger, 1997; Sinclair, 1994). The event method measures the proportion of students who drop out of school in a single year (i. e., "What percentage of students dropped out this year?"). The cohort method, or longitudinal approach, involves following a group of students who are expected to graduate together across the secondary school years (i. e., "What percentage of students entering the X grade in a certain school district drop out after Y years?"). Sinclair (1994) defined the final calculation method as the status rate. This method measures the proportion of students who have not completed high school and are not enrolled on a specific day. However, other authors do not cite this method of calculation. The following example is used to illustrate differences between the event and cohort methods. A principal reports that 80% of seniors graduated from school whereas the district that follows a class of students from their freshmen year in school to their graduation reports a 66% dropout rate. Both computations are accurate; yet illustrate very different pictures of the severity of the problem. Because the cohort method uses data collected over long periods of time, it is generally considered to better represent a school's graduation and dropout rates than the other two methods (Morrow, 1986; Wolman, Bruininks, & Thurlow, 1989).

Differences in calculating the dropout rate extend beyond local schools to both the state and federal levels. For example, the State of Nebraska calculates the dropout rate using the cohort method, including grades 7 through 12 (Nebraska Department of Education, Statistics and Facts about Nebraska Schools, 2002). The U.S. Census Bureau computes the dropout rate as the proportion of a given age cohort that is not enrolled in school and has not completed high school inclusive of grades 9 through 12 (Rumberger, 1987). These computational differences are due to each agency wanting to answer different questions. The Census statistic provides information about the dropout rate, whereas the State's focus was on how many students are graduating.

Beyond the inconsistencies in computing the dropout rate, researchers and school personnel often do not agree on the definition of a high school dropout (Hammack, 1986; Morrow, 1986; Sinclair, 1994). In some instances "dropout" may refer to youths who are not currently enrolled in a state approved school and have not graduated from high school at the predicted time. In other instances "dropout" refers to youths who are studying for the General Educational Development (GED) exam or who have received a high school equivalency certificate (Rumberger, 1987). In addition, Rumberger (1987) reported a lack of consensus in regards to the number of unexcused absences necessary to suspect that a student had dropped out of school.

Reconciling the differences in calculation method and definition is critical to address the issue of preventing students from dropping out of school (Sinclair, 1994). Sinclair (1994), concluded that until a uniform method can be agreed

upon, each dropout figure should include a notation describing the computational method and actual definition used to classify the reason a student exited school. This will allow for comparisons between data and dropout prevention programs to be evaluated for effectiveness.

### *Reasons Why Students Drop Out*

The specific reason why students drop out of school remains elusive to researchers. Nevertheless, some risk factors have been well documented in the literature and are the same for students with and without disabilities who drop out of school.

First is the lack of academic success as a primary reason both students with and without disabilities fail to graduate from high school (Bull, Salyer, & Montgomery, 1990; Butler-Nalin & Padilla, 1989; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Kaplan, Peck, & Kaplan, 1997; Lichtenstein, 1993; Phelan, 1987; Rumberger, 1987; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002; Sinclair, 1994; Slavin & Madden, 1989; Smith, 1986; Thompson-Hoffman & Hayward, 1990; Wagner, 1991). Wagner (1991) reported that 16.7% of students with disabilities who failed a course dropped out of school. Kaplan et al. (1997) reported that poor academic performance contributed to a negative self-concept in which students perceived teachers to be rejecting. They also reported that, as a consequence, the students disengaged from learning. Smith (1986) reported that 36% of students with disabilities who dropped out of school said they left school because of getting poor grades. The National Longitudinal Transition Study conducted by OSEP (2002) reported that

absenteeism and course failure were potent precursors for students with disabilities dropping out of school.

Second, and related to lack of academic success, researchers have reported that grade retention lead to both students with and without disabilities dropping out of school (Bartnick & Parkay, 1991; Finn, 1993; Roderick, 1994; Slavin & Madden, 1989; Thompson-Hoffman & Hayward, 1990). Thompson-Hoffman and Hayward (1990) reported that students with learning disabilities were particularly impacted by grade repetition and Roderick (1994) found that nearly 80% of students, without disabilities, who repeated a grade, dropped out of school. Further, retention in one grade increased the risk of students without disabilities dropping out of school by 40% to 50% and being retained two grade levels increased the risk to 90% (Roderick, 1994).

Third, experiencing academic failure and possible grade retention may have contributed to some students disengaging (i. e., becoming uninvolved in school activities or functions) from the educational environment. The process of disengagement is cumulative and may begin as early as first grade (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Further students' decision to disengage is progressive rather than instantaneous or based on some discrete occurrence (Finn, 1993; Wagner 1991). Students having multiple unexcused absences, minimal involvement in extracurricular activities, and involvement in negative social interactions with both their peers and school personnel have reflected this progression (Finn, 1993).

Wagner (1991) found that only 5% of students with disabilities dropped out of school when they missed less than 10 days during the school year. However,

this number doubled when students were absent between 21 and 30 days and reached 27% when they were absent over 30 days. These figures make tacit sense considering most of learning throughout school is cumulative. What is learned in one grade will build on past knowledge and assist in future learning. Therefore, increased absences interfered with students' education and, consequently, negatively impacted their academic success (Finn, 1993).

Fourth, disengagement from school has been associated among students who fail to participate in extracurricular school activities (Phelan, 1987). Adults with disabilities who had dropped out of school reported that they had not been actively involved in extracurricular activities since elementary or early middle school (Finn, 1993). Lack of involvement in school activities may typify students' feelings of alienation from teachers and the school community. A study conducted by Thompson-Hoffman and Hayward (1990) found that 62% of high school students with a learning disability who dropped out did not participate in extracurricular activities. On the other hand, students who had participated in extracurricular activities experienced positive social interactions with peers and teachers, thereby increasing their incentive to attend school (Cronginger & Lee, 2001). These relationships provide support and encouragement when a student is struggling academically.

Factors that place students with and without disabilities at risk for dropping out of school can be grouped into two main categories: academic failure and disengagement from the educational environment. These risk factors tend to impact students with and without disabilities in a similar negative manner.



The risk factors discussed thus far have been associated with the school environment and students' behaviors that occur within it. However, there are other factors that have increased the likelihood of students dropping out of school. Family demographics play a prominent role in whether a student will drop out of high school or graduate. For example, a yearly income below \$12,000, a parent who has dropped out of school, and single parent households are prominent risk factors; as too are being male and Hispanic (Bull, Salyer, & Montgomery, 1990; Bulter-Nalin & Padilla, 1989; Lichtenstein, 1993; Phelan, 1987; Rumberger, 1987; Rylance, 1997; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002; Sinclair, 1994; Slavin & Madden 1989; Thompson-Hoffman & Hayward, 1990; Wagner, 1991; Wolman et al., 1989). Although these risk factors are important, the present study focused on risk factors within the control of school personnel policies, and procedures.

### *Dropout Prevention*

Once students are identified with a risk factor, then it may be possible to develop prevention strategies to reduce the rate with which they drop out of school. Students with disabilities receive more intensive educational services and school personnel may be in a position to have a greater positive impact on their dropout rates than for students without disabilities. Ernst (1978) found that early identification of potential dropouts alerted schools to develop appropriate remediation and/or intervention services. Finn (1993) concluded that interventions to increase a student's participation in school programming and, consequently, decrease dropout rates should begin in early elementary school.

Similarly, Sinclair (1998) reported that students who were supported and monitored through the use of the Check and Connect program were more engaged in school and on track to graduate than students who did not participate in this program. The Check and Connect program continually assessed a student's level of engagement in school and provided a mentor to help students reengage in school programming (Sinclair, 1994).

Other recommendations for dropout prevention programming have included the following: (a) avoiding retention, (b) tailoring programs to students' needs, (c) creating a mix of academic and extracurricular experiences, (d) providing students opportunities for success in a supportive and caring learning environment, and (e) providing counseling services (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 2002; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 1987; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998). Sinclair (1998) suggested that the transition between middle and high school is a critical time when students begin deciding whether or not to drop out of school. Prevention strategies should begin at this important juncture, although Sinclair failed to specify what those might be. Slavin and Madden (1989) identified several general principles they believed should be incorporated into effective prevention programs: (a) programs should be comprehensive and intensive, (b) programs should frequently assess student progress and (c) programs should adapt instruction to meet individual students' needs.

The majority of the literature on preventative strategies has focused on general education students and was not specifically designed to meet the needs

of students with disabilities. In addition, the effectiveness of these prevention strategies has rarely been empirically evaluated (Wolman et al., 1989). Many authors have suggested methods or procedures to decrease students dropping out of school, but have provided little or no data to substantiate their opinions.

In summary, there is a discrepancy in methods used to compute dropout rates and how school personnel determine when a student has dropped out of school. These inconsistencies provided impetus for the basis for this study because how data has been reported affects the magnitude of the dropout problem. The literature reports that factors associated with dropping out of school have been similar for students with and without disabilities. However, the severity with which they impact students with and without disabilities might differ. Finally, there is a lack of specific procedural information and empirical data regarding the effectiveness of dropout prevention strategies. Therefore, the questions remain as to how many students with and without disabilities are dropping out of secondary schools and what prevention strategies can be employed to decrease the number of them dropping out of school. Obtaining answers to these questions may provide guidance to secondary school personnel in the development of appropriate policies and procedures to address the dropout issue.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate practices and policies used in Nebraska secondary schools regarding students with and without disabilities who drop out of school. The study was conducted to answer several questions. The

first question was answered using quantitative methods. The remaining three questions were answered using qualitative methods.

### **Statement of Research Questions**

All research questions are non-directional and disprove null hypotheses.

1. Is there a difference in how secondary schools in Nebraska calculate school dropout rates?
2. Is there a difference between variables associated with dropping out of school for student with disabilities versus students without disabilities?
3. Are students with disabilities included in dropout prevention programs currently implemented in Nebraska secondary schools?
4. What strategies do Nebraska secondary school principals report to be most effective in decreasing the dropout rate for students with and without disabilities?

These questions were addressed by surveying secondary school principals across the state of Nebraska. Information obtained from this study may provide guidelines for schools, both in and beyond Nebraska, and to develop dropout prevention programs for students with and without disabilities.

### **Limitations of the Study**

1. This study was limited to the use of a survey instrument as the primary method of data collection.
2. No pre-mailing was sent to respondents.

3. The short timeline in which the survey was sent may have impacted the thoroughness of the respondents answers.
4. The study was limited to secondary school principals in Nebraska and the data collected may not represent other school personnel in Nebraska or nationally.
5. The survey was mailed to building level secondary school principals and may be reflective of their opinions and not the data.

### **Definition of Terms**

Several terms appear throughout the study. The following definitions were used to provide consistency and clarity.

#### *High Incidence Disability*

Students who have been verified by a multidisciplinary evaluation team in the areas of specific learning disability, mild mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or speech and language impairment (Nebraska Department of Education Regulations and Standards for Special Education Programs , 2000).

#### *Low Incidence Disability*

Students who have been verified by a multidisciplinary evaluation team in the areas of deaf/hard of hearing, blind/visually handicapped, orthopedically handicapped, and severe-profound mental retardation (Nebraska Department of Education Regulations and Standards for Special Education Programs , 2000).

### *Age Out*

When a special education student leaves school because they reach the maximum age for school attendance, which is currently 21 years old (Bulter-Nalin & Padilla, 1989).

### *Event Dropout Calculation Method*

Often referred to as annual rate. Measures the number of students who dropout of school in a single school year (Sinclair, 1994).

### *Cohort Dropout Calculation Method*

This method follows a group of students as they enter high school and measures how many of them graduate four years later (Sinclair, 1994).

### *Status Dropout Calculation Method*

Measures the proportion of students who have not completed high school and are not enrolled at one point in time, regardless of when they dropped out (Sinclair, 1994).

## **Significance of the Study**

This study was a survey of Nebraska secondary school principals to examine policies and procedures for calculating dropout rates, identifying risk factors associated with students who dropout of school, and determining prevention strategies employed to decrease dropout rates. This information was gathered for students with and without disabilities who drop out of school. The survey data may assist policy makers at both state and national levels to establish uniform definitions for dropouts and develop a standardized criterion for calculating dropout rates. The results may also provide information about current

practices in dropout prevention and assist administrators in establishing effective programs in their district. This information, in turn, may help educators better understand the magnitude of the dropout problem, make comparisons between students with and without disabilities who drop out of school, and create and evaluate the success of their dropout prevention programs. Because of the limited research in the area of effective dropout prevention strategies, the results of this study may provide the basis from which to begin collecting empirically based data to identify strategies that reduce the number of students with and without disabilities who drop out of school.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into the five chapters. The introduction appeared in Chapter I and contained relevant background information, provided the context of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, definitions, limitations of the study, and organization of the study. A review of the literature is presented in Chapter II. The methods and procedures used to develop and conduct the study, and how data were obtained and analyzed, appear in Chapter III. Chapter IV provides analyses of data collected from the study. The discussion of results is contained in Chapter V, as well as a summary of the results, an integration of the results to previous research, methodological limitations, implications for practice (i. e., educational policies and programming for dropout prevention), and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of Literature

This chapter provides a review of research related to students with and without disabilities who drop out of secondary schools. Research articles were obtained from a search of PsychLit and ERIC from 1978 to the present. The search spanned 24 years because of the dearth of recent studies examining students with disabilities who have dropped out of school. A total of 31 articles, 18 focusing on students with disabilities and 13 addressing students without disabilities, were reviewed. A summary of relevant variables reviewed can be found in Appendix A. Appendix A provides a description of the research organized by the major dropout categories including school, home, and disability risk factors. Also included in this appendix are preventative strategies suggested and the type of study conducted. Based on the results of the review of literature, four major themes emerged: (a) defining a dropout, (b) method used to calculate the dropout rate, (c) predictors that influenced students' decisions to dropout of school, and (d) programs implemented to decrease drop out rates. Articles reviewed were representative of both students with and without disabilities.

#### *Defining a Dropout*

Determining the rate students drop out of school is affected by how school personnel define, or classify, a student as a dropout. Definitions used to determine a high school dropout are inconsistent. There is agreement on identifying a dropout when students formally declare their intention to leave school. When a student does not formally withdraw from school it is less clear as