

High School Dropouts: Where Do We Go Now?

The approach we take to the mounting dilemma of high school dropouts may well set the course for South Carolinas' future prosperity. So, where do we go from here?

The incidence of low graduation rates and high dropout rates are only symptoms of more pervasive, underlying problems. The long term, permanent solution to high school dropouts lies in our efforts to institute multi-faceted reforms in order to meet the rigorous demands of a global economy.

Across the nation educators are trying new programs including ninth grade academies and smaller learning communities, to mention two. These programs may discount the single highest predictor of high school dropouts—student achievement. Dropping out of high school isn't a particular event, but rather a process often in place long before high school. Therefore, we must address achievement, and fundamentally improve teaching and learning.

Our focus might begin with how teachers are prepared in colleges and universities. Teachers must be better prepared to enter the modern public school classroom with wide-ranging skill-sets addressing classroom management, instructional delivery, assessment, standards, data analysis, scheduling and the list goes on.

Students are known to enjoy learning and stay in school when their needs are met and the provider – the school – constantly seeks new ways to enhance the partnership. What works and what does not? Public schools will need expanded flexibility to offer alternative program choices, in addition to a standard diploma track, and not be penalized (counted as a dropout) when a student enters the alternative program whether due to special needs, discipline, parenthood, work, age, or alternative career choice.

If South Carolina is to effectively reform the system used to calculate data, then we must have better data, provide it to schools in a timely manner, and respond to the data in an efficient manner. There are more than 14,400 school districts nationwide and many are embracing a data driven model of decision-making. South Carolina must join those states by better defining, calculating and reporting high school dropouts. While the current system, SASI, serves many purposes, it has shortcomings and is frequently used differently from district-to-district. With clear and reliable data, and the ability to share those data we can bring down the dropout rate.

Recently 47 states agreed to collaborate and address the problem of high school dropouts. There may be no better time than now to implement a national student data system that provides the ability to quickly, safely, and accurately share student data across districts or states.

South Carolina uses a number of confusing terms when reporting dropouts: completion rate, dropout collection cycle, dropout rate, event rate (SC's calculation method), and high school completer. This vocabulary is confusing and removing the "event rate" is crucial as it is shown that dropping out isn't an event, but a process. Research indicates that a "cohort rate" is the best practice for determining dropouts. The method tracks a group of students – a cohort – from the time it enters high school until it graduates with a diploma. While not all students are likely to complete high school with a state issued diploma, there needs to be alternative completion guidelines without lumping everyone together and calling them a "high school completer" (as it is currently).

Finally, to evaluate our service to students, we must have a system of evaluation/accountability in place to measure progress in all of these reform efforts. This will ensure that we are capable of assessing our efforts and more importantly-capable of changing the way we prepare our youth through teaching and learning. Our future depends on it.

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