

Making School Work for the New Majority*

Mary Anne Raywid, Chair, Department of Administration and Policy Studies, Hofstra University

The good news is that the school dropout problem is finally getting some attention. After more than a dozen years of benign neglect, we have finally started worrying about it—and the all-important chorus has begun, demanding that schools do something about the problem. The bad news, though, is that the concern aroused—the resulting combination of compassion and patronizing arrogance—may do as much harm as good.

Studies have shown that (1) schools can be injurious to the mental health of the sort of youngster who drops out of school, (2) the behavior of some dropouts improves and their aggression toward others declines upon leaving school, (3) when dropouts leave school, their self-esteem rises and they acquire a sense of control over their own lives.¹ One study went even further, concluding that for those who drop out, "returning to school has negative effects on both psychological health and interpersonal competency. . . ."² That study recommends employment as a much better alternative for the dropout than returning to school.

There is only one difficulty with this solution, which is essentially the one we have been relying on. The difficulty is that neither we (society) nor the dropout (individually) can afford this solution. The costs of dropping out of school are just too high for all.

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¹D. S. Elliot and H. L. Voss, *Delinquency and Dropout* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington, 1974) and J. G. Bachman, S. Green, and I. D. Wirtanen, *Youth in Transition*, vol. III: *Dropping Out—Problem or Symptom?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, 1971).

²Michael S. Cook, *Jobs and Schooling: Youth Employment, Personality, and Delinquency in a Sample of Dropouts from Urban Schools* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, Center for Social Organization of Schools, December, 1983), p. 16.

From the individual's perspective, the dropout does not fare too well beyond that immediate increment to his mental health. He has practically guaranteed himself unemployment or the threat of it throughout his normal worklife years. Only 40 percent of our young dropouts are employed, while two-thirds of the graduates of the same age have jobs.³ Ernest Boyer estimates that as many as one-third of the dropouts "suffer chronic unemployment, and end up on welfare, supplemented by part-time jobs or . . . petty theft."⁴ There are fewer jobs open to them, they are less likely ever to qualify for anything but entry-level jobs, and they are more likely than graduates to be periodically unemployed. Their lifetime earnings are significantly lower than those of graduates.⁵ Thus, the future of the dropout is far from rosy—an enormous price for not staying.

But the rest of us pay, too. We pay in lower worker productivity which in turn contributes less to the GNP (gross national product). We are going to *need* those youths. In the first place, we are going to need them in the labor force if we want to maintain our high standard of living. We are going to start feeling the pinch of a diminished labor pool very soon. Today, 25 percent of our population is of the age entering the labor pool. In ten years, their number will have dropped to 16 percent.⁶

In the second place, those youngsters will be needed to support the elderly population in the years ahead. There are now more people over 65 years of age in this country than there are teenagers.⁷ The figures on the projected ratios between workers and retired workers are worth noting. Once, we're told, there were seventeen workers to every individual receiving Social Security benefits. By the year 2000, the ratio will have fallen to only three workers to one retiree; and one of those workers will be a minority group person.⁸ If the young people are not such good workers, we are all "at risk." And worse: unless we succeed in preparing them for productive lives, one or two of the three could be draining on the economy, in the form of unemployment checks or prison subsistence, instead of contributing to the nation's wealth. Thus, it appears that we all

³Education Commission of the States, *Reconnecting Youth: The Next Stage of Reform* (Denver: The Commission, Final Draft, October 1985).

⁴Quoted in "School Reform: What About the Dropout?" *The Journal-Gazette*, December, 1985; reprinted in *Educational Excellence Network*, December 1985/January 1986.

⁵Henry M. Levin, *The Educationally Disadvantaged: A National Crisis* (Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, July 1985).

⁶Anne C. Lewis, "Young and Poor in America," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 67 (December 1985), 251.

⁷U.S. Census Bureau data, 1980.

⁸Dale Mann, "Action on Dropouts," *Educational Leadership*, 43 (September 1985), 16.

have a somewhat selfish or self-interest stake in helping "at risk" students to become effective, contributing adults.

Particularly at this juncture in our history when there is reason to worry about whether the nation is slipping into serious economic decline, it seems such a foolish waste to write off still another cohort of youngsters. These are not hopeless cases. We err in always portraying the dropout as a low-ability, low-achieving minority youth. Many are none of these. Whites represented more than half of the substantial increase in the dropout rate between 1972 and 1982.⁹ It has been estimated that in Florida, one-third of the dropouts had been enrolled in advanced placement courses during their school years.¹⁰ And, a 1985 study showed that almost half of Dade County's high school dropouts progressed normally through school without grade retention until the eighth grade.¹¹

But school can be a pretty unpleasant place for a lot of youngsters; for some, the unpleasantness starts early. A recent report suggests that "many school districts are classifying up to 35 percent of all male students as abnormal or brain-damaged."¹² That is one way to deal with the "system-resistant"! And, from there on in some districts the students so labeled (and others) are systematically incapacitated through the practice of tracking. It is not without reason that some want to change the label from "learning disabled" to "system-disabled."

The evidence is fairly clear that those who drop out have first distanced themselves from the school psychologically: they participate in fewer activities, are less popular with other students, and feel less satisfied with the way their education is going and the way the school operates. For the dropout, school has often proved a place of repeated failure and "a place where one gets into trouble." Poor grades and sheer dislike are many dropouts' main reasons for leaving. Yet, even so, they do not intend to go. An overwhelming number are still announcing post-high-school education plans as late as their sophomore year.¹³

⁹Michael Sherraden, *School Dropouts in Perspective* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, Forum on Youth Policy, Business/Education Advisory Commission, March 1985).

¹⁰Speculation of a member of the Florida Task Force on Alternative Education which sat 1984-85.

¹¹*A Study of the Longitudinal Dropout Rate: 1980 Eighth-Grade Cohort Followed from June 1980 Through February 1985*, (Miami: Dade County Public Schools, March 1985), p. 11.

¹²Diane McGuinness, "Facing the 'Learning Disabilities' Crisis," *Education Week*, February 5, 1986, p. 28.

¹³See Ruth B. Ekstrom et al., "Who Drops Out of High School and Why? Findings from a National Study," *Teachers College Record*, 87 (Spring 1986), 360-363; and Gary G. Wehlage and Robert A. Rutter, "Dropping Out: How Much Do Schools Contribute to the Problem?" *Teachers College Record*, 87 (Spring 1986), 382, 384 and 385.

Then what happens? And what is it that makes it happen? Undoubtedly there are many reasons, but only a couple that are very prominently related to the way we think about schools and the youngsters who do not make it within them will be highlighted here.

John Goodlad has called attention to the odd way in which we understand the school's function. It is to educate, of course; but we seem to think little of stamping significant numbers of children as "failures" and settling for that in lieu of educating them. Yet, as Goodlad notes, "we would not put up for long with a physician who sent our child home with an F for health but no assistance in becoming healthy."¹⁴ Consider for a moment how short our patience might be with the engineer who defined engineering as condemning buildings rather than making them stand up, or the pharmacist who wanted to catalog the limitations of medicines instead of dispensing them, or the minister who had time and hope only for the least of sinners (no felons allowed).

Why, then, have we for so long permitted schools to say, in effect, "we do education in just one way; if you can not adapt to doing it our way, then our job ends with writing you up as a failure." And, of course, schools that see their function this way are understandably impatient with the youngsters who do not conform. Impatience yields short fuses and built-in excuses. For instance, when asked how his school could remain unconcerned about huge dropout rates, one administrator replied, "It's like I'm a pilot and there is a hijacker on the plane, and it is my job to throw him out of the window. My job is the safety of the rest of the passengers; that's the safety of the school."¹⁵ So, if you wonder why so many poor minority kids do not make it, just think of them as "hijackers," jeopardizing the rest of us!

There are at least two major flaws with such thinking, one moral and one demographic. The moral flaw lies in assuming that our obligation to prepare young people for adulthood extends no further than laying out what we think they ought to be grateful for. But if they cannot imbibe what we have laid out, don't we owe them more? If we were offering physical nourishment and their systems could not tolerate our menus, would we not be obligated to provide something else? If what we have been offering is as incompatible with the needs of large numbers of today's school

¹⁴John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1984).

¹⁵Quoted by Michelle Fine in "Why Urban Adolescents Drop into and out of Public High School," *Teachers College Record*, 87 (Spring, 1986), 404.

population as it appears to be, do we not owe them at least an effort at an education that might prove more nourishing?

The demographic situation further compounds the incongruity of the administrator who sees himself as protecting his school from the hijacker (or perhaps his people from the barbarian horde?). We are told that one-third of the nation's students currently consist of the disadvantaged, for whom schools are likely to prove such a poor fit.¹⁶ In cities, the proportion of disadvantaged students now ranges upward as high as 70-90 percent. Within five years, some states will have more disadvantaged than advantaged students. Just how long can that administrator see himself as fighting the good fight against the invader?

There is obviously a serious mismatch between many of our high schools and the students they are supposed to be serving. We must change that, and change it soon. If we are serious about wanting to keep prospective dropouts in school, then clearly what we must do is change the way they feel about school. They have to be convinced that education is of value, that it is worthwhile and can make a difference in their lives. We must find ways to render schooling more positive for them. And we must discover what will motivate these youngsters and orient them toward achieving. That is a tall order, but we have learned a lot about what will help and what will not. The state of Florida has provided the conclusive evidence for what ought to be clear on the face of the matter: If we're trying to *attract* youths toward school, to win them over, punishment is hardly one of the better ways to do this. In 1978-79, Florida schools put thousands of youngsters into punitive programs. A study by the Governor's office demonstrated that the "treatment" failed to accomplish anything positive.¹⁷ It did not improve school attendance or behavior, nor decrease suspensions. It changed nothing except, perhaps, to escalate the incidence of punishment for the following year.

The Excellence Approach is another dropout prevention solution which has been proposed. This approach probably will function with little more success than the Punitive Approach; indeed, it may even prove less successful. Like the Punitive Approach, this one seems more likely to increase than decrease dropout rates. As of this writing, forty-four states have adopted measures to raise grad-

¹⁶Levin, *The Educationally Disadvantaged*.

¹⁷*An Evaluation of the Florida State Alternative Education Program* (Executive Office of the Governor, Office of Planning and Budgeting, June 5, 1981).

uation requirements, standards, test scores, and homework time. Perhaps those who see such measures as attractive to the potential dropout are thinking about the shortcomings of some of the programs we have devised for such youngsters. If so, the writer shares in their indictment of the tracking and other "no win" situations we have often put at-risk youngsters into. But certainly the excellence measures are no solution either. The at-risk youngsters need a program that is much more and other than what the excellence movement is mandating.

A third, much more promising solution is gaining popularity. It is the proposal that we begin dropout prevention early—with pre-school programs for those youngsters whose background and circumstances mark them as dropout prospects. Such programs yield among the clearest, most definitive research findings we have in education. Youngsters who attended certain early childhood programs fared better throughout their school careers than those who did not. They were more successful, stayed longer, required fewer special services, and graduated in larger numbers than did comparable youngsters who had not been part of the early childhood program.¹⁸ Clearly, this approach is far more promising than the first two (the punitive and excellence approaches). But this approach alone will not suffice by way of dropout prevention. It responds marvelously to *one* of the major problems that swell dropout rates, but it cannot address another.

One major factor in dropping out is school failure. Most youngsters who leave school without finishing have experienced a lot of failure; and, in fact, the more failure, the higher the probability that they will drop out. Early childhood programs can prevent the failure cycle from getting started.

But there is a second major factor in dropping out, and for many youngsters it looms even larger than whether they are succeeding in school. It is the simple fact that they hate school. According to one major study, this is the most prevalent reason for leaving school reported by male dropouts. Fifty-one percent of them left because of their dislike for school. Girls seem to adapt a bit better: only 33 percent of the female dropouts left school primarily because they detested it.¹⁹ What this clearly suggests is that if we want to keep "at risk" youngsters in school, we are going to have to provide a

¹⁸See, for example, John Berrueta-Clement et al., *Changed Lives: The Effects of the Perry Preschool Program on Youths Through Age 19* (Ypsilanti, Mich.: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1984).

¹⁹Dale Mann, "Can We Help Dropouts: Thinking about the Undoable," *Teachers College Record*, 87 (Spring 1986), 308.

different kind of school environment for them than that of the typical comprehensive high school. A school for these youngsters must be a different kind of place, with a different kind of organizational structure and a different feel and flavor. Irrespective of the success of the early childhood programs we provide, this will remain true for a number of youngsters. This means that there will be a permanent need for differentiated schools and school environments.

Clearly, there must be collaboration of two sorts to keep at-risk youngsters in school. The new majority—disadvantaged students—pose very different challenges to educators than did the earlier middle-class majority. Middle-class students came to school with strong family support backing the venture, and with few of the worries about food, shelter, and home stability that are standard features of today's poverty living. To succeed in school, the disadvantaged require a lot more than good schooling. They need assistance that schools cannot provide, and should not even try to provide; so one form of collaboration schools must seek is close working relationships with the many community agencies that *can* provide those other services requisite to school success. If a teenager is pregnant, subject to abuse at home, hungry, or chronically drunk, it is going to take the help of several agencies, not just schools, to make that youngster into a participating, contributing adult. Toward this end, schools must collaborate with other agencies and services far more extensively and regularly than most of them have done in the past.

There is also the need for a second kind of collaboration if we are to keep marginal students in school—that is, collaboration with the world of work. School/business ties were earlier thought to be nice; they have now become essential. Schools urgently need the help of the business community in dealing with at-risk youngsters. They need its cooperation in providing placements for work-study and other programs offering the action-learning possibilities so important to disadvantaged youngsters. And they need the business community to provide jobs for the youngsters who successfully complete high school. The Boston "Compact" is a real model in this regard, promising job opportunities to inner-city high school graduates whose schools meet certain conditions. For a growing number of youngsters who have witnessed unemployment up close, this is striking evidence that graduation really counts for something.²⁰

²⁰Neal R. Peirce, "Compact for Jobs: Corporations Reach Out to Schools," *The Baltimore Sun*, January 27, 1986.

It is going to take some real doing to make school work for the new majority—new modes of collaboration with the community and its other institutions, new ways of organizing and keeping school, new patterns of dealing with content and with students. I hope schools are up to it, and that they will accept the challenge of adapting to the new majority rather than focusing on curbing the "hijacker threat." Only in this way can schools remain relevant to our society and its needs, as well as to the needs of thousands and thousands of youngsters whose lives can be altered so positively and profoundly—if only we get it right.