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**Curriculum Project**

**Dominican University 2001**

**Literature Survey Excerpt**

## ***Introduction***

The high school dropout is one of the most studied educational crises in America. Ever since compulsory education the focus of countless scholars has been to keep students in school long enough for them to complete their course of study. Why is so hard for students to finish school? Why are some students more likely to dropout of high school than others? What are the repeated cycles or critical factors of the high school dropout? Which critical factors can be addressed by the public schools? What programs work and why? How can programs improve? These questions will shape the literature review and guide this discussion towards the creation of guidance curriculum for the at-risk student.

I begin by reviewing the definition of the high school dropout and discuss the importance of a standard definition. From here I will delve into the critical factors of the high school dropout and separate out the factors that can be remediated or institutional factors. After these factors have been identified the path of the dropout will be analyzed. Thereafter, a review of dropout prevention programs and program evaluation will expose specific techniques that school use to improve their programs. The final piece of

this chapter will end in a discussion of the relationship between the at-risk student, dropout prevention programs, and how best to support the at-risk student towards graduation.

### ***The dropout definition: Depending On Your Agenda!***

“There are at least as many different definitions of a dropout as there are school districts recording dropouts. Some districts solved their problem of who to count as a dropout by not using any definition at all, whereas other districts had three or four definitions, and neither we nor they seemed to know which one was used.” (Natriello, 1986. pg. 9)

The Texas 1997-1998 Report on Public School Dropouts (Texas Education Agency, 1998) illustrates several key points that are helpful when looking at the definition of the dropout. This report clear states that that the definition of high school dropouts has changed over the past few years. For example, in 1992-93 the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) under the new definition of the Common Core of Data established a dropout definition that created a standard federal definition. Thirty-three states followed the recommendation and used their criteria for the dropout definition. In 1996-97 the state of Texas had a 3.6 percent dropout rate using the federal definition of a high school dropout. During Governor Bush’s tenure the state of Texas changed it’s definition of a high school dropout and miraculously lowered its high school dropout the rate to 1.6 percent using the same data. A dramatic decrease based on a

different set of criteria. Which is accurate? What is the motivation to use these smoke and mirror tactics? Are these politicians really the champions of education as they say they are?

The mutable nature of the high school dropout definition is problematic and usually becomes a political blade that is yielded in an attempt to gain public support or recognition for program improvement. This concept is essential to understand as we look at the statistics around dropout prevention. It is clear that the political agenda often drives programs and that the creative definition can alter perception of the data. One can derive from this information that public perception can be altered by the change of the definition. The definition can portray a consistent image while it's directly changes the information to portray that the crisis is being handled or improved. It can imply that a specific program or politician is directly responsible for the dramatic improvement.

The state of California uses the definition as outlined by the NCES. It defines the dropout as being a person who leaves school for any other reason other than prior to graduation or completion of a formal education, or legal equivalent, and who does not, within 45 school days, enter another public or private educational institution or school. For the sake of this project whenever the term dropout is used I will be referring to this definition.

School Dropouts edited by Gary Natriello (Natriello, G. 1986) is a piece of research that I am finding extremely valuable. This collection of essays on the subject of high school dropouts is fascinating. In the article A Population at Risk: Potential Consequences of Tougher School Standards for Student Dropouts (McDill, E., Natriello, G., & Pallas, A. 1986) it outlines that in an environment of increase standards there is an

increase of high school dropouts. Historically whenever the expectation increase around standards and accountability there is an increase of dropouts. Currently, education is experiencing an increase in student accountability. This is evident in California by the implementation of the California High School Exit Exam (CHSEE). The research points to the direct correlation between higher standards and higher dropout rates. This is not to say that a high standard is wrong, just the contrary. It is a good practice to set a high standard but if the goal is to have students meet or exceed it than it becomes essential to have programs in place to address deficiencies. It is clear that the California Department of Education is concerned if students are going to be able to meet the standard. This is evident in their recent decision to decrease the algebra standard within the CHSEE. Although, the standards that are being used are of far greater scope and sequence. The expectations of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade algebra class are the equivalence of a 10-grade algebra class twenty years ago. It is clear that the politicians are attempting to draw attention themselves by claiming to be for education reform without a true understanding of the complexities.