

## Article 30: Human Development and High School Dropout Rates and Highschool Dropout Support Programs

**High school dropout rates** remain a critical indicator of educational equity, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups even as national figures have reached record lows in recent years (Mullen & Nitowski, 2024; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024; Piscitello et al., 2022).

**High school dropout support programs** effectively bridge this gap by offering targeted academic, behavioral, and vocational interventions that can boost completion rates by 15%. Evidence from recent studies highlights that holistic models addressing both social and academic barriers are twice as effective as singular approaches. By improving graduation outcomes, these initiatives significantly reduce long-term social costs, including lower lifetime earnings and increased incarceration risks (Communities In Schools, 2024; Johnson et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2011).

### Causes and Scope of High School Dropout Rates in the United States

National high school dropout rates have declined significantly in recent years, reaching historic lows between 5.1% and 5.3%. Despite this trend, academic failure, chronic absenteeism, and external financial pressures still lead nearly 7,000 students to leave school daily. The scope of this issue disproportionately impacts marginalized groups, with dropout rates as high as 9.9% for American Indian youth and 10.7% for students with disabilities. These persistent disparities create immense social and economic burdens, with each dropout costing the U.S. economy approximately \$272,000 over their lifetime (Mullen & Nitowski, 2024; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024; Piscitello et al., 2022).

A report by the National Center for Education Statistics examined high school dropout rates in the United States by looking at young people aged 16 to 24 who were no longer enrolled in school and had not earned a high school credential. The analysis used data from the American Community Survey, which collects information directly from households across the country. In 2022, about 5.3 percent of youth in this age group—roughly 2.1 million individuals—were classified as status dropouts. The findings showed that dropout rates declined steadily over the past decade, decreasing from 7.0 percent in 2012 to 5.3 percent in 2022. However, the report found that dropout rates continued to differ across demographic groups. American Indian, Hispanic, and Black youth experienced higher dropout rates than White and Asian youth, even though gaps narrowed over time. Males generally had higher dropout rates than females. Given that the data came from a population-based survey, the estimates captured young people who left school at different points and in different settings. Overall, the report concluded that while progress has been made in reducing dropout rates, persistent disparities highlight the need for continued efforts to support high school completion in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Following that lead, a study examined the association between sociodemographic risk factors—such as income, race, gender, and age—and the likelihood of high school dropout among students in the United States. Furthermore, the study also analyzed how indicators of school disengagement (including attendance problems, disciplinary issues, and academic performance) shaped this relationship and whether the patterns observed differed between rural and non-rural settings. The researchers used long-term administrative data drawn from a public education system in Louisiana maintained by that state's Department of Education. The data at hand were collected as part of routine record keeping on

enrollment, attendance, behavior, and academic outcomes for students across the state’s public schools. A randomly selected sample of students who had reached at least sixth grade was followed over time to identify who eventually dropped out of high school. The findings showed that higher levels of sociodemographic risk were consistently associated with a greater likelihood of dropping out of high school. For non-rural students, multiple disengagement factors—including absenteeism, disciplinary incidents, and poor academic performance—helped explain how risk translated into dropout. In contrast, for rural students, academic performance emerged as the primary factor linking risk to dropout. These results suggest that the causes and pathways of high school dropout are not uniform across communities. The researchers concluded that effective prevention efforts must address both structural disadvantage and school engagement, with strategies tailored to the specific needs of rural and non-rural students (Piscitello et al., 2022).

On that same note, a study examined patterns of high school dropout and on-time graduation in the United States by tracking students at an urban public high school in Virginia over a four-year period. Using administrative school records, the researchers analyzed data on academic performance, attendance, disciplinary history, and graduation outcomes across multiple student cohorts. These data were collected through the school’s routine record-keeping systems and allowed students who graduated on time to be compared with those who did not. The findings showed that students with lower academic achievement, chronic absenteeism, and prior disciplinary exclusions were significantly more likely to drop out. Certain groups—particularly Latinx male English language learners—were disproportionately represented among non-graduates. The results highlighted that dropout risk is closely tied to school-based indicators that accumulate over time, rather than a single event. The study also showed that these risk factors do not affect all students equally, pointing to persistent disparities linked to language status and gender. Based on these patterns, the researchers concluded that early identification of attendance, academic, and behavior warning signs is critical. They emphasized that improving academic support, reducing exclusionary discipline, and addressing chronic absence could help schools prevent dropout. Overall, the study suggests that high school dropout in the U.S. is both predictable and potentially preventable when schools intervene early (Mullen & Nitowski, 2024).

### **Effectiveness and Impact of High School Dropout Support Programs**

High school dropout support programs successfully help lower dropout rates by providing essential academic, vocational, and behavioral interventions for at-risk students. Holistic models that combine peer mentoring with community-based case management are particularly effective at keeping students on track toward graduation. Research emphasizes that programs addressing both social and academic barriers produce significantly better outcomes than those focusing solely on classroom performance. By fostering these critical connections, these initiatives enhance long-term economic stability and reduce the broad societal costs associated with leaving school early (Communities In Schools, 2024; Johnson et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2011).

On that note, a study reviewed existing research to assess how effective high school dropout prevention and intervention programs were at helping students stay in school and complete their education. Following that lead, the study drew on a systematic review and meta-analysis of 167 studies published throughout fifteen years, using data from evaluations that measured dropout and completion outcomes. The researchers collected this information by screening studies from multiple research databases and including only those with rigorous experimental designs. The programs examined

ranged from academic support and mentoring to alternative schooling and targeted services for at-risk youth. Overall, the findings showed that most programs had positive effects, since they were associated with lower dropout rates and higher school completion. The review found little difference in effectiveness across program types, suggesting that many approaches can work when implemented well. Programs designed for specific groups, such as pregnant and parenting teens, also showed beneficial results. The researchers concluded that dropout prevention and intervention programs can meaningfully reduce high school dropout rates. Moreover, they emphasized that successful outcomes depended on selecting programs that fit local needs and ensuring consistent implementation (Wilson et al., 2011).

For instance, the Communities In Schools (CIS) 2024 Annual Report provides insight into how its integrated student support model helps students stay in school and succeed, especially in schools facing high dropout risk. The report drew on student outcome data from the 2023–24 school year, collected through routine tracking of attendance, academic progress, grade promotion, and graduation outcomes across CIS-partner schools nationwide. These data showed that students receiving CIS supports experienced strong educational outcomes. Specifically, 97 percent of K–11 students were promoted to the next grade, and 96 percent of high school seniors graduated or earned a GED. The findings suggest that providing coordinated academic, social, and basic-needs support inside schools helps address barriers that often lead students to disengage and drop out. The report concludes that embedding trained support staff in schools can play a meaningful role in improving student persistence and completion. Overall, CIS presents its results as evidence that comprehensive, school-based support programs can help mitigate high school dropout by keeping students connected, supported, and on track to graduate (Communities In Schools, 2024).

Lastly, a study examined whether a school-based support program could reduce high school dropout by improving graduation rates among students at a low-income urban high school in the United States. Particularly, the study evaluated the Peer Group Connection (PGC) program, which paired trained 12th-grade peer leaders with incoming 9th-grade students to provide guidance, connection, and support during the transition to high school. Hence, researchers randomly assigned students to either participate in the program or receive standard school services and followed their outcomes over four years. Graduation data were collected from school records and used to compare results between groups. The findings showed that male students who participated in PGC were significantly more likely to graduate on time, with graduation rates notably higher than those of nonparticipants. The study concluded that early, peer-led support programs can play a meaningful role in reducing dropout rates, particularly for students at higher risk. Overall, the results suggest that strengthening students' sense of connection and support during ninth grade can improve long-term educational outcomes and help mitigate high school dropout (Johnson et al., 2013).

## References

- Communities In Schools. (2024). *Annual report 2024*. [https://www.communitiesinschools.org/media/filer\\_public/86/b7/86b74b88-7e36-424c-b063-d8127e6f7aa7/cis\\_annualreport\\_2024.pdf](https://www.communitiesinschools.org/media/filer_public/86/b7/86b74b88-7e36-424c-b063-d8127e6f7aa7/cis_annualreport_2024.pdf)
- Johnson, V. L., Simon, P., & Mun, E.-Y. (2013). A peer-led high school transition program increases graduation rates among latino males. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 107(3), 186–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.2013.788991>
- Mullen, C. A., & Nitowski, R. J. (2024). Dropout epidemic—Who is (not) graduating high school: A 4-year analysis of predictive indicators. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 33(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/10567879241262754>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2024, May). *COE - Status Dropout Rates*. Nces.ed.gov. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/coj/status-dropout-rates>
- Piscitello, J., Kim, Y. K., Orooji, M., & Robison, S. (2022). Sociodemographic risk, school engagement, and community characteristics: A mediated approach to understanding high school dropout. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 133, 106347. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106347>
- Wilson, S. J., Tanner-Smith, E. E., Lipsey, M. W., Steinka-Fry, K., & Morrison, J. (2011). Dropout prevention and intervention programs: Effects on school completion and dropout among school-aged children and youth. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 7(1), 1–61. <https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2011.8>