



## Four indicators educators can use to identify potential dropouts in 6th grade

Students who are at high risk for dropping out of school can be identified as early as 6th grade with four simple indicators, according to a study of 13,000 Philadelphia school district students recently published in *Educational Psychologist*.

"Many students in urban schools become disengaged at the start of the middle grades, which greatly reduces the odds that they will eventually graduate," write the researchers. "We use longitudinal analysis--following almost 13,000 students from 1996 until 2004--to demonstrate how four predictive indicators reflecting poor attendance, misbehavior, and course failures in 6th grade can be used to identify 60% of the students who will not graduate from high school."

Many reform efforts have focused on making middle-grades schools more developmentally appropriate and more academically excellent, the researchers write, but much less attention has been paid to heading off student disengagement and lack of motivation, which play a big role in the nation's graduation rate crisis.

Using data that is readily collected by any school, the researchers identified the following four indicators that educators could use as early as middle school to identify students likely to drop out:

- Attending school 80% or less of the time during 6th grade;
- failing math in 6th grade;
- failing English in 6th grade; and
- receiving an out-of-school suspension in 6th grade.

"We can regard these findings as hopeful because they indicate that, in 6th grade, most students who can be identified at high risk for failing to graduate are only demonstrating difficulty in one academic subject and/or in one behavioral realm rather than having difficulties in many areas as is typical of many struggling high school students," the authors write.

### **Behavior a 5th predictor**

The criteria for the indicators were that the yield among nongraduates had to be at least 10% and that the predictive power of the indicator had to be at least 75%. For example, receiving a suspension met the criteria because 80% of students who received suspensions did not graduate within one year of on-time graduation and 10% of the total number of nongraduates had suspensions.

Unsatisfactory final behavior marks in any subject in 6th grade, a 5th indicator, did not quite meet the criterion for predictive power (75% failing to graduate), but had a high yield--50% of nongraduates received a poor behavior mark, the researchers note.

"Receiving a final unsatisfactory behavior grade in any subject in the 6th grade significantly reduced the chances that 6th graders would graduate from the school district within 1 year of expected graduation," the researchers write. "In addition to being a significant warning flag in and of itself, unsatisfactory behavior magnifies the damaging effects of course failure on students' prospects of graduating."

Course failure was a better predictor of not graduating than were low test scores, the researchers found. End-of-5th grade test scores in reading and math were poor predictors of dropping out, supporting data from other studies that found that end-of-6th grade test scores were poor predictors of dropping out, according to the researchers.

*"Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions," by Robert Balfanz, Liza Herzog and Douglas MacIver, Educational Psychologist, Volume 42,*