Measure What Matters
and No Child Will Be Left Behind

Marty Duckenfield
National Dropout
Prevention Center

Sam Drew, Ph.D.
National Dropout
Prevention Center

Introduction

The goal of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is to provide a quality educational experience for every child in public school with the expectation that *all* children can learn, resulting in higher graduation rates. The centerpiece for this plan is *accountability*; for everyone to take this obligation to reach all children seriously, high-stakes tests have been incorporated into every child's educational experience so that educators and parents can see whether their local schools are making "Adequate Yearly Progress" in reaching these high goals. As accountability is at the core of NCLB, it follows that the assessment system should measure correlating standards. The current system measures acquisition of knowledge but fails to measure many other important variables — variables that matter because they enhance learning, variables that would indicate whether a student will succeed in school and in life.

Increasingly, research is revealing that there is a downside to high-stakes testing, particularly with youths already at risk of dropping out of school. This well-intentioned approach does not meet the actual challenge; there is more to succeeding in school than performing well on an academic examination. It is time to examine the current accountability system. It does matter how and what is measured; and not everything that matters is getting measured.

Why Students Drop Out

Too many students are leaving school before graduating, and there is ample evidence explaining the phenomenon (Smink and Schargel 2004, Rumberger 2004). The National Education Longitudinal Surveys conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (1990) is a well-respected source that continues to provide valuable data on the reasons students drop out. Documented indicators of a student's potential for dropping out include not liking school, poor attendance, problems with discipline, and an inability to get along with teachers or fellow students. Another study of students who dropped out of school and their parents, in Henderson County, N.C., supports these findings (Drew 2003). The study found that significant percentages of both

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student dropouts and their parents indicated that students (a) did not feel a part of their school, (b) did not find classes interesting or relevant, and (c) sensed a lack of caring by anyone at the school about whether they stayed in school. As long as young people are disengaged from school, children *will* be left behind.

Research from the Minneapolis-based Search Institute shows that students become more vulnerable to dropping out when they possess fewer of the 40 Developmental Assets for Healthy Youth Development (Figure 1). These assets, also described as "protective factors," illustrate the essential qualities in healthy adolescents' lives, qualities that will help lead to well-rounded and civically engaged adults. These assets include support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, positive values, and a commitment to learning. These data reinforce the work of the prevention research field, with syntheses by Bonnie Benard (1991), illustrating that young people who develop resilience in home, school, or community settings are most likely to succeed in school and life. This resilience is fostered by such activities as a relationship with a caring adult, responsibility for meaningful tasks, and expectations of high performance.
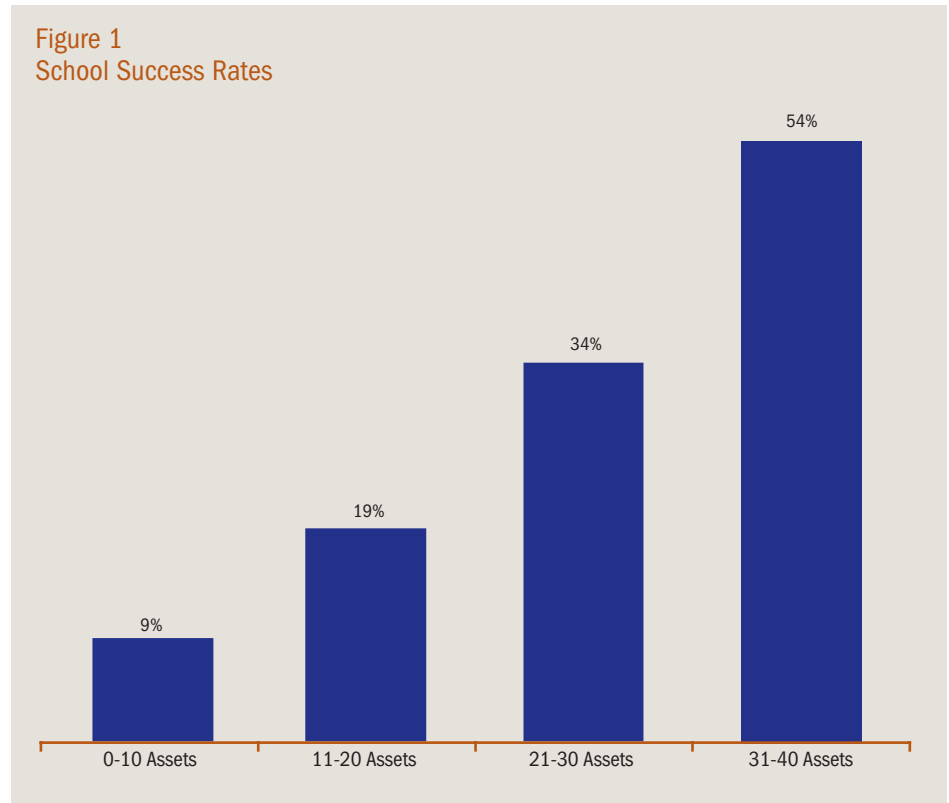

Figure 1
School Success Rates

Figure 1. Search Institute (2003) found that the more assets students had, the more likely they were to succeed in school.

High-Stakes Testing Contributes to the Dropout Rate

Indicators of student success are not fully measured by the current method of high-stakes testing. In fact, there has been an unintended consequence of this single form of assessment: The methods of accountability are dictating *what* and *how* things are being taught.

In a recent study of state exit examination policies in two school districts in Virginia and Maryland by the Center on Education Policy, exit exams affected teaching, with teachers having to "emphasize topics and skills likely to be tested and to spend more time reviewing information and test-taking skills" (Gayler 2005, 4). The report goes

on to describe how teachers were pushed to cover discrete facts, leaving little time for discussion, in-depth learning, or creative lessons.

Early evidence shows that current accountability measures not only fail to measure all aspects of school improvement, but even exacerbate school dropout rates. (Massachusetts Department of Education 2005; Nichols, Glass, and Berliner 2005). Students are not becoming engaged in the learning process nor are they developing the attributes that would provide them with the resilience needed to succeed when living in at-risk situations. Moreover, with poor performance on tests and in coursework, students are being retained in greater numbers. The research is clear that students who are retained once are 40-50 percent more likely to drop out and those retained more than once 90 percent more likely (Slavin and Madden, 1989).

Measuring What Matters

To reach the goals of NCLB at least two important questions should be answered: What should students gain from their 13 years of required schooling? What does research show are the most effective ways to keep young people engaged in school and improve their chances of graduating?

Certainly a central component of quality education is student acquisition of academic knowledge. In addition to knowledge acquired in

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the academic areas, most educators agree that graduates should also:

- be productive citizens, workers, and family members who possess critical-thinking and problem-solving skills;
- be able to ask questions and research answers;
- have an ability to get along with others;
- possess the skills needed to work effectively on a team;
- possess good oral and written communication skills;
- become people who are engaged in their communities; and
- care about others.

These aspirations are comprehensive: students should be prepared for life, ready to be contributing members of a democratic society.

So, what works in increasing the graduation rate? Over the past two decades, the National Dropout Prevention Center, based at Clemson University in Clemson, S.C., has identified 15 research-based strategies effective in dropout prevention (Smink and Schargel, 2004). These strategies include school/community collaboration, family engagement, early literacy development, and service-learning. (See Figure 2.)

Such strategies stress that schools must have strong partners in the education of young people. Teachers, schools, parents and family members, and community members, organizations, and businesses all

Measure What Matters continued...

Figure 2
15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention

The National Dropout Prevention Center has identified 15 effective strategies that have the most positive impact on the dropout rate. These strategies have been implemented successfully at all education levels and environments throughout the nation.

School and Community Perspectives
1. **Systemic Renewal** A continuing process of evaluating goals and objectives related to school policies, practices, and organizational structures as they impact a diverse group of learners.
2. **School-Community Collaboration** When all groups in a community provide collective support to the school, a strong infrastructure sustains a caring, supportive environment where youths can thrive and achieve.
3. **Safe Learning Environments** A comprehensive violence prevention plan, including conflict resolution, must deal with potential violence as well as crisis management. A safe learning environment provides daily experiences at all grade levels, which enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all students.

Early Interventions
4. **Family Engagement** Research consistently finds that family engagement has a direct, positive effect on youth achievement and is the most accurate predictor of a student's success in school.
5. **Early Childhood Education** Birth-to-five interventions demonstrate that providing a young person additional enrichment can enhance brain development. The most effective way to reduce the number of youths who will ultimately drop out is to provide the best possible classroom instruction from the beginning of their school experience through the primary grades.
6. **Early Literacy Development** Early interventions to help low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills establish the necessary foundation for effective learning in all other subjects.

Basic Core Strategies
7. **Mentoring/Tutoring** Mentoring is a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust. Tutoring, also a one-to-one activity, focuses on academics and is an effective practice when addressing specific needs such as reading, writing, or math competencies.

8. **Service-Learning** Service-learning connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning. This teaching/learning method promotes personal and social growth, career development, and civic responsibility and can be a powerful vehicle for effective school reform at all grade levels.
9. **Alternative Schooling** Alternative schooling provides potential dropouts a variety of options that can lead to graduation, with programs paying special attention to the student's individual social needs and academic requirements for a high school diploma.
10. **After-School Opportunities** Many schools provide after-school and summer enhancement programs that eliminate information loss and inspire interest in a variety of areas. Such experiences are especially important for students at risk of school failure because they fill the youths' afternoon "gap time" with constructive and engaging activities.

Making the Most of Instruction
11. **Professional Development** Teachers who work with youths at high risk of academic failure need to feel supported and have an avenue by which they can continue to develop skills, techniques, and learn about innovative strategies.
12. **Active Learning** Active learning embraces teaching and learning strategies that engage and involve students in the learning process. Students find new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong learners when educators show them that there are different ways to learn.
13. **Educational Technology** Technology offers some of the best opportunities for delivering instruction to engage students in authentic learning, addressing multiple intelligences, and adapting to students' learning styles.
14. **Individualized Instruction** Each student has unique interests and past learning experiences. An individualized instructional program for each student allows for flexibility in teaching methods and motivational strategies to consider these individual differences.
15. **Career and Technical Education** A quality CTE program and a related guidance program are essential for all students. School-to-work programs recognize that youths need specific skills to prepare them to measure up to the larger demands of today's workplace.

have a vested interest in students' success; in addition, they each have important roles in that success and *should be a part of the accountability process.*

Assessments for Students

If assessment drives teaching methods, what assessment tools have positive outcomes? And what teaching or learning methods match these forms of assessment and achieve more comprehensive educational goals?

Service-learning is uniquely positioned to achieve the goals of NCLB by unifying many of the proven dropout prevention strategies, as well as providing the experiences needed to produce resilient young people. It is a form of teaching that can engage all students, especially those who are disaffected with school. There are multiple assessment tools that match this strategy, enhance teacher quality, engage students in meaningful learning, and involve communities and parents in supportive and crucial roles.

Assessments can be used throughout the service-learning process — at the start of the project, throughout, midway, and at the project's conclusion (Shumer, Neal, Richardson, and Sundre 1999).

As Marybeth Neal, research director at the National Youth Leadership Council, explains, there are multiple reasons to assess students, and methods of analyzing and assessing data.

Reasons to Assess Student Performance
- to document student learning
- to meet the needs of educational institutions to align with graduation standards
- to facilitate communication between students, teachers, and site supervisors concerning quality work
- to identify best practices for the purpose of student and program improvement
- to facilitate communication between educational and general communities about service-learning benefits
- to monitor problems

Methods to Analyze and Assess Data
- Rubrics can be used to assess quality levels of portfolios, student presentations, or related writings, whether assessed by students, teachers, or site supervisors.
- Checklists can be used to assess subtask completion in a project.
- Matrices can track subtasks, and their interrelationships.
- Standard student assessments, such as pre- and post-tests, are also relevant to the service-learning experience as a measurement of knowledge gained.
- All of these can be assembled into student portfolios of writing, artwork, photographs, newspaper clippings, letters, evaluations, etc., and assessed with a rubric.

These kinds of rigorous assessments give teachers, administrators, parents, and students a clearer and

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more comprehensive picture of student learning while at the same time forcing the incorporation of a variety of instructional strategies that engage young people in the educational process.

Assessments for Teachers

The 15 Effective Strategies advanced by the National Dropout Prevention Center (Figure 2) offer a framework for the assessment of teachers and their efforts to ensure success for every child. Teachers' use of those strategies need to be evaluated. Are they using active learning and multiple intelligence theory in their lessons? Are they using educational

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technology? Can they incorporate more individualized instruction? Are they continuing to enhance their skills through professional development? The importance of teaching methodologies cannot be overemphasized.

Assessments for Schools

Schools also must be evaluated on whether they are following what research shows is needed for dropout prevention. As Rumberger and Palardy (2005) conclude in their recent study, "Schools should be accountable for all students who enter, not only the ones who remain" (26). Their research suggests that basing a school's performance solely on test scores

is incomplete, and that complementary measures of school performance should assess a school's effectiveness.

Many effective school-based strategies can be incorporated into service-learning, and these can provide a basis for assessment. For example, are alternative learning settings provided for students who respond best to such approaches? Are students afraid to attend school, or is there a safe and caring environment? Service-learning is a powerful way to involve all constituencies to create a positive school climate. As Stegelin and Bailey (2004) illustrate, creating a sense of belonging for students is key in meeting the needs of students who are at risk of leaving school and who feel alienated from the school and the community. The sense of belonging that service-learning creates, especially with those students who aren't actively involved in the life of their school, is desperately needed.

Assessments for Communities

Additional community factors should be included in evaluation targets. Are community members becoming involved with students as mentors? Are they providing workplace settings for students to apply their new skills?

Community organizations,

businesses, and individuals can become integral to the full educational program through service-learning. They can play a significant role in contributing to the development of students' emotional and social growth, encouraging their academic growth and offering opportunities for authentic citizenship. Meeting a young person's needs to develop assets and protective factors is important to successful dropout prevention, as measured through the Search Institute's Developmental Assets list.

Communities, like schools, must develop the mindset that both must be held accountable for keeping all students in school.

Conclusion

Improving U.S. schools requires multiple strategies for helping young people achieve academically and become contributing citizens. These strategies and approaches should be research-based and focus on the work done in classrooms, the schools as a whole, and the wider community. Accountability systems should promote and measure all three.

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features of resiliency research. If states expand their accountability plan to incorporate assessment methods that strongly encourage educational strategies like service-learning, educators will be able to more consistently ensure the academic success of students as well as provide the comprehensive educational experiences students need to be productive, contributing citizens in the 21st century. Such a plan will embody true educational reform. Such a plan also will ensure that no child is left behind, and more important, that every child succeeds. **G2G**

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