



# Reenrollment of high school dropouts in a large, urban school district



Institute of Education Sciences  
U.S. Department of Education



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Summary

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**Prepared by**

**BethAnn Berliner  
WestEd**

**Vanessa X. Barrat  
WestEd**

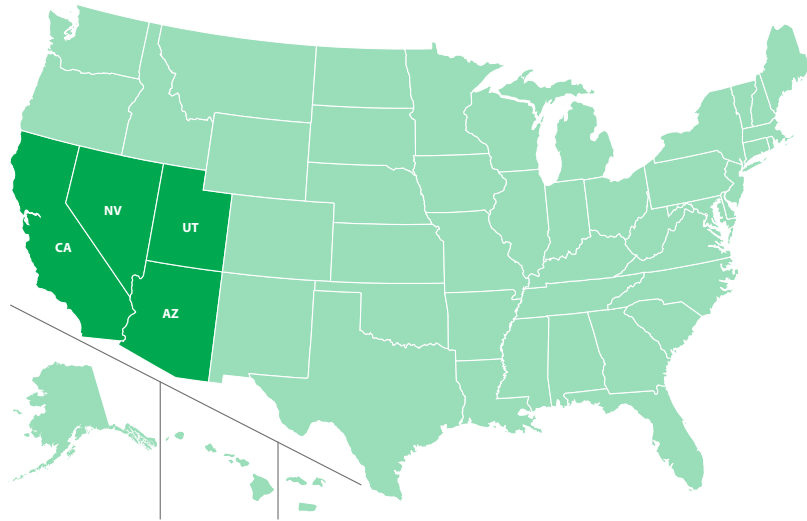
**Anthony B. Fong  
WestEd**

**Paul B. Shirk  
San Bernardino City Unified School District**



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# Reenrollment of high school dropouts in a large, urban school district

**This study follows a cohort of first-time 9th graders in one large urban school district from 2001/02 to 2005/06 and documents their dropout, reenrollment, and graduation rates. For the one-third of dropouts who reenrolled in the district over that period, it reports course credit accrual and graduation outcomes as well as students' reasons for dropping out and the challenges districts face with their reenrollment.**

In 2005/06 an estimated 1.2 million U.S. students did not complete high school with their classmates (National High School Center 2007; Pinkus 2006). While public attention and an extensive research literature focus on the dropout problem evident in that figure, much less is known about the number and characteristics of students who drop out and then reenroll.

This study follows a cohort of first-time 9th graders over five years (2001/02–2005/06) in San Bernardino City Unified School District to describe the magnitude of its dropout problem and the numbers, characteristics, and graduation outcomes of the students who dropped out and subsequently reenrolled in the district. It documents issues related to the reenrollment of dropouts and what district staff and reenrollees say about policies and practices to

improve graduation outcomes for dropouts who return to school. By focusing on reenrollees, this study contributes to shaping policy that addresses the broader dropout challenge.

In 2001/02 there were 3,856 first-time grade 9 students enrolled in San Bernardino City Unified School District high schools. By 2005/06, 45 percent of standard graduates had earned regular high school diplomas, 35 percent had dropped out at least once during the five years, and 20 percent had transferred to other schools and their outcomes are unknown. Dropping out of high school is not necessarily a permanent outcome. Among the dropouts, 31.0 percent eventually reenrolled in a San Bernardino City Unified School District high school during the five years of the study, and 18.4 percent of these reenrollees graduated from a district high school by 2005/06.

This study reports on the personal and academic reasons why students dropped out and reenrolled in high school. In interviews reenrollees reported on both “push” and “pull” factors that motivated their dropout and return to school. The dropout literature describes school experiences that push students out of school before graduation—academic struggles, boredom, and limited ways to make up failed course credits—or life circumstances that pull them in directions that stall

completion—family crises, employment, pregnancy, and gang pressure (Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison 2006; Jordan, McPartland, and Lara 1999). Without a diploma, however, dropouts are often pushed out of the labor market. And principals, teachers, sports coaches, and counselors helped to pull dropouts back to high school by offering to immediately reenroll them in school and by providing counseling and academic assistance on their return.

The enrollment data show that the majority (59.7 percent) of reenrollees dropped out in their first year of high school and that close to half (47.2 percent) returned to school for only one year, earning few course credits.

Reenrollment rates were also assessed by various student background characteristics. Reenrollment rates were lowest for Asian students (13.3 percent), who also had the lowest dropout rate (22.6 percent). Hispanic, English language learner, and male students also had low reenrollment rates but were more likely to drop out than were other students. Hispanic students had a higher dropout rate (39.0 percent) and a lower reenrollment rate (27.9 percent) than students of other races/ethnicities. English language learner students dropped out at a higher rate (43.3 percent) than did other students (32.5 percent) and reenrolled at a lower rate (25.6 percent). Male students were more likely to drop out than were female students (39.5 percent compared with 30.7 percent) and less likely to reenroll (28.1 percent compared with 34.7 percent). For these student subgroups low reenrollment rates meant that dropout events became permanent exits from San Bernardino City Unified School District high schools during the period covered by the study.

The highest reenrollment rates were found for grade 9 dropouts (49.4 percent), Black dropouts (43.4 percent), female dropouts (34.7 percent), and student dropouts not classified as English language learner students (33.7 percent). The higher reenrollment rates, especially for grade 9 and Black student dropouts, demonstrate how dropout events can be a temporary interruption rather than a permanent high school outcome.

The reenrollment rates showed less variability by suspension and low socioeconomic status than by the other characteristics analyzed, staying close to the overall 31.0 percent reenrollment rate of the study cohort.

The evidence also indicates that while reenrollees fared better than dropouts who did not return to a district school, most did not earn enough course credits upon reenrollment to graduate within the five years of the study. Nevertheless, 18.4 percent of reenrollees earned a district high school diploma by 2005/06.

District contacts reported a strong commitment to reenrolling dropouts but cited practical challenges or disincentives to reenrollment. They noted the complexity of offering credit-recovery interventions for credit-deficient students at continuation schools and the lack of such interventions at traditional high schools.<sup>1</sup> Demand generally exceeds enrollment capacity at continuation schools, which offer these interventions for reenrollees. Funding concerns were especially pressing on the district and high schools. State funds, tied to enrollment and attendance rates, were reduced as a result of the unstable enrollment and attendance of dropouts and reenrollees.

District contacts also explained that the poor attendance of reenrollees—and the likelihood that they will drop out again—made it difficult to meet specific testing, graduation, and other accountability requirements. Given these challenges, district administrators, principals, and reenrollees presented their suggestions for improving graduation outcomes for dropouts who reenroll in district high schools.

This study of one district offers findings on which future research can build. Findings about the magnitude of the dropout problem and the numbers, characteristics, and graduation outcomes of reenrolled students could

change as the results of additional longitudinal research on dropouts and reenrollees become available.

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Note

1. Continuation schools, public alternative schools for students ages 16–18, offer a more flexible schedule than traditional high schools for students who have fallen behind, allowing them to make up failed credits and earn additional credits toward graduation at a quicker pace.