



**NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR
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RESEARCH CENTER SAYS STATE MUST DO ITS HOMEWORK ON DROPOUTS

The North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research released a major study of high school dropouts today, concluding that too many students drop out of high school. The report, "Missing Persons: Understanding and Addressing High School Dropouts in North Carolina," analyzes ways to calculate the dropout and graduation rates, assesses who drops out and why, reviews programs designed to minimize the number of dropouts, and recommends policies that the state should consider as it tackles this pressing state problem.

"Here's the sad truth," says Mebane Rash Whitman, editor of *North Carolina Insight*, the Center's journal. "Too many students drop out of school in our state. It's time for the state to do its homework. We need to know exactly how many students drop out each year and how to keep them in school."

How To Count Dropouts

There are a variety of ways to calculate dropout rates, and over the years there has been a good deal of controversy over which rate the state should report. Tracking cohort rates, which follow the actions of a group of individual students that begin high school at the same time, is considered the most accurate method in many ways. The Center study reports that the N.C. Department of Public Instruction released four-year cohort graduation rates for the first time in February 2007. Using this method, 68.1 percent of all students in North Carolina graduated from high school in four years. Whitman says, "That is not enough, and the state must do more to keep students in school. Of the students that do not graduate in four years, some graduate in five years or longer, some graduate with a certificate, and others drop out. Despite improvements in calculating the percentage of students that graduate in four years, the percentage of dropouts in North Carolina is still unknown." The Center commends the N.C. Department of Public Instruction for generating four-year cohort graduation rates and urges the state to use this data to develop dropout prevention policies.

Who Drops Out and Why

The Center study finds that the largest number of dropouts leave school between 9th and 10th grades – after the first year of high school. Students are having a harder time clearing the 9th grade and adjusting to high school.

By ethnic group in North Carolina, Native Americans have the highest dropout rates, followed in rank order by Latinos, African-Americans, whites, and Asians. By gender, no matter the race or ethnicity, boys are more likely to drop out than girls.

Students drop out for a host of reasons. “Pull” factors are external family and environmental pressures that tend to pull a student away from school. Pull factors include issues such as pregnancy or the need to become family breadwinners. “Push” factors are school experiences that tend to push a student out of school. Push factors include the student’s perception of the relevancy of school curriculum, a school’s willingness to accept and accommodate students who learn differently, and societal signaling devices such as the state’s compulsory attendance law, which allows students to drop out legally after age 16.

Current Programs, Interventions, and Policies in North Carolina

The Center’s study reviews a variety of programs and interventions – Communities in Schools, dropout prevention counseling, alternative schools, Eckerd Therapeutic Camps, middle college, the small schools initiative, block scheduling, and restrictions on driver’s licenses, among others. All of these initiatives are designed to minimize dropouts in our state. North Carolina is fortunate to have a variety of approaches to reduce the number of high school dropouts but without data on each program’s effectiveness, statewide progress will be limited.

Center Says the State Needs To Do Its Homework on the Issue of Dropouts

The Center says the state needs to do its homework on the issue of dropouts. Whitman says, “To get an ‘A’ on this homework assignment, the state needs to do four things. We need to know how many students drop out each year. We need to consider keeping them in school until age 18. While we’ve got them in school, we need to make sure their school work is relevant and interesting. And local dropout prevention plans would go a long ways towards helping address this statewide problem on a local level.”

The Center’s study includes the following policy recommendations:

- The state should continue to expand its effort to provide the true picture of the dropout problem through continued reporting of four-year cohort graduation rates. The study recommends tracking four-year cohort dropout rates as well. These reports will improve our understanding of the problem and allow better comparisons nationally.
- The N.C. General Assembly’s Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee should study the impact of raising the compulsory school attendance age from age 16 to 18 as part of a policy of encouraging as many students as possible to complete high school. States such as Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin, which long have had a compulsory attendance age of 18, experience lower dropout rates than North Carolina.
- The N.C. Department of Public Instruction should consider revising and updating its school curricula by adding more real-world elements such as service learning, internships, and career exploration with an eye toward increasing the relevance of the curriculum and increasing the number of students who stay in school. The curriculum is currently weighted more toward college-bound students. Curricula and graduation requirements must be made relevant and meaningful to all students.
- The N.C. General Assembly should require the N.C. Department of Public Instruction to formally evaluate all existing dropout prevention programs and policies and provide funds for this evaluation. Once N.C. DPI completes its research, N.C. DPI should require each local school system to develop a research-based dropout prevention plan that addresses the unique needs of its school population and incorporates resources available in its own community. Whitman says, “There is no single reason that students drop out, and there is no single fix for this important public policy problem. The research needs to be done by the state, but the problem needs to be addressed locally.”

About the Center

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit research corporation created in 1977 to evaluate state government programs and to study public policy issues facing North Carolina. The Center is supported in part by a grant from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation in Winston-Salem, with additional support from nine other private foundations, 150 corporate contributors, and about 600 individual and organizational members. The Center thanks Progress Energy of Raleigh, N.C., The Mary Duke Biddle Foundation of Durham, N.C., and The Cemala Foundation of Greensboro, N.C. for their grants in support of this project. In addition to publishing *North Carolina Insight*, the Center also publishes *Article II: A Guide to the N.C. Legislature* and in-depth research reports. The Center recently has conducted studies on governance of North Carolina's public universities, the shortage of public school teachers in North Carolina, domestic violence, economic development in Eastern North Carolina, and the pros and cons of state lotteries. Copies of the issue of *North Carolina Insight* containing the Center's research evaluating dropouts in North Carolina are available for \$20, which includes tax, postage, and handling. To order, write the Center at P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC 27602, call (919) 832-2839, fax (919) 832-2847, or email tbromley@nccppr.org

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