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Urban CEO Superintendents' Alternative Strategies in Reducing School Dropouts

John R. Hoyle
Virginia Collier
Texas A&M University

The focus is on strategies used by 10 urban districts to reduce school dropouts. Thirty-eight strategies for dropout prevention were identified. Although the majority identified dropout prevention strategies, only two districts referred to "recovery programs." If district spokespersons mentioned their CEOs using a systems approach in reducing dropouts, the program plans were more specific and recovery programs more active. A surprise was the silence about instructional initiatives for early grade intervention and dropout prevention. The most common prevention strategy was punitive measures involving the criminal justice system, that is, police departments, district attorneys. Thus, it is not surprising that the dropout rate in several of these cities remains unabated during the past 5 years.

Keywords: *dropout prevention strategies; urban CEOs and systems leadership; urban schools*

Will the high school graduation rate increase to 90% by 2010? We are already 5 years behind schedule. Urban school CEOs are looking for ways to reduce the number of America's youth who drop out of school and fail to achieve the American dream. CEOs are searching for alternative curricula and funding for programs to meet the educational, social, and personal needs of adolescents who have lost hope in earning a high school diploma. Green (2001) reported that "the problem of low graduation rates is really an urban problem" (p. 4). He analyzed 50 of the largest districts in America and found that Cleveland, Ohio, had the lowest overall high school graduation rate, and the highest graduation rate was 87% in Fairfax County, Virginia. As a result of these alarming statistics, beleaguered urban school executives are

turning to systems leadership strategies to engage community, state, and national agencies; foundations; and government in sharing the struggle of keeping our youth in school and ensuring higher percentages of high school graduates (Björk & Lindle, 2001; Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000; Hoyle, Björk, Collier, & Glass, 2005; Jenlink, 2001; McCarthy, 2002). Urban CEOs are finding that urban social and economic conditions, stiffer course requirements for graduation, and the growth of “high-stakes” exams have increased the retention of students in the ninth grade that portends greater numbers of high school dropouts.

To assist in addressing the problem, this article strives to deepen the search for solutions to the growing dropout problem in urban school districts and investigate current strategies. We review student dropout statistics: who drops out of school, the devastating costs of dropouts to America’s economy, and the toll on human lives. Next, a framework of research examines the complexities of why students drop out, followed by the research procedures including the 10 questions directed to district dropout administrators. Then, we present the findings including a table matching the 15 alternative strategies by the National Dropout Prevention Center with the strategies under way in the 10 selected districts. We close the article with conclusions and recommendations based on insights gleaned from the inquiry.

Who Drops Out

Despite efforts to increase high school completion in the United States, each year approximately 5% of all high school students drop out of school (Kaufman, Kwon, Klein, & Chapman, 1999). According to the Children’s Defense Fund, one high school student drops out every 9 secs, and students most likely to drop out are disabled, Hispanic, African American, Native American, or from low-income families (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). If these students live in urban areas and come from single-parent homes, their chances for completing high school remain at 50% (Fry, 2003). Russell Rumberger (2001) reported that in the 1997-1998 school year, 479,000 students dropped out of high school, and Rumberger and Lamb (1998) reported that 21% of students who were eighth graders in 1988 dropped out before Grade 12. Duffrin (2003) warned, moreover, that students who fall behind in credits during the ninth grade, creating the “bulge,” are 5 times more likely to drop out than students who advance to the 10th grade and fail no more than one course. In addition, Mark Goldberg (2005) reminded us, “If a student is held back twice by grade nine, he or she

may reach the age at which dropping out of school does not require parental permission” (p. 392).

In a landmark study, Green (2001) reported that fewer than 50% of urban African Americans and Latinos/Latinas graduated from the 45 urban districts where there were sufficient data to analyze. Thus, African Americans and Hispanics are more likely than non-Hispanics to drop out of school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). However, Vaishali Honawar (2004) cautioned dropout researchers about the elusive nature of counting dropout numbers of Hispanic youth this way: “Nearly 9 percent of Hispanics in grades 10 through 12 in the 2000-2001 academic year dropped out before the end of the year” (p. 6). These figures are subject to error because large numbers of Hispanics are immigrants who never attended school in the United States. For example, in 2001, 43.4% of the Hispanics age 16 to 24 years who were born outside the United States were high school dropouts. Hispanics born in the United States were much less likely to drop out (Honawar, 2004).

Some observers reasoned that the decline in dropouts is a result of youth choosing an alternative route by taking the GED. Rumsberger (2001) observed that “10 percent of all young people completed high school through an alternative means in 1998 compared to 4 percent in 1988” (p. 1). The General Equivalency Diploma (GED) alternative is one answer to why the proportion of students completing high school appears to remain steady whereas the proportion earning high school diplomas has actually declined.

Some researchers doubt the accuracy of the U.S. Department of Education dropout analyses based on household surveys and rely on the U.S. Census Bureau data (Fry, 2003). The Census Bureau (2002) reports the status dropout rate (the percentage of an age group that is not enrolled and has not earned a high school credential; i.e., diploma or equivalent, such as a GED) has declined in all major racial and/or ethnic groups. During the 1990s, the Hispanic dropout rate fell from 21.8% in 1990 to 21.1% in 2000. Thus, although various databases about who drops out are becoming more accessible, it is challenging for researchers, CEOs, and other policy makers to interpret the data.

Counting Dropouts

Confusion remains about various methods state education departments and school districts use to estimate dropout rates. These methods range from estimated percentages of students making the transition from Grade 11 to Grade 12, to comparing numbers of students who enter Grade 9 and graduate 3 years later. In addition, the definitions of the terms *dropout rates*, *dropout percentages*, and *dropout numbers* add to the confusion.

One best effort to bring clarity to the dropout count is Gregory Wood's (2001) definitive work that classified dropouts into four categories: event, status, cohort, and high school completion rates. *Event rate* is the number of students who drop out each year compared to previous years; *status rate* is higher than event rate because it calculates the proportion of all individuals in the population who have not finished high school and are not enrolled at a given point in time; *cohort rate* is the number of dropouts from a single age group or grade during a period of time; and the *high school completion rate* indicates the percentage of all persons age 21 and 22 years who have earned a high school diploma or equivalency certificate (L. Wood, 1994). In spite of Wood's classification of dropouts, the numbers remain elusive and inaccurate because of confusing state department policies, reporting rules, inconsistent data gathering, and interpretation procedures.

Another notable method for calculating graduation rates was designed by Green (2001). He identified the eighth-grade enrollment for each subgroup (White, African American, and Latino/Latina) for the fall of 1993 and followed the students to determine how many high school diplomas were awarded in the spring of 1998, when those eighth graders should have graduated. His formula is the following: "Graduation rate = regular diplomas from 1998/adjusted eighth-grade enrollment from 1993" (p. 1).

Perhaps confusion over the preferred methods of reporting dropouts has caused unintended or intended unethical behaviors. Christopher Brauchi (2003) described the errors found in the Houston, Texas, Independent School District in the 2001-2002 school year. The district reported that only 1.5% of its students dropped out of school, making Houston a model for other urban districts. Reporting procedures became suspect when a Houston high school assistant principal asked his principal why the school reported 100% attendance and no dropouts after he discovered that school enrollment went from 1,000 freshmen to fewer than 300 seniors 3 years later. In spite of this revelation, according to Brauchi, "The school continued to claim no dropouts and the principal stood her ground" (p. 1). The "whistle-blowing" assistant principal was assigned to another position.

Increased pressures on urban school administrators from the CEO superintendent on down to the campus attendance clerk is not surprising because bonuses are awarded for improved student attendance and higher test scores. To reduce these pressures from superiors, some administrators may report distorted numbers to avoid reprimand or searching for another job. In sum, counting methods and reporting remains problematic in framing the total picture of who actually drops out. These loosely coupled data management and reporting problems reflect gaps in the knowledge base of system administrators in determining who actually drops out of their school districts.

The High Costs of Dropouts

District CEOs are charged to be cost-effective with every tax dollar. For every school dropout, the district loses financial and human capital. Because state and local school funding formulas rely on student attendance, every dropout has a negative impact on resources to meet student needs. Even though Hanushek (1989) and Hedges, Laine, and Greenwald (1994) found little empirical evidence that more money automatically produces higher student achievement, they believe that better resources promote better teaching, smaller classes, and more communal schools (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Other scholars suggest that the amount of school resources influences school dropout and faculty turnover rates. Not only do schools struggle to provide equitable funding for all students but also students who drop out become economic burdens for state and federal governments. Dropouts cost the United States an estimated U.S. \$260 billion annually in lost earnings, taxes, and social services (U.S. Department of Labor, 2000). Incarceration rates and school dropouts have a high positive correlation because more than one half of Americas' federal prison inmates are high school dropouts (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1998). A 1% increase in high school graduation rates would save approximately \$1.4 billion in incarceration costs, or about \$2,100 per each male high school graduate (CompuServe, 2004). Between the 1985-1986 and 2003-2004 school years more than 2 million students, largely from urban districts, have dropped out and cost the state of Texas more than \$500 billion in income, lost tax revenues, welfare, unemployment, and criminal justice costs (Johnson, 2004). Thus, large numbers of urban dropouts remain an American social tragedy in terms of our nation's influence in a global economic market and in our social systems to support the health and educational needs of our citizenry.

Why Students Drop Out

It is now common knowledge that reasons surrounding the drop-out problem are inextricably linked to issues affecting our demographic, social, political, and economic way of life. Child abuse, poverty, family instability, unemployment, and discrimination are embedded in the reasons our youth quit school. In addition, greater press for accountability by state policy and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) mandates ending social promotion and increasing the difficulty of high school exit exams could increase the number of dropouts (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). The NCLB Act requires that all groups of students be tested and required to meet the same standards.

Oregon classroom teacher Janene Thomas (2005) believed that a single score that determines future success for her diverse students will create more failures and increase the number of school dropouts. She questioned how scores on a single test can provide accurate information to help guide the achievement of the nation's "historically low-achieving groups, students in special education programs, those from impoverished homes, minority students, and English-language learners" (p. 385). She believed that a single high-stakes test is an inadequate measure for her diverse students who do not learn the "same thing in the same amount of time" (p. 385). Other observers find single high-stakes testing too narrow and unrelated to skills needed to become successful citizens and believe it will only increase the dropout rate in America (McNeil, 2000; Popham, 2003).

In spite of these concerns, however, the NCLB test-based accountability has gained support from legions of political, corporate, and higher education officials demanding "rigorous standards" and from advocates for poor children who have been neglected and allowed to fail in America's classrooms. Supporters of high-stakes testing believe that the tests promote alignment of the curriculum with the tests and consequently standardization of the curriculum and that they provide student performance data to help make informed decisions about each student (Fuller & Johnson, 2001; Lunenburg, 2002; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2001). However, teacher Janene Thomas (2005) and others argued that NCLB limits options for all students and should be replaced by more flexible child-centered curricula and instruction (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; McNeil, 2000; Rapp, 2002; Spring, 2002). These opponents to NCLB support preparing children and youth for life and instilling cultural appreciation, respect for social justice, and traditions that define an educated person. A "one best model" for all children and youth is viewed as mean spirited and unresponsive to individual needs and lacking respect for unique talents and ways of learning and knowing. When flexibility in teaching and testing is lost, students of poverty and English language deficits become public school casualties, and they join the ranks of the unemployed, turn to crime, become depressed, and live in poverty. Poverty, especially among minority youth from single-parent homes in urban centers, presents a pattern of violence, fear, and day-to-day survival. As a result, resource-poor schools are expected to solve these complex problems.

Although schools play a strategic role in social justice and students' keys to a better life, school leaders realize that they cannot solve the problems alone. Unless community agencies and state and national government build stronger links to turn the plight of urban and rural children in a positive direction,

America will fail to live up to its promise of opportunity for all. Dropouts, “pushouts,” and burnouts are difficult to save in high school. They are saved in preschool through Grade 3 (Hess, Lyons, & Corsino, as cited in Ormrod, 1995; Hoyle, 1993). Few will argue that the National Education Goal 1 is not commendable; however, few believed at the time or now that “by the year 2000 all children in America will start to school ready to learn.”

Research findings reveal the obvious link between high absenteeism and low test scores (McNeal, 1997; Rumberger, 1995; Temple & Reynolds, 1997). Fred Lunenburg’s (2002) research on improving student achievement to prevent dropouts is a collaborative effort. He wrote,

Sustained district wide improvement is not possible without a strong connection across levels of organization and each school is supported by a strong external infrastructure, stable political environments, and resources outside the school, including leadership from the superintendent and school board as well as leadership from the state. (p. 22)

Thus, the causes of dropouts and links to school effectiveness and community collaborations have been well documented. America, however, is 4 years behind in reaching the school completion Goal 2, “By the year 2000 the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent” (National Education Goals Panel, 1999). Because research clearly establishes that the greatest numbers of student dropouts are in urban centers, we have investigated dropout prevention strategies implemented in 10 urban districts.

Urban District Selection

We selected 10 of 30 urban districts suggested by American Association of School Administrator (AASA) with supporting data from *Education Week*, the AASA’s *Daily Web News*, Intercultural Development Research Association, and other media sources for education information. We attempted to select the 10 districts based on their locations, similar demographics, and various strategies under way to keep students in school until they graduate. The 10 districts are the following:

- Colorado Springs, Colorado, District #11
- Dallas, Texas, Independent School District
- Los Angeles, California, Unified School District
- Miami-Dade County, Florida, Public Schools
- Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Public Schools

- Sacramento, California, Unified School District
- San Antonio, Texas, Independent School District
- San Francisco, California, Unified School District
- Salt Lake City, Utah, Schools
- Tulsa, Oklahoma, Public Schools

In all 10 urban districts, the administrator delegated by the superintendent to be responsible for student accounting and who agreed to be interviewed by telephone and to provide district policies and drop out prevention documents was our contact person.

Research Procedures

The current study was focused on identifying dropout prevention strategies in selected urban school districts as reflected in the policies, strategies, and actions taken by CEO superintendents. As a result of the extensive literature about dropout statistics and the controversies in defining and calculating dropouts found above, we chose to focus on prevention strategies in use or in future plans. Eight questions were created to identify district similarities with the 15 strategies recommended by the National Dropout Center that have positive effects on the dropout rate in the United States. The eight questions are as follows:

- What strategies are you using to keep kids in school?
- Has your district changed its process of determining dropouts?
- What community agency leaders are helping to keep kids in school?
- What do you suggest as the best system to monitor student attendance?
- Who is responsible for leading your dropout program?
- At what level do your dropout interventions begin?
- Do you have any indicators of past success in reducing dropouts?
- On a scale of 1-10, where does dropout prevention and recovery of dropouts rate as a district goal?

After completing the interviews and document reviews, we aligned the information to the 15 National Dropout Prevention Center Strategies (see Table 1). Follow-up phone calls were made to the same or another administrator if clarification was necessary. We tried to allay fears of negative publicity by promising them a final document that should provide helpful strategies found in the other districts. Because of heightened scrutiny by the news media and state legislators about the dropout problem, we assured spokespersons in each district that the findings would highlight their efforts to increase graduation rates.

Table 1
Links to the 15 Strategies Recommended by
the National Dropout Prevention Center

Recommended	Links to Strategies
1. Evidence of systemic renewal	Changing the system referenced Staff development implemented District-level personnel involved Staff designated for dropout programs
2. Evidence of professional development	Professional Learning Communities developed Students taught resiliency strategies
3. Early childhood education	Early childhood not referenced
4. Alternative schooling	Charter schools Digital schools Elective and mandatory alternative programs Hospital program Night school Summer school and/or institutes
5. Instructional technologies	Digital school Technology used in tracking attendance and general automatic parent notices
6. Service learning	None
7. Conflict resolution	Court action Mediation program offered by city agencies (police, etc.) Anger management and/or antiharassment programs
8. Out-of-school experiences	Work education programs
9. Community collaboratives	Support of civic clubs Support of private corporations Involvement with the legal system (police, district attorney, juvenile courts, county officials)
10. Family involvement	Efforts to build awareness regarding importance of attendance
11. Reading and writing programs	No reference to specific programs
12. Individualized instruction	Mentioned once in regard to digital schools
13. Mentoring/tutoring	Provided by private corporations, police, community organizations Mentoring by staff members
14. Learning style/multiple intelligence strategies	Not mentioned
15. Career education/workforce	Work education mentioned in one district

Findings

The ease with which information could be obtained seemed to be an indication of the importance of dropout strategies in a district. If a phone call to the superintendent's office resulted in the quick identification of a name for "the person responsible for dropouts in the district," the result was a conversation with an individual who seemed to focus on dropouts. If identifying the correct person to answer the questions required a callback or referrals from one person to another until individuals who saw themselves as being knowledgeable about dropouts were contacted, then the clarity with which the individual spoke was tempered. It was common for individuals in this latter category to reference other responsibilities they had in the district in addition to dropouts.

Individuals who were clearly focused on dropouts referred to the superintendent's interest in and/or support for dropout prevention and recovery strategies. The inclusion of dropout prevention and recovery was also mentioned as a board goal in the districts. This attention from the CEO and the board can be assumed to be the reason there was an individual responsible for dropouts in those districts.

Three districts referenced formal dropout prevention and recovery plans. Each district approached the development of their plan differently. Committees representative of diverse groups within and outside the districts were common. In Colorado Springs, the plan was developed by forming committees focused on the 15 strategies identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center. When a committee determined a strategy was not adequately addressed in the district, the committee developed plans for services to address the need. Without exception, however, the district spokesperson for each district, with or without a formal plan, indicated that he or she anticipated dropout initiatives would grow in importance in the next few years, partially because of NCLB. All of the district spokespersons indicated that their programs were works in progress and that they were seeking strategies that will assist them with their planning.

Strategies Identified

District spokespersons identified 38 strategies. The researchers grouped the strategies into six categories. The categories are (a) punishments and incentives, (b) personnel, (c) targeted programs, (d) alternative schools, (e) community involvement, and (f) instructional initiatives (see Table 2).

(text continues on p. 82)

Table 2
Categorized List of Strategies Named by District Spokespersons, December 2004

Strategy	Colorado Springs, CO	Dallas, TX	Los Angeles, CA, Unified	Miami Dade, FL	Oklahoma City, OK	Sacramento, CA	San Antonio, TX	San Francisco, CA	Salt Lake City, UT	Tulsa, OK
Punishment and incentives										
Access to higher education		X								
Attendance incentives			X				X			
Criminal courts and/or peer courts			X		X		X		X	X
Personnel										
Attendance monitoring	X			X				X		
Coordination of service teams			X							
Counseling for individuals and groups						X	X		X	
Dedicated district personnel			X			X			X	
On-campus student support personnel	X		X							
Social workers									X	
Parental involvement	X	X	X	X		X*				
Format district prevention plan	X	X		X						
Targeted programs										
After-school programs						X			X	
Anger management and/or antiharassment										X
Elementary program			X					X	X	
Gang prevention								X	X	

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Strategy	Colorado Springs, CO	Dallas, TX	Los Angeles, CA, Unified	Miami Dade, FL	Oklahoma City, OK	Sacramento, CA	San Antonio, TX	San Francisco, CA	Salt Lake City, UT	Tulsa, OK
Substance abuse programs				X					X	
Transition support (primarily between middle school and high school)										
Reconnection centers		X					X			
Truancy										
Alternative schools	X	X	X		X	X	X			
(disciplinary)										
Alternative schools (elective)	X		X		X					
Charter schools	X									
Digital schools	X									
Hospital program and/or pregnancy					X				X	
Night schools	X								X	
Summer institutes	X									
Work education			X							
Community involvement										
Private companies and/or organizations		X	X				X			
Faith based						X				
Government agencies (including police)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	

Punishments and Incentives

Out of the 38 strategies referenced in the current study, six districts referenced alternative schools that are a mixture of places designed to encourage and/or entice students to remain in school while other districts referenced disciplinary alternative schools including Texas mandatory disciplinary campuses. It should be noted that five districts referenced the criminal justice system in some way when discussing their dropout strategies. This is probably because compulsory attendance laws result in some level of involvement with the legal system. City and county courts were mentioned with the greatest frequency. In California, there appears to be a strong relationship between school districts and the district attorneys, as Los Angeles and San Francisco Unified Districts referenced their relationship with the city and district attorneys.

Peer courts were also mentioned as an extension of involvement with the legal system and sometimes funded and managed by a branch of the legal system. Even parental involvement was linked to the legal system. This involvement ranged from the district taking parents to court for violating compulsory attendance laws to the required parental meetings held by the attorney general's office in Los Angeles when students have excessive absences. Moreover, the researchers found frequent involvement of police departments often through the administration of federal grants through the justice department. The relationship with the legal system is even more evident in the listing of community resources referenced by district spokespersons as charted in Table 2.

Only two districts mentioned incentives; however, punishments such as those listed above were mentioned by eight districts. In addition, attendance incentives and parental involvement activities were the only two programs beginning in the primary grades and continuing through high school. Access to higher education was mentioned by only one district as a strategy used to provide students with an incentive for staying in school. The reader should be reminded, however, that this does not mean that incentive programs do not exist in many, or even all, of the districts. It does imply, however, that incentive programs are not a top priority in the overall strategies being used to address dropout problems.

Personnel

The creation of a new position at either the district or campus level appeared to be directly related to superintendent and board priority ratings of

addressing the dropout problem. Only two districts had identified an individual at the district level to coordinate and conduct programming on dropout reduction. For example, Tulsa Public Schools assign a campus person to monitor and report dropout statistics to the associate superintendent for instructional services. Counseling services for potential dropouts were mentioned by three districts, with the services being provided either by police departments, health department social workers, or school counselors. It is interesting to note, school counselors, because of a lack of time due to other duties, did not seem to focus on dropout prevention. In at least three districts the counselors referred students to social services or other county youth counseling agencies. Parental involvement was a frequently mentioned strategy especially at the elementary and middle school levels. At these levels, the focus was on attendance with various incentives being mentioned. At the secondary level, parental involvement was mentioned and was more likely to be less frequently linked to law enforcement and the courts. For instance, in Los Angeles Unified, excessive absences result in a parent being called to a meeting with the city attorney. In several instances, parents being fined for their child's excessive absences were mentioned.

Personnel were in place in each district to monitor dropout programs. In Los Angeles Unified, dropout prevention consultant positions were added with new grant funds. These consultants on campuses organize coordination services teams that include an administrator and other district and campus personnel and are expected to meet as frequently as needed. These teams focus on individual students and provide them mentors to guide them toward improved performance and attendance.

Targeted Programs

All districts mentioned at least one program targeted at a particular problem or need. Examples are an after-school program planned to provide students with academic support with tutors and with supervised activities until parents or guardians pick them up. Other programs focused on student behavioral or social problems. Such programs addressed anger management and/or antiharassment, gang prevention, substance abuse, and truancy. Several of these programs were being conducted in cooperation with state or private health agencies or local police departments. Addressing other student problems were programs for homebound and hospital services—services required by the federal government under Individual Development Education Act (IDEA).

Examples include the reconnection centers in Dallas that work to recover prior dropouts. In Miami-Dade, transition support for students moving into middle school and high school is a targeted strategy. Given the traditionally high attrition rate experienced in the ninth grade, transition strategies for students moving into high school can be presumed to be basic to dropout prevention in each of the 10 districts. Recovery programs were rarely mentioned; however, several spokespersons indicated that recovery programs would be strengthened to meet NCLB standards.

Alternative Schools

Alternative schools were mentioned in six of the districts as one of their first strategies to provide schools of choice. These schools took on varying forms and functions. One of the more innovative alternative schools was a digital school in a Colorado Springs shopping mall. The original intent was to recover dropouts; however, the school was in great demand by students wanting to earn credits to get back on track for graduation. This unexpected response caused the district to plan another mall location and to consider on-campus digital alternative schools on each high school campus.

The most familiar alternative school models were night schools, summer schools, and work education programs. Although not all districts mentioned these alternatives—and none mentioned them as one of their first strategies—this absence may be because these programs have been used for a longer period of time and are a more accepted form of alternative education than the more recent digital, disciplinary or choice schools.

One district referenced a charter school as an alternative for students in the district. This school, however, was run by the district and was not the independent charter school that frequently comes to mind.

Community Involvement

Community involvement in terms of specific organizations are in place in three distinct groups—governmental bodies, private companies, and nonprofit organizations. The governmental bodies involved included state, federal, and city entities. The most frequently mentioned and most of the “hands-on” involvement came from branches of the criminal justice system. Police departments, constables, city and county attorneys, and judges were referred to repeatedly as key elements in dropout strategies. State and

national governments were referenced in regard to grants that had been awarded to individual districts and targeted services provided by branches of the government. An example of service is drug counseling provided by county or state department of health. Grants were most frequently referenced as coming from the federal government. Collaborations with other school districts were also mentioned. For example, three districts join together to provide night schools in Colorado Springs.

Like grants, mentoring programs also involved private businesses. An example is the mentors provided to San Antonio by USAA Insurance. In other districts, local businesses and police provided mentors while others came from faith-based organizations. Some mentoring programs are supported by grants. For example, the Sacramento grant Linking Education and Economic Development comes from a Carnegie grant.

Nonprofit organizations were the third type of support provided by communities. Organizations mentioned by name included Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Club, Boys and Girls Town, and Fathers and Sons. These organizations seemed to be primarily involved in prevention or tutoring.

Instructional Initiatives

Instructional programs in each district are driven primarily by required curriculum and state examinations in reading, math, language arts, social studies, and science. Thus, each school campus is held accountable for aligning instructional programs with exams. Some districts, however, have created smaller learning communities with mentors to assist students in areas of low performance. Professional Learning Communities were a strategy that appeared to be unique to Colorado Springs. These learning communities were described as systematic approaches to dealing with troubled students rather than relying on the individual teachers. The district is applying the teaching and mentoring strategies of Ruby Payne regarding children of color and poverty. Other districts mentioned a variety of programs regarding immigrant children, particularly from Mexico, that were in various stages of development.

The Miami-Dade Coordination of Services Teams seemed similar to Colorado Spring's Professional Learning Communities. Although not traditional staff development, both of these strategies bring together teachers to share information about a student. The resulting growth in understandings of how the system operates and the attitudes and responsibilities of others on the team or in the learning community should result in professional development by the teachers and coordinated support for the student.

The teaching of resiliency strategies to students was mentioned only by Los Angeles Unified School District. Although we are not familiar with the development of resiliency strategies in children, the district spokesperson indicated that it was hoped that this effort would result in more recognition for students, particularly those in troubled schools.

National Dropout Prevention Center Strategies

The strongest links among the districts to the 15 strategies recommended by the National Dropout Prevention Center were Numbers 1, 4, 9, and 13 (see Table 1). The first strategy, *evidence of systematic renewal*, included four related strategies: changing the system referenced, staff development implementation, district-level personnel involved, and staff designated for dropout programs. Strategy 4, *alternative schooling*, included six examples: charter schools, digital schools, elective and mandatory alternative campuses, hospital program, night school, and summer school and/or institutes. Strategy 9, *community collaboration*, includes support of civic clubs, support of private corporations, and involvement with the legal system (police, district attorney, juvenile courts, and county officials). In addition, Strategy 5, *instructional technologies*, includes the digital schools in Colorado Springs, and Strategy 13, *mentoring and tutoring*, is linked with mentoring and tutoring provided by private corporations, police, community nonprofit organizations, and by teachers and other staff members in the district. Thus, we found tenuous links to the 15 promising strategies created by the National Dropout Prevention Center.

Conclusions

The focus of the current study was on strategies used by 10 urban districts to reduce school dropouts. We attempted to identify strategies that the districts viewed as their frontline of attack in reducing dropouts as perceived by the person responsible for overseeing the district dropout prevention programs. Thirty-eight strategies for dropout prevention were mentioned by spokespersons under various labels and emphases. Some of the programs were labeled with a program name such as Professional Learning Communities whereas others are generic, such as alternative schools and summer institutes. Although the majority of the programs were discussed as dropout prevention, two districts referred to "recovery programs." We discovered that if district spokespersons mention their CEOs as taking a specific interest in reducing

dropouts, the program plans were more specific, and recovery programs were active. One surprise was the lack of mention of instructional initiatives for early intervention and dropout prevention. Only one district referred to instructional programming as one of their dropout prevention strategies. The most common reference was to more punitive strategies involving the criminal justice system, that is, police departments, district attorneys, judges, truant offices, and court procedures.

It appears that only three of the districts appointed administrators with sole responsibility for dropout prevention. Although three spokespersons indicated that dropout prevention was their primary concern, the other seven indicated reducing dropouts was one of their multiple responsibilities. This delegation of responsibility for dropout programs may be an artifact of the past central office administrative structures or of adding tasks to some and assigning other personnel to campus leadership positions to monitor new accountability mandates.

In spite of our efforts to glean rich information from district spokespersons, minimum strategies were mentioned that linked to the 15 strategies recommended by the National Dropout Prevention Center. Although evidence of system renewal, alternative schooling, community collaboration, and mentoring and/or tutoring strategies were prominent, the other 11 strategies had little if any links to actual programming in the districts. Again, although the spokespersons may have overlooked specialized instructional programs for early and ongoing intervention, the primary mention was in the digital schools in Colorado Springs.

Thus, as a result of our inquiry it is not surprising that the dropout rate remains unabated during the past 5 years. When one half of our urban children fail to finish high school, urban school CEOs must display system leadership and gain the support for community-wide dropout prevention programs that start with families with children beginning in their early years and continuing until graduation. The 15 strategies are an excellent beginning, and efforts to initiate them in the 10 districts need to be encouraged and funded if they and all urban districts are to slow down the numbers of broken lives because of dropping out of school.

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John R. Hoyle, professor of educational administration at Texas A&M University, is an authority on leadership preparation and standards, the superintendency, and future studies. He has more than 150 publications and served as president of National Council of Professors of Educational Administration and received their first “Living Legend” award. In a 2004 national survey, his peers selected him as one of four “most exceptional living scholars” in educational administration.

Virginia Collier, clinical associate professor at Texas A&M University, served as teacher, principal, and superintendent in Texas for 35 years. She was the first female president of the Texas Association of School Administrators and served on the Texas Board of Educator certification. She is coauthor of *The Superintendent as CEO: Standards-Based Performance* (with L. Bjork, V. Collier, & T. Glass, 2005).