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ANALYSIS

FINDING THE MISSING PIECES IN THE DROPOUT PUZZLE

This issue of Analysis summarizes the League's two-year student retention project designed to develop general guidelines for business participation in dropout prevention programs. The final report will be ready this Fall.

Texas business has undertaken some impressive efforts to reduce the state's high dropout rate. However, while many approaches appear to be promising, it is generally too early to gauge their impact. Few programs are subject to more than cursory evaluations and in most cases obtaining information on results was difficult, if not impossible.

Nevertheless, promising approaches to dropout prevention share some common attributes. These include:

- taking a holistic approach that addresses both social and academic problems;
- targeting students at as early an age as possible and, if feasible, involving parents;
- taking a flexible approach and altering programs as more is learned about successful strategies;
- using age-appropriate incentives and information to connect school with work or college; and

- taking advantage of available community resources in order to avoid duplicating efforts.

While some unique approaches are being tried, there are innovative ideas being applied elsewhere that have yet to find their way into Texas. The Texas business community, with only a few exceptions, has not yet made early intervention in children's lives a top priority. While this is understandable given that dropping out occurs in middle and high school, this failure could limit long term success.

Finally, while programs exist that address the social and academic factors pulling students away from school, the economic factor - the need to get a job - is generally overlooked in business-sponsored efforts. As a result, many Texas students are sacrificing their long-term economic future for short-term gain. Additionally, businesses may be missing an opportunity to use a powerful incentive to keep kids in school - access to a job.

<p>The Governmental Research Association GRA 1991 Award FOR Most Distinguished Research WON BY Texas Research League FOR ITS REPORT "TEXAS COURTS" JULY 16, 1991</p>	<p>The Governmental Research Association GRA 1991 Award FOR Most Effective Brief Presentation of Research WON BY Texas Research League FOR ITS REPORT "THE TEXAS HOMESTEAD LAW: INTRUSIVE ANACHRONISM OR VENERABLE SAFEGUARD?" JULY 16, 1991</p>	<p>TRL WINS TOP AWARD</p> <p>The League won the highest award given by the Government Research Association at the GRA's annual meeting held in July. The <i>Most Distinguished Research</i> award was won by "Texas Courts", written by Harold R. Sanders.</p> <p>Also, the <i>Most Effective Brief Presentation of Research</i> award was awarded to the League's study of "The Texas Homestead Law: Intrusive Anachronism or Venerable Safeguard?", written by John R. Kennedy.</p>
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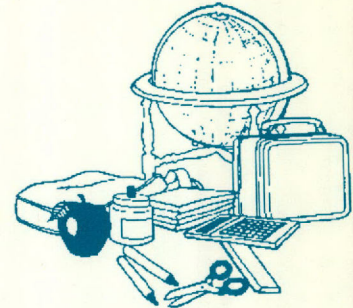
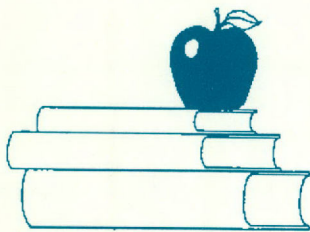
Volume 12
Number 8/9
August/
September
1991

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WHY SHOULD BUSINESS CARE ABOUT DROPOUTS?

In 1989, the League began a project to find out “what works” in dropout prevention. Faced with a variety of approaches, the project was designed to provide Texas business with guidance in developing a comprehensive strategy to keep children in school. At the time, the economic and social consequences of high dropout rates were beginning to be realized by business, government and the education community. Widely-publicized studies calculated the annual economic impact of the state’s dropout rate to be in excess of \$17 billion. Faced with the presumed need to develop a skilled and educated workforce to compete in a global economy, business leaders reacted to these studies by making education reform and dropout prevention top priorities.

Since 1989, much has happened - yet little has changed. Texas’ dropout rate remains unacceptably high, achievement tests paint a dismal picture of Texas students’ academic abilities, and major changes in educational delivery have yet to be made. However, major efforts are underway to change the status quo, efforts which, if sustained, could alter Texas schools’ mediocre performance. Nevertheless, cynics can still claim that progress to date has occurred mainly in the sophistication of the rhetoric used, not in actual results.

The economic costs associated with Texas’ dropout rate are high: an estimated \$17 billion annually in lost wages and tax revenues and in increased spending for social services and prisons. Dropouts are far more likely to be arrested, to be unwed parents, to be on welfare and to be unem-

ployed than are high school graduates. In short, dropouts are a burden upon society. Without action, this burden may grow even worse in the future.

Because of Texas’ demographic characteristics, the school-age population in the future will contain larger numbers of traditionally disadvantaged students. These students are not being well-served by today’s schools and the dropout rate is just one indicator of this. Tests scores also document wide discrepancies in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students. With good reason, business leaders look at this situation with great alarm.

If academic achievement and graduation rates are not raised, the supply of native-born, highly-trained workers will dwindle. As a nation, the U.S.

can always import highly-skilled individuals to fill technical jobs. However, this will undoubtedly worsen society's division into haves and have-nots, with the have-nots including large numbers of minorities stuck in a permanent underclass. In the words of one business executive: "The United States is on its way to becoming the world's first fully-industrialized third world country."

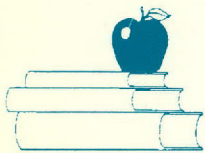
An excellent education system in Texas could make the state very competitive in terms of economic development. Texas has a growing and relatively young population in a nation which is aging. However, without an educated work force the state cannot hope to attract the type of businesses that create higher-paying jobs. Uneducated or undereducated workers will not be able to master the more complex skills needed in a rapidly changing technological environment. Stuck in lower-paying jobs, these workers will lack the purchasing power to buy the consumer goods that business produces. **Unless action is taken now, tomorrow's dropout is more likely to steal a computer than to buy one.**

WHY DOES TEXAS HAVE SUCH A HIGH DROPOUT RATE?

Students who leave school early do so in large numbers before reaching high school. The ninth grade has the highest dropout rate for any grade level. Why? The answer may lie in a combination of academic, social and economic factors.

Academic Factors

State law prevents schools from holding students back more than twice in grades K-8. The result is that many students who have yet to master the required academics are "placed" into the ninth grade. **One-third of Texas ninth grade students are overage for their grade and being overage is an important predictor for dropping out.** If a student is held back again in the ninth grade, that student may be



three years overage when he or she returns to school. Not surprisingly, many do not return.

Poor academic skills, then, are one reason that students leave school early. Yet, not all overage students leave school and not all students who are at grade level stay in school. Lacking basic skills, then, is only part of the equation. What other factors might explain the dropout phenomenon?



Social Factors

Motivation is an important component of school success, indeed success in any endeavor. Without it even bright students can flounder. Motivation can stem

from within and without. Students who have high expectations placed upon them by parents and teachers are often motivated to live up to those expectations. Conversely, when parents and teachers place low expectations on students these unfortunately may be fulfilled as well.

Parental expectations and education level play an important role in a student's success in school. When parents themselves lack a high school diploma, they may not place a high value on their children obtaining a diploma and consequently may set low expectations for success. Texas' adult population, especially its minority population, has a very high proportion of high school dropouts. A University of Georgia study recently concluded that the two most important factors that predict a state's dropout rate are: (1) a high proportion of illiterate adults (Texas has among the highest in the nation) and (2) a high proportion of disadvantaged minorities (again, Texas has among the highest).

Recent studies of Hispanic educational achievement suggest other social factors that may be limiting the upward mobility of Mexican-Americans, Texas' fastest growing minority group. Traditionally, each successive generation of immigrants has achieved higher education levels. However, a recent study by the University of Texas at Austin found that **the longer Mexican-American families are in the United States, the lower their children's education level becomes.**

While no one knows the cause, researchers speculate that first-generation parents are often motivated because they chose to leave their homeland for economic opportunities in this country. The second generation, while better educated, may lose that motivation after working at low-paying jobs or getting stuck on welfare. As a result, they may expect less from their own children.

Some students from very disadvantaged backgrounds do succeed in school. Their parents may expect them to do better than they were able to do or they may possess strong internal motivation that allows them to overcome their situation.

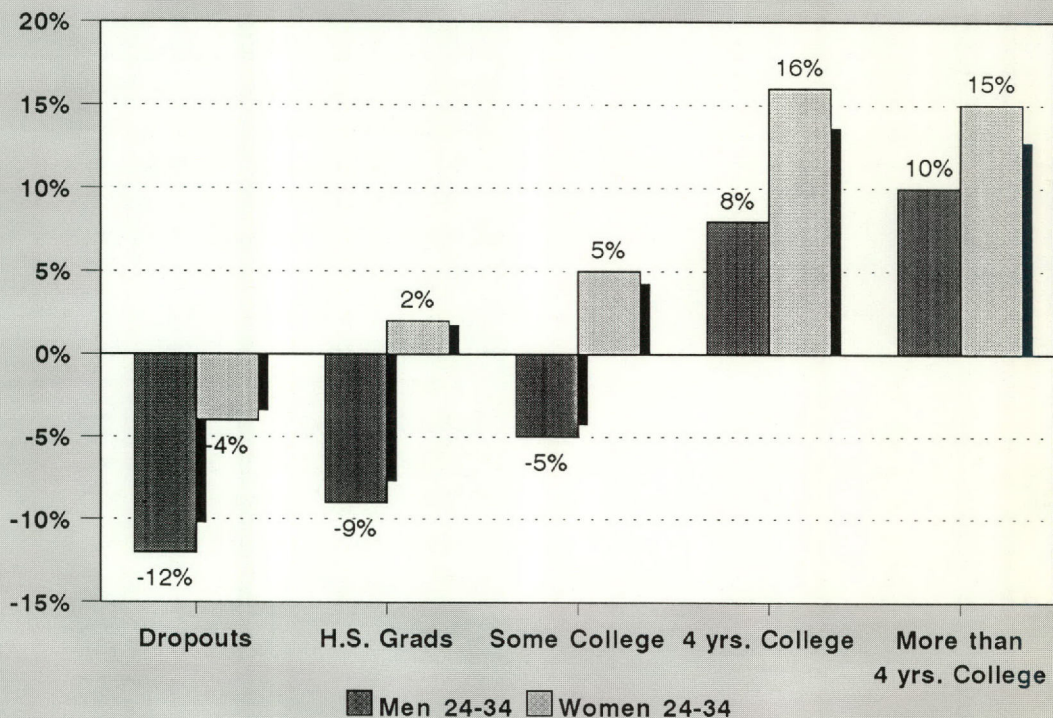
However, statistics suggest that these cases are the exception rather than the rule. Further compounding low expectations for success are the many social ills that have placed today's youth at risk (see "Portrait of an Eighth Grader," page eight).

In summary, at least part of the dropout problem stems from the many social ills which youth face and a cycle of underachievement and low expectations. Any solution to the problem must recognize these factors and provide disadvantaged students with additional social support in order to break this cycle.

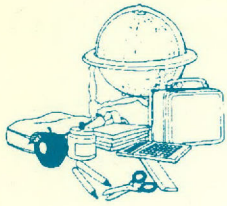
FIGURE ONE

WAGES ARE FALLING FOR ALL BUT THE WELL-EDUCATED

Percent Change in Earnings 1979-1987



Source: National Center on Education and the Economy



Economic Factors

A third reason that Texas has a high dropout rate is economic. In the past, high school dropouts have been able to find gainful employment. However, employment opportunities and real wages for dropouts are decreasing (see Figure One). Potential dropouts, then, need to be made aware of this situation. Given adequate knowledge of the working world, students may be motivated to do better in school and graduate. However, schools historically have remained isolated from the working world.

Helping departing students find employment has never been a major school function. While nearly every school has counselors, most spend their time assisting students in course selection. Additionally, college selection assistance and duties related to state-mandated testing programs eat up a considerable part of available time. According to a 1981 survey, job placement consumed only 4% of counselors' time. Nearly half the students in central city schools never talked to a counselor about occupational choices.

Lacking good information on the employment market and the skills needed to succeed at work, students often fail to see the connection between working hard in school and economic success. Instead, they face a youth labor market where opportunities for the noncollege-bound are limited. This is especially the case for young workers just out of school, a high percentage of whom continue to work at the same dead-end jobs they held during school.

Few large businesses want to hire recent high school graduates; they prefer to wait until young workers have "proven" themselves at another, generally low skill, job. As a result, typical graduates end up working at dead-end jobs until they are in their mid-20s. In contrast, European and Japanese employers seek to hire highly-trained youth before they are 20 years old.

In the past, young workers could get summer or part-time jobs that taught them the rudiments of a trade they could pursue later. If this wasn't the case, they at least got an exposure to the adult world, working with and being supervised by adults. Today, estimates are that three-fourths of working teenagers are in jobs that do not provide any meaningful training. They may rarely apply knowledge learned in school, not even simple mathematics. Checkout scanners and cash registers with product pictures or symbols add up bills and calculate the change for them. In addition, these teenage workers are often supervised by workers who are barely older than they are. As a result, many who work at unchallenging jobs grow cynical about work in general, becoming "burnt out" before they join the permanent work force.

Solving the dropout problem, then, requires constructing a better bridge between school and work. America's foreign competitors already do so; German employers hire from strong apprenticeship programs, and Japanese firms seek references and referrals from school counselors when they hire for entry-level positions. That American employers do not is understandable, given that schools are unable to give meaningful information on prospective employees other than grades and attendance. School-to-work programs can address this problem by giving youth the opportunity to gain, in school, the values, habits and skills that employers want.

A DROPOUT PREVENTION STRATEGY FOR BUSINESS

Based on field research and evidence of what works in other states and countries, a dropout prevention strategy is suggested to address the three sets of factors - academic, social and economic - that lure students from school before high school graduation. Typically, strategies do not neatly fit into one category or another; the best programs attempt to address multiple barriers to school completion.

PEER ASSISTANCE AND LEADERSHIP (PAL)

This nationally-recognized program trains high school juniors and seniors to tutor younger, at-risk youth in their own schools or in feeder elementary or middle schools. Tutors receive course credit by attending classes in problem-solving, listening skills, conflict resolution, drug and alcohol abuse prevention and tutoring techniques.

PAL programs provide a significant amount of assistance to students at a relatively low cost. Programs report having a positive effect in a number of areas, in particular, improvements in "school climate," attendance, academic performance and behavior, as well as in lower dropout rates. Business can contribute to PAL programs in a variety of ways. These include donating money; providing mentors, tutors, and guest speakers; supplying equipment or materials; and offering incentives and discounts to participants.

EXPANDED ADOPT-A-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

The **Ranger Insurance Company** in Houston supplies its adopted school, the Ryan Middle School, with tutors. Between 40 and 60 Ranger employees donate their time as tutors after school and on Saturdays. When this partnership began in 1987-88 Ryan ranked 24th out of 25 Houston middle schools in its performance on state tests; in 1990-91 the school tied for 11th place among Houston middle schools.

Tenneco, Inc. has had a ten year relationship with Jefferson Davis High School in Houston. Tenneco's involvement is unique in that it is a comprehensive assistance program that provides support before a student enters high school and continues through college. To ease the transition to high school, the Bridge Program helps students improve their study skills and learn problem-solving techniques during the summer **before** they enter high school. Tenneco employees serve as mentors and tutors in the program.

Tenneco also supports the Jesse H. Jones Academic Institute, a summer program designed to improve the prospects of Davis students who want to go on to college. This program improves students' prospects for attending college by testing them for their academic proficiencies and developing specific curricula to meet students' needs. Tenneco pays a stipend to each student who successfully completes the four-week course. Courses are conducted by the University of Houston-Downtown and graduates are provided with summer jobs at educational institutions by the Tenneco/CIS (Communities in Schools) Summer Jobs Training Program. Worksite sponsors serve as mentors for the students, helping them

to develop career goals. The program has served more than 800 students and boasts a 98% completion rate.

In 1983, Tenneco began offering college scholarships to two graduating students each year. The scholarships provided \$2,500 per year for four years. However, since relatively few Davis students went on to college, the company decided to offer a broader scholarship program to encourage more students to seek a higher education. Beginning in 1992, **Tenneco Presidential Scholarships** will provide all graduating seniors at the school who meet certain eligibility requirements with \$1,000 per year in scholarship money to attend college. Interested students must attend at least two summer programs at the academic institute.

A MODEL EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

The **Texas Instruments Foundation** in Dallas has shown how a business can become involved in improving early childhood programs. The foundation has provided a grant to establish a model early childhood program building on the federal Head Start program. Other participants in the center are the **Meadows Foundation**, the **Communities Foundation**, the University of Texas at Arlington and the Julius C. Freezer Elementary School. The center provides education, nutrition, social services for families and a parental involvement component. Unlike most Head Start programs, the center provides full-day (nine hours) service and operates for 12 months rather than nine. Grant funds make possible the hiring of additional personnel, supplementing salaries for regular Head Start staff and paying for indirect administrative costs for services not included in the regular Head Start program.

ACCELERATED LEARNING

Chevron U.S.A., has demonstrated its support for accelerated schools by committing \$180,000 to the accelerated schools effort in the Houston area, part of a \$1.4 million national commitment over a three-year period. Chevron employees are also active volunteers at the J. Will Jones elementary school, an inner-city school where the accelerated learning concept is being applied.

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

There are a number of alternative schools with private sector support in Texas. Examples include **Foley's Academy** in Houston, the **Burger King Academy** in San Antonio and the **PAYS School** in Sar Angelo. These programs share a number of similar features: smaller school size; smaller classes; individualized, self-paced instruction; and access to counseling and other services, often through the Communities-in-Schools program.

1. TO ADDRESS THE ACADEMIC FACTORS: Strategies that supply students with the academic support they need to stay at grade level.

Tutoring programs. Several promising programs providing tutorial assistance to at-risk youth exist in Texas. These programs also provide social support and, in some cases, financial incentives to participating students.

Cross-age Tutoring

This has been shown to provide significant benefits to both student tutors and to those being tutored. At one time, students tutoring each other was commonplace, providing a cost-effective and efficient method of instruction. Today, peer tutoring is coming back in vogue as a way to reach at-risk youth who need more individualized help than teachers alone can provide. Peer tutoring works because at-risk youth tend to learn best in company with other students.

Adult Tutors

Business-sponsored tutoring efforts using company employees can have an impact on student achievement. Volunteer tutors can demonstrate to youth that adults care about their education. Also, they can offer "real life" examples to illustrate how particular concepts being taught have application in their work, thus answering the oft-repeated questions: Why do I need to know this? When will I ever use this once I leave school?

Early Childhood Programs

One intervention strategy that has a proven track record is early childhood education programs. Yet, most business efforts focus on the schools and continue to treat education as if it is something that does not begin until age four or five. Students born today will not enter kindergarten until 1996 and will not graduate until 2009 - if they make it that far. Recognizing this, the Committee for Economic Development, a business-sponsored research group, has commented that "...children need more than education reform.

BRINGING SOCIAL SERVICES TO SCHOOL

Communities in Schools (CIS) is perhaps the largest single dropout prevention effort in Texas. Based on the national Cities in Schools model, its Texas roots date back to 1979. Legislation passed this year will allow the program to grow significantly during the next two years. CIS is a public/private partnership that provides at-risk students with access to support services to keep the student in school. Resources come from Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) funds, state and district funds and individual, corporate and foundation grants. Social service agency staff are "re-positioned" in the schools through cooperative agreements between CIS and service providers.

CIS activities include counseling, referrals to health services, tutoring, mentoring, learning labs with computer-assisted instruction, special enrichment activities, pre-employment skills training, job placement and a parental involvement component. Originally located in middle and high schools, CIS has expanded to include elementary schools as well. The program has proven to be an effective dropout prevention strategy.

Schools for the Future is a newer program and is funded through a start-up grant from the **Hogg Foundation for Mental Health**. Established in nine middle and elementary schools in four Texas cities, the program uses the school as the site for social service delivery. By focusing on elementary and middle schools, Schools for the Future aims to prevent, rather than remedy, problems. The program has resulted in significant gains in test scores and improvements in school discipline in other states.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The Houston Business Promise, a voluntary agreement by Houston businesses to help improve education, offers some concrete suggestions to businesses that want to foster greater parent involvement in their children's education. These include using company newsletters to publicize employee involvement in schools and emphasize the importance of parental participation in parent/teacher meetings and other school activities; helping employees attend parent/teacher conferences by allowing time off with pay, or compensatory time, or by adjusting work schedules; and working with schools to schedule conferences at off-work times.

They need an early and sustained intervention in their lives to help them break the vicious cycle of poverty and stay on track.”

Accelerated Learning

Nearly all educators agree that keeping students at grade level is imperative for dropout prevention. The accelerated learning model has demonstrated effectiveness in bringing up the achievement level of disadvantaged students. This model is a program which builds on the strengths of elementary students and teachers. This method, when properly executed, is producing startling results - raising test scores and school morale, and keeping students in school who might

have otherwise dropped out. This program recognizes that at-risk students must learn at a faster pace than traditional students.

Alternative schools

Alternative schools have demonstrated success in working with at-risk students. Students who attend these schools appreciate the programs' flexible structure and ancillary services, such as on-site child care for young parents. Students can work at their own pace and attend classes on a half-day schedule, which allows them to hold jobs. These schools are graduating higher proportions of at-risk youth than conventional

PORTRAIT OF AN EIGHTH GRADER

Youth in America have been described as an endangered species. Some indication of this fact can be gleaned from recent studies concerning the status of eighth graders in America. These studies reveal that:

- A 12- or 13-year-old who is home alone for 11 or more hours a week is twice as likely to abuse alcohol, tobacco and marijuana. These eighth-grade “latchkey” kids are also more at risk emotionally: more likely to be stressed, afraid and angry.
- Eighth graders don't much like school, don't do well at it, and don't get much encouragement. One-fifth of all eighth graders are at high risk of school failure, according to the National Education Longitudinal Survey of 1988. Half of the students surveyed said they were bored in school at least half of the time; nearly half said they discussed their schoolwork with their parents seldom or not at all.
- Most eighth graders have after-school jobs, despite research concluding that after-school jobs lead to high rates of absenteeism and to lower grades. According to the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, four-fifths of all eighth graders work after school at babysitting, lawn work, delivering newspapers, or similar jobs.
- Eighth graders don't have anyone to talk to about their plans for the future; two-thirds of them want to go to college, but only one-third plan to enroll in a college prep program when they go to high school. A National Center for Education Statistics study showed 26% of eighth graders had never talked to their fathers about high school plans, 11% hadn't talked to their mothers, 54% hadn't talked to a teacher, and 64% had never talked to a guidance counselor at school.
- Eighth graders spend four times as many hours a week watching television as doing homework, and read an average of only two hours a week outside of school.

THE VALUED YOUTH PARTNERSHIP (VYP) PROGRAM

This peer tutoring program in two San Antonio school districts links older at-risk children (particularly Hispanic high school and middle school students) with younger students also at risk. The non-profit Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) and Coca-Cola were collaborators on the project, begun in 1984.

Results from the 1988-90 phase clearly demonstrate the program's ability to keep students in school. During this period, a total of 101 middle school students tutored 485 elementary school students in two public school districts in San Antonio. Results were impressive, both for the tutors and for the students tutored. Only one tutor (1%) dropped out compared to 11 (12%) from a comparison group of at-risk students who did not participate in the VYP program. Both the tutors and the students tutored achieved significant academic gains. Tutors had fewer disciplinary action referrals after participating in the program and they also scored significantly higher than the control group in self-concept measurements.

I HAVE A DREAM

In June 1981, Eugene Lang was invited to address the 61 sixth-grade graduates of Public School 121 in East Harlem, New York. Lang, a multi-millionaire industrialist, had attended the school 53 years earlier. He had planned to deliver an address using Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech to frame his advice to the students: if they would stay in school and work hard, they had a chance to grow up and be a success like him. As he looked out at the audience of poor black and Hispanic students and parents, many of whom appeared thoroughly uninterested, he had an inspiration which was to have an effect far beyond P.S. 121. Lang decided to put his money where his mouth was; if the youngsters would finish high school, he would pay their way through college.

After receiving a great deal of media attention, the I Have A Dream program spread throughout the nation. I Have a Dream's adopted students, called "Dreamers," face many obstacles to educational advancement. While most are related to poverty, money alone cannot overcome the barriers that Dreamers face. Rather, the presence of caring adults is needed over a long period of time. In the I Have a Dream program, trained project coordinators are supported by an education director and coordinator of activities involving business, community-based, cultural and municipal agencies. A team effort is needed to mobilize resources that are needed to confront problems as they occur. Because of its multi-faceted approach, I Have a Dream contains elements of many dropout pre-

vention strategies: scholarships, mentoring, tutoring and coordinated social service delivery.

The oldest and largest I Have A Dream program in Texas is in Dallas and has adopted nearly 2,000 students. Nearly all come from single-parent, minority and/or low income families where educational expectations are minimal. Students from this targeted group have a predicted dropout rate of 60%. The first sixth-grade class was adopted in 1987 and is expected to graduate in 1993. At the end of the 1990-91 school year 83% were still in school, having survived the ninth grade—typically the most dangerous year for dropouts.

THE SAN ANTONIO EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP

The San Antonio Education Partnership, patterned after the Boston Compact, the Baltimore Commonwealth and other business compacts was formed in 1988. Its purpose is to reduce the dropout rate (reported to be as high as 42% in local high schools) and to promote academic achievement in targeted San Antonio high schools by providing incentives for students to remain in school and to graduate. The partnership uses two types of incentives: financial aid at local colleges and universities (up to \$500 per semester) and preferential access to employment opportunities. In order to be eligible, students must maintain a 95% attendance rate and an 80% grade average.

Program partners include eight high schools, chosen because of their high dropout and low achievement rates, the City of San Antonio, the Greater San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, the Industrial Area Foundation and San Antonio area colleges and universities, both public and private. Funding limitations have prevented expanding the program to more high schools.

The partnership reports a dramatic rise in the number of eligible students since its formation. During the 1987-88 school year (prior to program implementation), only 19% of graduating students met eligibility requirements (grade average of 80 and 95% attendance). By 1989-90, that proportion reached 60%. The senior year dropout rate in participating schools was lowered from 19% to 8%.

Employers hiring partnership students give the program high marks. However, college-bound students have encountered some difficulties and many have required academic remediation. This indicates the need to prepare students for college in high school by encouraging enrollment in college preparatory courses and providing academic support services, such as the academic institute that Tenneco requires for participation in its scholarship program. Without this support, minimum grade requirements may encourage students to take less-demanding courses and they may find themselves ill-equipped for college work.

schools working with the same type of students. Yet they only reach a handful of the students who could benefit from them. Business can assist by helping to set up alternative schools so that every district or region with a significant at-risk population has one.

2. TO ADDRESS THE SOCIAL FACTORS: Strategies that supply students with the social capital needed to succeed in school and in life.

Mentoring

As a dropout prevention strategy, mentoring is receiving a great deal of attention from the business community. It is a low-cost, hands-on approach to the dropout problem and is one which can be implemented relatively quickly. Because at-risk youth often lack positive role models and life influences, it can fill a much-needed vacuum in their lives. Dropouts frequently cite the lack of a single person who cares about them as a primary reason for leaving school. Mentors can fill this void and help students develop a deeper connection to school.

Coordinating Social Services

Focusing social services in the schools can have a number of advantages. By bringing social services to the school, a place where attendance is legally mandated, more students and their families can be reached. In addition, the school is familiar territory, much less foreboding than the welfare office. These programs can do more than coordinate social services; they can also act as an advocate for the student. Recognizing the need to coordinate social services, the Texas Business and Education Coalition, an alliance of business and education leaders formed to support education reform, states that: "Educational and social service efforts should be coordinated and available on site to ensure that all students, and particularly minority and economically disadvantaged youth, are able to realize their potential."

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

One model for local action might be a unique business-led effort - **Project A+** in Austin. This initiative is a long-term partnership between the **IBM Corporation** and the Austin Independent School District. Begun in 1989, the goal of Project A+ is to identify fundamental changes necessary to enhance education and to build community support for those changes. The project is overseen by seven teams focusing on strategic planning, curriculum, technology, vision, dropout prevention, higher education and empowerment. Each team is comprised of individuals who represent all segments of the community.

Among the elements of Project A+ are:

- increased parental involvement using the MegaSkills approach that emphasizes the role of parents as their children's primary tutors;
- an ambitious technology demonstration project that includes a \$5.5 million grant of equipment from IBM and substantial teacher training;
- site-based management, where decisions are made at the school with a minimum of direction from central administration; and
- the implementation of the accelerated learning concept at three elementary schools.

Significantly, Project A+ does not attempt to implement immediate, system-wide changes. Instead, pilot schools have been selected for the various reforms. By implementing changes in this manner, more can be learned about their effectiveness before putting them into all schools. By involving community leaders in planning, developing and implementing the project, Project A+ builds the broad-based support that is essential to create the climate for school change.

Parental Involvement

Business can not only encourage parental involvement, it can provide the means to make it happen. Of prime importance is granting "parental leave" to employees for meeting with teachers or visiting their children's schools. This is an affordable and effective way for business to contribute to public education. In addition, many types of parental support can be offered in the work place: brown-bag lunch seminars for the parent-to-be; small-group discussions for parents of pre-teens, preschoolers, or adolescents; on-site, after-school child care; formal presentations during the work day on time or stress management; individual counseling; parent libraries with magazines, books and videos, and a phone to make calls in privacy.

3. TO ADDRESS THE ECONOMIC FACTORS: Strategies that help connect school with work and provide financial assistance for those seeking further education.

Paid tutoring

As a part-time job for at-risk youth, paid tutoring opportunities can provide much-needed financial assistance while at the same time helping to improve a student's academic abilities, as well as those of the student being tutored. This employment can also provide students with work experience that teaches them self-responsibility, communication skills and how to work cooperatively - all skills that business look for in workers.

Scholarships

Financial assistance to attend college or technical school can provide a powerful incentive for a student to stay in school. Scholarship programs that are coordinated with academic and social support systems are vital to dropout prevention efforts. Texas' changing demographics requires substantial effort to overcome past educational inequities, especially with regard to disadvantaged populations which will comprise an increasing portion of the future labor force.

Preferential Hiring

Preferential hiring as an incentive for at-risk youth is an element in a number of dropout prevention programs in major U.S. cities; prominent examples include the Boston Compact and the Baltimore Commonwealth. Providing preferential hiring and assistance in job placement can help potential dropouts by attacking the motivational problems and by bridging the difficult school-to-work transition that noncollege youth face. In Texas, only one established program that uses this approach was identified - the San Antonio Education Partnership.

Career Information/Counseling

Faced with personnel limitations, schools need assistance from the private sector to provide students with relevant information and counseling about career opportunities. At-risk students, in particular, need to know more about demanding and reasonably-paid occupations that offer them a chance at upward mobility. All too often, disadvantaged students are acquainted with family and neighbors in only a narrow range of jobs. Business can provide practical assistance to the schools by providing them with volunteers and guest speakers.

Monitored Work Experience

At-risk youth need quality employment opportunities that can help integrate schooling with work. **Cooperative Education** teaches job skills in classroom settings and combines this with paid or unpaid work experience. Job site training has been found to be more effective than traditional vocational education because it teaches work maturity skills in a setting where students are more directly motivated than in school. However, many cooperative education programs stress specialized skills that are less adaptable to the general work place.

Apprenticeships provide on-the-job training to students who want to learn a practical trade or enter a specific skilled profession. Training is usually combined with serious academic study over the course of the program. Apprenticeships not

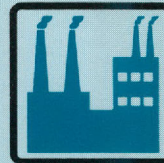
only teach specific skills, they provide youth with work place competencies that American business loudly complain are lacking in young workers. Common in Europe, apprentice programs are relatively rare in the U.S. and generally are not for youth; the average U.S. apprentice is 29 years old. The combination of academic study with job training can provide students with a powerful incentive to stay in school. This is an area that merits serious consideration.

Career Academies are usually "schools within schools." They combine academic coursework with career preparation and employment opportunities in special fields for high school students. The typical academy targets economically disadvantaged students in grades 10-12 who are at risk

of dropping out. These academies create special learning environments for students both inside and outside of the school. Significantly, academies involve business people in curriculum development and on their governing boards. This helps to ensure that programs are relevant to occupations.

CONCLUSIONS

Texas business has begun to construct dropout prevention programs that, if sustained, may help lower the dropout rate and boost student achievement. The most promising approaches reviewed provide intensive support to students over a long time period, ideally beginning as early in a student's life as is feasible. In addition, the best



CAREER INFORMATION AND COUNSELING

Choices and Changes is a program in economic education that was developed to target at-risk students. Funding has been provided by **The Ford Foundation**, **The Sears-Roebuck Foundation**, **Exxon Education Foundation** and other major businesses and foundations. The curriculum, specially designed for potential dropouts, covers such areas as: work environment; goal setting; the linkage between effort, performance and rewards; and planning for students' future role in the work place. Significantly, it introduces at-risk youth to economic concepts at an early age and reinforces these concepts over four key grade levels.

Junior Achievement classes, staffed by business volunteers, provide information to students about the economic consequences of dropping out, the job market and qualifications needed for entry-level employment. Significantly, Junior Achievement has begun to target disadvantaged youth in its efforts.

Another promising approach has been developed by the Texas business community in a partnership with the Texas Employment Commission. This program, **From Classroom to Boardroom**, lets students interact with successful business leaders and professionals in order to give students insight on how to prepare for employment after high school. This approach can provide valuable assistance to disadvantaged students who may lack knowledge of education's importance for success in life.

A CHECK LIST FOR BUSINESS INVOLVEMENT

Good public relations is essential to any business. However, your involvement in the schools should go beyond just good PR - it should be viewed as an investment opportunity, and not just a charitable contribution.

The following is a DO's and DON'Ts checklist to help answer some frequently asked questions about becoming involved in dropout prevention programs. While the list is specifically directed at businesses that want to attack the dropout problem, most are applicable to other forms of school/business collaboration.

“Which programs should I support?”

- Support programs that have identifiable goals that can be measured and evaluated and that have realistic timelines for achieving the goals.
- Support programs that have someone “in charge” to work directly with business participants.
- Support programs that have established accountability procedures.

“What type of program works best?”

- The most effective programs address the dropout problem at an early age, involve parents, attack both academic and social impediments to learning, and relate schoolwork to later life - going to college or getting a job.

“What should I do to get started?”

- Identify your community's needs - work closely with teachers and administrators to ascertain where help is needed. A good person to contact first is the school district's at-risk coordinator.
- Determine how much and what type of resources - financial, staff, or facilities - you are willing to commit to the program on a long-term basis.
- Determine if there is an effective organization linking business efforts in your area in order to share information and ideas and avoid duplicating activities. If not, work to get one started (the local chamber of commerce might be a good place to start).

“What can I do in my own business?”

- Establish work policies that encourage your employees to become involved in their children's education, such as time off for teacher conferences and participation in substantive school activities.
- Establish work policies that support the family structure, for example, flexible working hours that permit parents to be home during non-school hours, and access to quality child care

“What should I avoid?”

- Do not commit resources and undertake programs that cannot be sustained during both good and bad economic times. If the project is more than you can support alone, collaborate with other concerned businesses.
- Avoid programs that try to reach all schools and all students - that is the school district's job. Instead, develop, pilot and evaluate innovative programs that, if successful, can be adopted to a broader setting.

“What can I expect?”

- Remember that change takes time - quick results should not be expected.
- Remember that some students are more disadvantaged than others; the more barriers a student must overcome, the longer it may take to see results.
- Be prepared to rethink your approach as you learn more about what works and what doesn't.

programs are not static, they adapt as more is learned about their successes and failures.

Unfortunately, however, hard data on effectiveness are sorely lacking in most cases. Without concrete evidence that particular strategies work, business support may prove to be transitory. It is crucial that business, in partnership with schools, develop long range methods to track student outcomes. Because many schools face serious resource limitations, business must be willing to lend a hand in this effort.

While some exciting approaches are being tried, some noticeable gaps exist. Business support for early childhood programs and child care is still minimal, yet these programs may offer some of the best long-term approaches to keeping students in school. Additionally, the transition from school to work is generally not addressed in a comprehensive manner and programs that may possess great potential, such as apprenticeships and career academies, are virtually nonexistent in Texas.

Another factor that may be impeding progress is the tendency for many businesses to view their public education projects as public relations efforts. Consequently, these businesses have a tendency to want to act alone rather than work collaboratively with other business groups. In order to be effective over the long run, Texas businesses must be willing to set aside their individual "pet projects" and form a united front that is capable of producing long-term results. Education is not a charity, it is an investment in each company's and the nation's future.

The most hopeful sign in terms of long-term commitment and results is the change in business attitudes towards involvement in public education. While long active in supporting higher education, American business is a relative latecomer in its efforts to support the public schools. Also, initial efforts tended to be viewed as charitable activities rather than investments in human capital. There has definitely been a sea change in business attitudes, with business leaders making significant commitments of time and money to educational improvement.

Texas business leaders also have been active in developing long range plans for education reform. The Texas Business and Education Coalition includes prominent leaders from both the education and business communities. The coalition, in its Statement of Purpose, declares that: "Our vision is that by the beginning of the 21st century, Texas will have a work force based in educational excellence that will make Texas the nation's economic leader with a level of opportunity and quality of life second to none."

The coalition draws together numerous community, education and business groups that are attempting to improve Texas education. However, these groups are often fragmented and isolated from one another. Through various task forces, the coalition is focusing on "actions needed to develop an educational system that meets work force needs of business, the academic prerequisites of higher education, and the general needs of society."

The business community's involvement in education reform is absolutely vital. The work place skills that business increasingly demands, such as interpersonal skills and the ability to apply technology, are often those that schools traditionally have not taught. Developing a skilled work force means that business must be able to communicate its expectations to both educators and students.

Several strategies that are designed to prevent dropouts, particularly those that seek to address the school-to-work transition, can also be useful in raising the skill levels of high school graduates. For example, apprenticeship programs that combine on-the-job training with academics can help motivate students to stay in school and produce higher skilled workers. However, as mentioned earlier, apprenticeships for youth are rare, both in Texas and in the nation. The Texas Business and Education Coalition could play an important role in filling this gap by helping to create apprenticeship and other innovative school-to-work programs. Doing so would help to establish Texas as the nation's economic leader and a model for other states to follow.

WHAT TOMORROW'S WORKER NEEDS TO KNOW

A recent report by the U.S Department of Labor outlines the skills required by business in the future and suggests the need to bridge the gap between school and the work place. The **Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS)** was charged with examining the demands of the work place and whether young people are capable of meeting those demands. Preliminary results of their study were recently released in a report, *What Work Requires of School*. A final report will be released early next year.

The commission's report includes some important findings:

- More than half of young people leave school without the knowledge or foundation required to find and hold a good job.
- Recent technological growth and the emergence of a global marketplace have not been reflected in how young people are prepared for work, or in how work places are organized.
- The most effective way to learn skills is "in context," that is, placing learning objectives within a real environment rather than insisting that students first learn in the abstract.

SCANS has identified five competencies and a three-part foundation of skills and personal qualities that define job performance. These eight requirements are described as "essential preparation for all students, both those going directly to work and those planning further education." The five competencies are:

Resources - being able to identify, organize, plan, and allocate resources.

Interpersonal - being able to work with others.

Information - being able to acquire and use information.

Systems - being able to understand complex inter-relationships.

Technology - being able to work with a variety of technologies.

Work involves an interplay between these five competencies and a three-part foundation of skills - **basic skills**, higher-order **thinking skills**, and diligent application of **personal qualities**. The basic skills include listening and speaking as well as reading, writing and arithmetic. Thinking skills include the ability to think creatively, make decisions, solve problems, and know how to learn. Personal qualities include responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, integrity and honesty.

What This Means For Business

The SCANS report illustrates the need for business to look beyond the dropout problem and address the skills needed by all young people. In particular, the need to learn skills in context is an area that business can address through creative school-to-work programs, such as apprenticeships and employment programs where students learn while they work. The thinking skills that students need to possess can be addressed by supporting school reform initiatives, such as the **Coalition of Essential Schools**. The Essential School's concept focuses on the student-teacher relationship in the classroom and views the student as a worker and the teacher as a coach. Diplomas are awarded upon successful demonstration of mastery of essential skills. The coalition has received active support from the business community, including the **Exxon Education Foundation**, **General Foods**, and the **Southwestern Bell Foundation**.

Mark Your Calendar!

TRL Annual Meeting
Friday, November 8
Austin

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