

Is the High School Principal the Single Agent of Dropout Prevention as Suggested by the State Board of Education?

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Abstract

This study compared the relationship between the change of administration and the dropout rate data of two comprehensive inner-city high schools in North Alabama. Data from the Alabama State Department of Education School Report Cards (ASDESRC) from 1990-2007 was used. The Population's dropout rate data was analyzed along with the inverse correlation to the graduation rate using descriptive statistics. Comparisons were made of the administrations (Principals) in the individual high schools in question. The results demonstrate there was a significant difference in the dropout rate of the following urban high schools (A=657, & I=1131), each of whom had undergone a change in the principalship. A change in principalship directly affects the dropout rates and levels of trust between the school and community.

Dorn (1996), states that governments, educators, and social critics have created rather than discovered the dropout problem in Americas public high schools. Richards (2004) reported in the Education Week Journal that nationally 40% of all high schoolers dropout and nearly 70% of Black males dropout annually. So, why are students in large urban areas dropping out of high school? Since the introduction of Goals 2000 which was created in 1996, many school officials, administrators, and teachers in school systems as well as ASDE representatives have realized the extreme difficulty in reaching the 90% graduation rate established by the policy. In addition, they have had difficulty in finding extra funding for another unfunded mandate. ASDE has further exacerbated the situation in the 1999-2000 academic year by changing from an 8th grade equivalent competency Exit Exam to an 11th grade equivalent Graduation Exam to complete high school requirements. The purpose of Goals 2000 was to create a more educated and literate population. Almost all American high schools had to increase the number of Carnegie Units for graduation from high school. The ASDE created the 4x4 curriculum for high school completion. Its intent was to require every high schooler to take four years of math, science, social studies,

and English before being able to receive a diploma and pass the high school graduation examination. In an effort to meet Goals 2000 objectives and make Alabama the most literate and educated state among its peers in the country, this attempt can now be viewed as a little premature.

The Policies of Goals 2000 are viewed by some as a source of the problem and not a solution to the dropout rate crisis (Dorn, 1996). High school principals are now charged with the task of being the single agent of change for reducing the dropout rate. The Alabama State Department of Education (ASDE) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) have taken the unprecedented step of implying the high school dropout rate can be one of the criteria for a principal's evaluation for the measurement of a high school's success or failure, with the other being the graduation rate (Alabama State Department of Education, 2009). Up until academic year 2004-2005, the Average Daily Membership (ADM) was based on the number of students on attendance rolls during the first forty days of school. The ASDE recognized a flaw in academic year 2005-2006 in its calculation of the ADM of a school and revised it from the average number of students on attendance rolls during the first 20 days of school after Labor Day. Previously, the calculation entailed the counting of students on attendance rolls during the first forty days of the school year.

Rationale for Study

With the recent completion of the ASDE mandated University Principal Preparation Redesign process, it appears we are posed to produce excellent Instructional Leaders (Principals) for the schools of the future. The Principal Preparation Programs in Alabama, at first glance, appeared to be well suited in August 2009 to capture the essence of what its new name entails: Instructional Leadership verse Educational Administration. This redesign process led the way nationally by infusing cutting edge research data with the assistance of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to develop the most highly trained principals in the country. Through its efforts, it has created an excellent vision for future schools leaders in Alabama. Or has it? Did it neglect the role of the high school principal by using a broad brush approach to its redesign efforts? Dropout prevention was totally overlooked as a strategy or goal, even though it is one of two accountability acts measured by the ASDE to meet the high expectations of the Governors Task force on School Reform.

Framework of Urban High Schools

Lever, Sander, and Lombardo (2004) outlined research that indicated inner-city youth are at higher risk of dropping out of high school than their counterparts in suburban and rural schools. Inner city youth are found to have more risk factors associated with their inability to complete high school than their suburban and rural counterparts. The high school dropout rate should be a national concern.

Paula Zahn (2008) of the Paula Zahn Show, which was aired nightly on CNN reported on May 9, 2008 that high schools in America are in crisis. She released current data from the

United States Department of Education. Paula reported the high school dropout rate is a silent epidemic.

Zahn's (2008) statistics revealed six thousand high school students drop out of America's high schools everyday. One million students drop out of high school every year. One-third of high school students failed to graduate with their class. The rate is even more alarming for African-American and Hispanic-American students. Current data derived from the US Department of Education, National Center for Education (2011) states that "40% of African-American, Hispanic-American, and Native-American students failed to graduate with their class" (pg. 1).

Richard (2004) informed the nation that the Southern Governor's Association (SGA) met on September 13, 2004, and made reducing the dropout rate high priority. SGA went on record to express that the state's vitality and livelihood of southern states in general is tied to the success or failure of their public schools. Some southern governors are calling for a high school redesign commission whose ultimate purpose is it to retain more students in high school, thus reducing the dropout rate. On March 5, 2009, Bryan Henry of WSFA TV 12 news reported on The Governors Task Force on High School Dropouts being held that day in Montgomery, Alabama. The speaker for the occasion was Retired General Colin Powell's, wife, Alma. She brought national attention to the 38.75% high school dropout rate in the state of Alabama.

High schools throughout the United States are attempting different strategies in reducing the dropout rate. Gehring (2004) reported the Baltimore, Maryland school district reduced the number of credits ninth grade students need to be promoted to the tenth grade from seven to four. He further asserts the Baltimore City School Board is attempting to reduce the nearly 40% dropout rate between ninth and tenth grades respectively. In its attempt to reduce the dropout rate, Baltimore has adherently watered down the definition of the word *proficient* as it applies to quality high school education and diploma. School districts around the country understand that more effort is needed to improve the dropout rate. In Pell City, Alabama, the local city board has re-hired some of its best retired teachers to work with at-risk youth. The Pell City Schools System projected their dropout rate was 26.4% (Cason, 2004), which is nearly twice that of the state average of 13.4%. The Pell City District's approach is different from most school districts. Nationally, the majority of school districts work with students in the high schools. The Pell City Model works with students at an earlier age, sixth and seventh grades (Cason, 2004).

These school districts must hire and retain mature principals in these high schools that have the capacity to lead change toward the Goals 2000 Report and ASDE Accountability Acts. Morehead and Morehead (1995) define capacity as 'the ability to hold volume, potentiality, and a position or character assigned or assumed' (p. 109). Berube (1991) defines capacity as "the potentiality of individuals to assume multiple hats, view events from different lenses and perspectives, and determine a plan of action for future quality results" (p. 236). This capacity of leadership implies that individuals are reflective practioners who are lifelong learners and cognizant of the needs of the school community.

Research Questions

1. Does a change in school leadership at two select urban high schools in North Alabama affect the dropout rate?

2. Can the High School Principal be the single agent of change in dropout prevention and graduation rates?

Population and Sample

The population sample for this study consisted of the number of dropouts listed by the Alabama State Department of Education School Report Cards (ASDESRC) as a percentage for two high schools between the 1999-2004 school years and 2003- 2007 school years, respectively. Dropout is defined by ASDESRC as “students in the 9th grade at the beginning of a particular year that are projected to leave school prior to completing high school within 4 years” (1999-2007, p.1). Furthermore, data for the study were collected over a three year period for each school.

Analysis of the Data

Since the schools in this study represent sample populations of the eligible schools for that group, only descriptive statistics were necessary for the data analysis. Making use of percentages of the data collected in response to categories of each item provide clear, concise, and consistent insight into the data.

Consistent with the Alabama State Department of Education School Report Cards (ASDESRC), the following data was collected and analyzed between the academic years beginning in 1999-2000 and ending in 2005-2007. The analysis of data is as follows for High School A which began with an Average Daily Membership (ADM) of 657 and an ASDE *projected dropout rate of 31.74%* in academic year 1999-2000. Through two changes of administration over the next three years, the following decline in enrollment occurred. In academic year 2000-2001 under a new principal, the ADM *decreased by 10% from 657 to 594.2* with an ASDE *projected dropout rate of 35.9%*. In the following academic year 2001-2002, the ADM *decreased 14%, 657 to 557.6* with an ASDE *projected dropout rate of 28.88%*, with the comparison year staying constant. In the academic year 2002-2003, under a new principal, the ADM *decreased 12%, 657 to 576* with an ASDE *projected dropout rate of 38%*, with the comparison year and administration staying the same. In the final academic year 2003-2004, the ADM *decreased 9%, 657 to 598.5* with an ASDE *projected dropout rate of 21.38%*. This data demonstrates there is a correlation between the change in the principalship of High School A and its overall dropout rate over this four year study (Alabama State Department of Education, 1999-2007).

Table 1
Percent of ADM Decline, Percentage Dropout Rate, and Graduation Rate of Urban High School A After a Change in Leadership: Comparison of ASDE School Report Cards Results

ADM	Academic Year	% Decline/Dropout	Graduation Rate
657	1999-2000	31.74	94%
594.2	2000-2001	10/35.91	95% *
557.6	2001-2002	14/28.88	77%
576.1	2002-2003	12/38	93.2% *
598.5	2003-2004	9/21.38	73.45

Note: Represents the Alabama State School Report Card which calculated on the previous school years data. The * represents a change in administration.

Consistent with the Alabama State Department of Education Schools Report Cards (ASDESRC), the following data was collected and analyzed between the academic years beginning in 2003-2004 and ending in 2006-2007. The analysis of data is as follows for High School I during academic year 2003-2004 which began with an Average Daily Membership (ADM) of *1131 students* and an ASDE *projected dropout rate of 18.45%*. In academic year 2004-2005, the ADM *increased by 114 students to 1142.4* through the change of administration while maintaining an ASDE *projected dropout rate of 25.07%*. In academic year 2005 – 2006, the ADM *dipped slightly by 32.2 students* with a *projected ASDE dropout rate of 13.16%*. In academic year 2006-2007, the ADM *increased 91.3 students* with a *projected ASDE dropout rate of 3%*. This data demonstrates there was a significant decline in the projected dropout rate of High School I over the four year study of data after a change in the principalship (Alabama State Department of Education, 1999-2007).

Table 2
Projected Dropout Rate and Graduation Rate of Urban High School I after a Change in Leadership: Comparison of ASDE School Report Cards Results

ADM	Academic Year	% Decline/Dropout	Graduation Rate
1131	2003-2004	18.45	63%
1142.4	2004-2005	25.07	97.76% *
1129.7	2005-2006	13.16	99.14%
1221.5	2006-2007	3	97.5%

Note: Represents the Alabama State School Report Card which calculated on the previous school years data. The * represents the change in administration.

Conclusion

Ward (2009) asserts the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and Goals 2000 reports placed heavy interest and emphasis on the word *proficiency*, using it as a barometer of individual school goal reforms, sanctions, and rewards. Unfortunately, the rigor in the definition of the word *proficient* has various meanings from state to state; however, the term has little or no common

meaning (Common Core Standardizations). The variance between the meaning as offered by the states and the federal government leaves a lot to be desired for *student proficiency*.

Since schools face harsh sanctions for not having adequate numbers of students who are proficient, many State Departments of Education are lowering the bar for high school completion. However, ASDE has taken a different approach by raising the bar for high school completion and its correlation to high school proficiency with no increase in funding (unfunded mandates). Principals and teachers in inner-city high schools are spending increasingly more time on testing, but very little time on the development of the whole child and school community relations. Friedman (2005) stated that in order to compete in a world that is flat and in which the playing field is leveled, individuals must be multilingual, innovative, and have a global awareness.

From this data analysis, one can infer that the high school principal is not the single agent for dropout prevention. Conversely, the high school principal has a significant impact on high school dropout and graduation rates. As a matter of fact, this data suggests the high school principals' impact on the dropout and graduation rates has a *plus or minus effect of 30%*. However, the data further reveals that high school teachers and parents have a *plus or minus effect of 70%* impact on the student dropout and graduation rate scores.

High School A had four principals during the eight year study period from 1999-2007. This is an average replacement of a principal every 2.3 years of service. One can surmise that this extreme turnover in the principalship has a definite correlation to the dropout and graduation rates of students and community trust in the schools' ability to educate its children. It can further be asserted there was a core group of teachers and parents at both schools, as well as community leaders that continue to expect students to perform at proficient levels of competency.

It is recommended that urban school boards place less emphasis on the principal as the sole agent of dropout prevention and begin to assess their P-12 culture in an effort to identify impediments to creating climates for learning. The principal is not the Single Most Important Agent of change in the school as implied (Alabama State Department of Education, 2009) and ultimately held accountable for the success of each student. It is further recommended that the principal/Instructional Leader (IL) should be made aware of their responsibility to set tone and institutional values for how employees and students should interact with one another and with members of the larger community. Increased strategic emphasis should be placed on its intention for developing the school community concept for dropout prevention purposes by asking the question: "How can I convey the meaning of organizational expectations?" This will transform the current school model of being teacher centered (teaching subjects) to a student and community centered (teaching students) model. Districts must endeavor to preserve in their hiring practices for the stewardship of their schools (principals). LEA's must focus on hiring individuals who are job and psychologically mature, for a minimum of a four year contract of employment. Prior to taking the helm of both High Schools A & I, only *two of the six (33%)* principals had previous effective high school principal experiences. The purpose of the four year contract is to give the principal time to build organizational trust, which is critical to the vitality (relationships, rigor, and relevance) of a school. The principal, as school leader, would focus on the meaning of instructional leadership by providing master schedules that give teachers time for collaboration, inquiry, and empowerment (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003). All interested parties must understand that dropping out is not a one-time event. It is often due to a series of events related to organizational and environmental culture.

This shifting philosophy will require the elimination of the preconceptions that the leader is a hero or heroine. Communities of heroes and heroines are required for true educational reform (Murphy & Seashore-Lewis, 1994). Conversely, there was a positive impact to High School I's dropout, ADM, and graduation rate during the four year period of the new principal regime. During this same period of the study, the State of Alabama witnessed the dramatic increase in the *dropout rate from 13.4% to nearly 38.75%* of all high schoolers. Developing communities of learners through participatory engagement shatters the old paradigms and models of the principal as the sole agent of dropout prevention.

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