

High School Drop Outs . . . or Push Outs?

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By Kathy Emery

“Nearly 1 in 4 California students will drop out during high school, state educators said Wednesday . . .”

-- *SF Chronicle*, July 17, 2008

A friend of mine brought this article to my attention, noting that stories reporting on high school dropouts always seem to be written during the middle of the summer recess. So, I decided to see if that were true and did a search for “dropouts” from 1995-2008 at sfgate.com. Here’s a fairly arbitrary sampling of what I found:

- **June 4, 1996:** . . . one in six ninth-graders still fails to reach graduation . . . 1994-95 -- 4.4 percent -- dropped out. That is fewer than the previous year . . . 4.9 percent.
- **June 8, 1999:** The four-year dropout rate is 11.7 percent . . . The graduation rate is 67.2 percent . . . school districts collect numbers haphazardly, which is why the statewide figures do not match each other.
- **April 20, 2002:** One of every 35 California high school students dropped out last year -- maybe -- says a new report by the state Department of Education. That is a dropout rate of 2.8 percent . . .
- **March 24, 2005:** . . . Harvard University researchers say the state graduates only 71 percent of its high school students -- not the 87 percent it claims.
- **November 4, 2006:** . . . in 1999, the senior class was short 43,967 students -- 11.6 percent of the expected class. In 2003, the senior dropout rate had dipped to 8.1 percent. And in 2005, it was down to 7.2 percent. But in 2006, the dropout rate rose again, to 7.8 percent
- **March 4, 2008:** An estimated 25 percent of students fail to complete high school . . .

Confused? Welcome to the world of “data-driven” education reform. This is supposed to be the way to fix our schools, finally. We haven’t been able to solve the problem of high school dropouts before because we didn’t know exactly how many of them there were. Now that we know for sure . . . well, the solution will be implemented. Really?

Let’s ponder three stories as context in which to reflect about dropouts. By 1995, Mission High School had a community health care center in the basement of the building, a principal who had negotiated a truce between the neighborhood gangs, a positive relationship with the Mission police, a consistent and fair discipline policy and many other effective programs. The students were no longer falling between the cracks. The school was getting national attention for its ability to dramatically increase graduation rates and send its students to college. Superintendent Rojas fired the administration and eliminated all the programs, ostensibly, because it wasn’t increasing test scores fast enough.

In 2002, McAteer High School (API = 1) was closed down to make room for the more elite School of the Arts (API = 10). Superintendent Ackerman promised the McAteer students they would be looked after. That promise was never kept. In 2003, when the school board shut down Urban Pioneer, an alternative high school that engaged students other schools could not, Ackerman agreed with the students’ pleas that they be kept together when transferred to another school. She reneged on that promise.

Stories are only anecdotal as opposed to “objective data.” Yet, ironically, stories seem to get at the complexity of the truth better than data. The real problem with stories is that they tell awkward truths that those in power would prefer not to know.