In modern knowledge and information societies where schooling and life-long-learning is of critical importance, dropout from school is a severe problem. Worldwide, education and literacy levels are increasing, but the individual and societal consequences associated with early school leaving make it a top policy issue in developed and developing countries alike. But there is good news for policymakers and educators: School dropout can be reduced. New research indicates that most school and community-based programs can reduce dropout rates, given these are carefully implemented and selected with respect to local settings and staff qualifications.

ADRESSING SECONDARY SCHOOL DROPOUT IN THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY

Not completing the normal course of secondary schooling is a serious problem, for the society and the individual student. For modern knowledge societies with an increased focus on learning, knowledge and education, high dropout rates result in a lower skilled workforce and reduced human capital. For the individual, dropping out of school might lead to lower earnings, unstable working arrangements, unemployment, health problems, and, in the worst case, to long-lasting poverty.

Policymakers have addressed the problem of secondary school dropout, and some countries have been responding to high dropout rates with a variety of large educational reforms and single programs in either school or community settings.

This systematic review aimed to summarize existing research on the effects of programs that aim to reduce school dropout or increase school completion. The target group included children from pre-kindergarten age until secondary school, though the majority of programs focused on students in secondary school. The review examined general programs designed for typical students plus a subset of programs designed specifically for teen parents.

TYPES OF DROPOUT PROGRAMS

There are a large number of program strategies available for preventing school dropout, most of which are designed to target some of the common risk factors
associated with failure to complete school, including poor academic performance or low school attendance. Other programs target school-level factors and are designed to create more relevant schools.

Among the most common program types in the review were school or class restructuring programs, which in their simplest form involve creating smaller classes or lower teacher-student-ratios. More complex school restructuring programs involve changing the entire focus of a school to separate students into smaller theme-oriented academies. Other program types included vocational training programs, programs focussing on additional academic services (e.g., tutoring, homework assistance) and community service programs. Another group of programs included mentoring and counselling in career planning. Further, alternative schools provide educational services to ‘at risk’ students who have been excluded earlier from traditional school settings. Also reviewed were programs with college-oriented programming, case management, counselling, skills training (e.g., reading skills), and multi-service programs offering a broad range of different services.

**POSITIVE EFFECTS OF PROGRAMS AGAINST SCHOOL DROPOUT**

While dropout programs were effective at reducing dropout overall, the most notable finding from the systematic review was that no single prevention or intervention strategy stood out as better than any other. This finding has particular practical significance, especially when taken together with the finding on the importance of implementation quality. School administrators and policymakers have a great variety of choices available to them for dropout prevention and intervention programs. The results from this systematic review suggest that the particular program strategy chosen makes less of a difference in eventual outcome than selecting a strategy that can be implemented successfully by the school or agency. Unfortunately, cost information was rarely provided in the studies included in the review, but the findings suggest that decision makers may be better off considering the fit of a program with their setting and staff, and the cost of a program, than in selecting a particular or popular strategy. Once programs are in place, focusing on implementation quality is critical. Most of the programs reviewed were relatively intensive (occurring over significant time and involving considerable changes in the educational settings in which they were implemented). It would, therefore, be unwise to conclude that less intensive, much less frequent, or much shorter programs (which did not turn up often in the literature and were therefore not part of this review) would be as effective as those reviewed.

**FACTS ABOUT THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW**

- The search strategy yielded a total of 23,677 reports, of which 2,794 were deemed potentially relevant and retrieved for eligibility determination. Of those, 548 reports describing 167 studies were included in the final review.
- Most studies were conducted in the U.S.; some were conducted in Great Britain or Canada.
- Both published and unpublished studies were included.
• The first part of this review included 152 studies on general programs, and the second part included 15 studies on programs designed for teen parents.
• The studies included were reported or published between 1985 and 2010.
• The study populations included school-aged youth, corresponding to approximately ages 4-18. Studies with participant populations including recent dropouts between the ages of 18-22 were also included if the program under study was explicitly orientated toward secondary school completion or the equivalent.
• The review included only studies with an experimental or quasi-experimental design with at least 10 subjects in each of the treatment group or control group.
• Studies focussing on specialized populations, such as students with mental disabilities or other special needs were excluded.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

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