Dropouts in Massachusetts Public Schools:
District Survey Results

April 2006

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350 Main Street, Malden, Massachusetts 02148-5023 #781-338-3000
www.doe.mass.edu
April 10, 2006

Dear Superintendents, Leaders of Charter Schools and Collaboratives, and Colleagues:

I am pleased to release the following report, *Dropouts in Massachusetts Public Schools: District Survey Results*. Our October 2005 dropout report showed an increase in the state dropout rate—from 3.3 percent in the 2002-03 school year to 3.7 percent in the 2003-04 school year. Because I am concerned about the increase in dropouts, and because I believe that those working closely with students can provide valuable insights into why students are dropping out of school, I sent an open-ended survey to district leaders. The report is a compilation of responses to a survey I sent out in November of 2005.

The survey and report are first steps in the Department’s dropout prevention initiative. I am pleased to announce that Massachusetts is one of three states that will be working with Achieve, Inc., to increase our college and work readiness rates, and decrease the number of students who are dropping out.

In addition, during the next few years, the Department plans to work with our strategic partners to gather and disseminate information about dropout prevention and to seek additional funding to improve high school graduation rates and reduce barriers to learning. I hope you find this report useful.

Sincerely,

David P. Driscoll
Commissioner of Education
INTRODUCTION

In November 2005, Commissioner David Driscoll of the Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE) asked school superintendents and leaders of charter schools and educational collaboratives to respond to a four-question, open-ended survey on dropouts. The DOE developed this survey as a follow-up to the report *Dropouts in Massachusetts Public Schools: 2003-04* released by the DOE in October 2005. As described in the report, the state dropout rate for the 2003-04 school year was 3.7 percent – an increase from 3.3 percent in the 2002-03 school year. To help the DOE gain more insight into district perceptions of why students dropped out, and what can be done to keep students in school, the DOE asked all districts to complete the November survey on dropouts.

The four survey questions were:

1) Based on what you’ve seen in your district, why are students in your community dropping out of high school? Please be as specific as you can, and if possible, include the number of students who dropped out for each reason in the 2003-2004 school year.
2) What steps has your school or district taken to improve high school retention and graduation rates?
3) What do you see as the biggest challenge in decreasing the state’s dropout rate?
4) What steps do you think the Department of Education can take to help curb this problem statewide?

The DOE received a total of 105 surveys from districts across the state. In general, high school principals and district superintendents completed the surveys. Among the survey respondents, high school dropout rates for the 2003-04 school year ranged from 0.0 percent to 27.8 percent.

Based on the open-ended responses, the DOE created categories to compile and summarize the data. Due to the open-ended nature of the questions, some subjective interpretation of the results was necessary. Similar responses were combined into larger categories.

The report has four main components based on the four survey questions. The lists of general district responses and the percentage of districts within each response are included for each question. Two appendices are included at the end of this report: 1) a copy of the survey sent to all districts in November; and 2) a list of the 105 districts that responded to the survey.
Summary of Survey Responses

Question 1: Why Students Drop Out

“Based on what you’ve seen in your district, why are students in your community dropping out of high school? Please be as specific as you can, and if possible, include the number of students who dropped out for each reason in the 2003-2004 school year.”

Consistent with national research on why students drop out, respondents described a wide range of reasons that students left school. Nearly half of the respondents cited that their students dropped out due to lack of academic success and personal and family issues.

Please note: The percentages below are the percent of districts that responded within each of the following categories – not the percentage of dropouts who were coded in each category. While some respondents listed dropout reasons by number of students, most respondents listed reasons without the number of students for each reason cited. Many respondents indicated that most students drop out of school for more than one reason.

Some of the reasons that respondents indicated for students dropping out could also be considered “risk factors” for students dropping out. Research indicates that these factors are often associated with students who drop out of school, although the factors do not necessarily cause students to drop out. These risk factors include: history of truancy and poor attendance; lack of academic success; personal and family issues including high mobility of students and families; and discipline/behavior issues, including substance abuse.

Percent of Respondents that Reported the Five Most Common Reasons Students Dropped Out

![Bar chart showing the percentage of districts that reported the five most common reasons students dropped out. The reasons include Lack of Academic Success, Personal and Family Issues, Economics, Frequent Truancy, and Unknown. The chart indicates that Lack of Academic Success is the most common reason, followed by Personal and Family Issues, Economics, Frequent Truancy, and Unknown.]

District Responses: Why Do Students Drop Out?
(Note: Many respondents cited more than one reason.)
Lack of Academic Success – 46% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents indicated that students dropped out due to failing classes, falling behind on coursework, and/or falling behind peers on academic credits.

Personal and Family Issues – 46% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents stated that students left school due to lack of parent support, disruptive family life, death in the family, education not valued in family, parents requesting student to discontinue education, and unspecified personal or family issues.

Economics – 40% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents indicated that students withdrew from school for full-time employment, leaving to support families financially, job training, and other economic related reasons.

Frequent Truancy – 40% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents reported students left school due to inconsistent and poor attendance.

Unknown – 36% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents stated that they were not aware of the reason(s) students dropped out.

GED – 27% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents indicated students dropped out to obtain a GED.

Health Issues – 23% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents reported students dropped out due to illness or mental/emotional health issues.

Substance Abuse – 23% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents stated that students who dropped out had a history of substance abuse or drug addiction.

Court-Involved – 21% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents reported students dropped out due to involvement with the Department of Youth Services (DYS) or due to incarceration.

Disengagement – 21% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents stated students dropped out because they were disengaged or had a lack of interest in school.

Pregnancy/Parenting – 21% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents indicated students withdrew from school because they were pregnant or were a parent.

Lack of Educational Alternatives – 14% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents reported that students left school because alternative education programs and career and vocational technical education were not available to the students (program not available at school or program operating at capacity).
MCAS – 13% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents stated that students dropped out after failing part or all of the grade 10 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam or due to concern that they would be unable to meet state and local requirements for graduation.

Mobility – 13% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents reported that students dropped out who were transient and had recently moved into their district.

Behavior – 11% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents reported that students dropped out due to discipline and behavioral issues.

Evening/Night School – 9% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents reported that students withdrew from the regular education setting to attend evening/night school.

Grade Retention – 8% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents reported that students dropped out because they were retained in grade either the year they dropped out or in a previous academic year.

Language Barrier – 8% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents reported that some English Language Learners dropped out because their lack of English language skill was a barrier to their learning.

Lack of Funding – 7% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents reported that students dropped out because the district lacked funding for special programs to address student needs.

Military – 3% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents reported that students dropped out to join the military.

Large High School – 3% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents stated that students dropped out because the high school or the class size was large.

Exclusion – 2% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents reported that students dropped out because they were excluded (suspended) from school for disciplinary reasons.

Lack of Support Services – 2% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents reported students dropped out due to a lack of support services offered.

Lack of Transportation – 1% of responding districts cited this factor
Respondents reported that students dropped out because of a lack of transportation to get them to and from school.
Question 2: Steps Taken

“What steps has your school or district taken to improve high school retention and graduation rates?”

The following is a list of categories of actions taken by the 105 districts that responded to the survey. Overall, nearly half of the respondents indicated that they have established alternative programs to improve graduation rates. In addition to the responses below, four percent of respondents indicated that funding cuts have hampered their progress in implementing new dropout prevention programs.

Percent of Respondents that Reported the Five Most Common Steps Taken to Increase the Graduation Rate

Alternative Programs – 45% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents developed alternative learning options and programs to address the needs of their lowest performing students.

Personal Connections with Adults – 37% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents increased opportunities for personal connections between students and adults in the school.

Engaged Parents – 32% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents met and worked with parents and families to get them more engaged in their children’s education.
Teacher Discussions – 23% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents established regular times for teachers to meet to discuss students who were having problems and find solutions.

Attendance Developments – 23% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents investigated why students failed to attend school, established rigorous attendance policies, and assigned attendance counselors to work with students who were frequently absent.

MCAS Preparation – 22% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents offered increased academic support for students with low skills in English language arts/reading and math, to assist them in preparing for the grade 10 MCAS exam.

External Partnerships – 20% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents partnered with external groups and community organizations, including connecting with probation officers when students were involved with the courts.

Scheduling Modifications – 20% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents addressed individual student scheduling needs and acknowledged that some students may need more than four years to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to earn a high school diploma.

Counseling – 17% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents provided additional counseling to students at risk of dropping out and sometimes offered referrals to outside counseling services.

Vocational-Technical Education – 15% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents offered vocational options such as referrals to job training programs and vocational-technical education.

Night School – 14% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents referred students to night school as an alternative to remaining in the regular high school program.

Academic Support – 13% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents offered intensive support in reading and math.

Partner Students – 13% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents partnered students who were new to the school with peer leaders, and offered tutoring by high-performing students.

Summer School – 12% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents provided summer school opportunities to students who needed additional academic assistance or coursework.

Behavior Intervention – 11% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents implemented behavior intervention plans for students with behavior problems.
Dropout Prevention Policy – 10% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents developed school-wide or district-wide dropout prevention policies and strategies.

Small Learning Communities – 10% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents established small learning communities within large high schools.

Early Intervention – 7% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents identified at-risk students in middle school and created early intervention strategies to assist them.

Substance Abuse Prevention – 6% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents established school-wide substance abuse prevention programs.

Special Education Evaluations – 6% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents conducted special education evaluations of students who were suspected of having a disability that was interfering with their school performance, and reviewed the special education referral and placement options.

GED – 5% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents offered a General Educational Development (GED) program to students who were seeking an alternative to enrollment in the regular high school program.*

Work-Study – 5% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents offered work-study opportunities for credit.

Electives – 4% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents offered more elective courses to engage students.

Re-enroll Dropouts – 3% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents offered dropouts the chance to re-enroll in school.

Programs for ELL – 2% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents strengthened programs for English Language Learners.

Graduation Contracts – 1% of responding districts cited this step
Respondents created individual graduation contracts defining the responsibilities of the student and the school.

* It is important to note that, according to the GED Testing Service, students may take the GED test only if they are not enrolled in school and have not received a diploma or high school credential. Therefore, referring students to GED programs will not increase high school graduation rates.
Question 3: Biggest Challenge

“What do you see as the biggest challenge in decreasing the state’s dropout rate?”

The following is a list of categories of challenges that respondents described in their surveys. The percentages indicate the percent of respondents that reported a challenge in a category. Many respondents listed multiple challenges; therefore they are counted in multiple categories.

Over half of the respondents that submitted surveys reported that insufficient funding is their biggest challenge. Other common challenges included engaging students and personal and family issues.

Percent of Respondents that Reported the Five Most Common Challenges to Decreasing the Dropout Rate

- **Insufficient Funding** – 50% of responding districts cited this challenge
  Respondents said lack of sufficient funding made it difficult to address the needs of at-risk students, or to increase and support alternative learning options and alternative education programs.

- **Engaging Students** – 29% of responding districts cited this challenge
  Respondents stated that finding ways to engage all students, meet the needs of different types of learners, motivate students to learn, and communicate the benefits of a diploma represented their biggest challenges.
Personal and Family Issues – 28% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents reported that students’ personal and family issues, including lack of parental support for education, were the biggest challenge.

Need for Early Intervention – 20% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents described the need for early intervention to identify and address the academic and behavioral needs of at-risk students.

MCAS/State Graduation Standard – 16% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents cited the challenge of improving student performance on the grade 10 English language arts and math exams in order to increase the number of students who meet the state graduation standard.

Attendance – 7% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents described frequent truancy as a major challenge.

Poverty – 7% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents cited poverty and the problems associated with it, as a challenge for schools.

Substance Abuse – 5% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents reported the challenge of working with students who are abusing substances or have an addiction.

Vocational Education Access – 5% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents stated lack of access to career/vocational-technical education is a challenge.

School Safety Issues – 4% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents cited student behavior issues and school safety.

Increased Academic Expectations – 2% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents said rising expectations for students’ academic performance, made it difficult to meet the needs of all students.

Definition of Dropouts – 2% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents stated that the DOE definition of dropout does not reflect the actual number of dropouts.

Night Schools – 2% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents described a need for more diploma-granting night schools as an alternative to regular high school programs.

Students Retained in Grade – 2% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents cited the need to strengthen academic instruction for students who are retained in grade.
Transient Students – 2% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents described high mobility of students, which disrupts academic progress.

Transportation – 2% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents cited a lack of transportation for students, including transportation for summer school and after school opportunities.

Tracking Students After They Leave – 1% of responding districts cited this challenge
Respondents stated it is difficult to track students moving to other states to determine if they are enrolled in school, which may inflate the reported dropout rate.
**Question 4: Suggestions for the DOE**

“What steps do you think the Department of Education can take to help curb this problem statewide?”

Of the four survey questions, responses to this question had the largest variation. Over 100 different suggestions were submitted for this question. The responses were grouped into eight main themes. Overall, the highest percentage of respondents (64 percent) suggested increased funding.

**Percent of Respondents that Reported the Five Most Common Suggestions for the DOE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggestion</th>
<th>Percent of Responding Districts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase Funding</td>
<td>64%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support Flexibility and Alternatives</td>
<td>31%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enhance Support Services</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve Dropout Data or Policies</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<td>District Responses: Suggestions for the DOE</td>
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<td>(Note: Many respondents cited more than one suggestion.)</td>
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**Increase Funding – 64% of responding districts cited this suggestion**
Respondents described a need for increased funding for alternative education programs and dropout prevention programs, and also advocated general (non-specific) funding increases.

**Support Flexibility and Alternatives – 31% of responding districts cited this suggestion**
Respondents called for the state to increase flexibility in response to an increasingly diverse student population, increase access to vocational-technical programs, and support regional learning alternatives for non-traditional learners.

**Enhance Support Services – 12% of responding districts cited this suggestion**
Respondents recommended development of parent support programs, increasing the number of school counselors, and advocacy for more social services for students.
Improve Dropout Data Reporting – 11% of responding districts cited this suggestion
Respondents called for the state to improve its dropout data reporting system. The current system counts as dropouts students who leave high school to earn a GED, attend Job Corps, or attend night school. Respondents also called for the state to use end-of-year enrollment as the denominator for calculating the dropout rate.

Modify Laws or Policies – 10% of responding districts cited this suggestion
Respondents recommended raising the dropout age to 17 or 18 years old, strengthening the Massachusetts truancy law, and requiring high school enrollment to obtain a driver’s license.

Increase Information Sharing – 9% of responding districts cited this suggestion
Respondents recommended creating an online database for programs to share information, hosting a state conference on dropout prevention, and increasing information sharing among schools and other governmental agencies that work with young people.

Improve Early Intervention – 7% of responding districts cited this suggestion
Respondents recommended establishing a protocol to identify at-risk students at the elementary school level, supporting early intervention with families, and focusing on early childhood education.

Revise MCAS Process – 6% of responding districts cited this suggestion
Respondents suggested reducing the emphasis on MCAS, increasing public information about re-test options, and reducing the length of the test administration.
Appendix A: District Dropout Survey

Dropout Survey

The 2003-2004 High School Dropout Report showed a disturbing up-tick in the number of students who are choosing to leave high school prior to graduation. To help us gain a better sense of why our students are dropping out, and what can be done to retain them in school, please fill out the attached survey by December 1, 2005.

***

1. Based on what you’ve seen in your district, why are students in your community dropping out of high school? Please be as specific as you can, and if possible, include the number of students who dropped out for each reason in the 2003-2004 school year.

2. What steps has your school or district taken to improve high school retention and graduation rates?

3. What do you see as the biggest challenge in decreasing the state’s dropout rate?

4. What steps do you think the Department of Education can take to help curb this problem statewide?

***

Thank you for filling out this survey. Please send your comments to: Heidi Perlman, Director of Communications, at hperlman@doe.mass.edu by December 5, 2005.
### Appendix B: Dropout Survey Respondents

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