

Unintended Consequences: How Texas State Policy Exacerbates the Dropout Crisis

Eileen M. Coppola
Rice University
Center for Education

Conceptualizing the Causes of Low Graduation Rates

- Complex
- Additive
- Interactive



Placing the Students' Experience at the Center of Policy Outcomes

Students experience the weight of these different factors, often several simultaneously, and deal with them over long periods of time.



Examples of policies that contribute to the dropout crisis

- Extensive grade retention
- 90% rule on attendance
- The way high-stakes testing degrades the curriculum over time

**Needed: Understanding of Enacted
Policy that Makes Students the Unit
of Analysis**

Grade Retention

■ Policy Assumption

Students should repeat grades until they master material to be learned in that grade. Retention may be used as a way to prepare students to pass high stakes tests.

■ Actual Effects

- Increased, multiple retention of students.
- Many incentives for schools to utilize this avenue.
- Limited academic progress when school doesn't have the capacity to resolve the source of the difficulties.
- Increased chance of dropping out each time a student is retained in grade.
- High levels of frustration, disorientation, and alienation reported by students.

SAMPLE DATA – THE EFFECTS OF RETENTION

Data from Dropouts Considering Returning to School

STUDENT 1: I've repeated ninth grade four – four times.

STUDENT 2: Same thing with me. I repeated ninth grade four years because I just slacked off. I was lazy and –

INTERVIEWER: You repeated ninth grade four years?

STUDENT 2: Yes. ...Well part of my problem was my freshman year it was – if I didn't know anything I wouldn't do it, or I wouldn't go to class because, you know, I was afraid if they'd call on me and have me go up I wouldn't know how to work it so I just wouldn't go to class. So that was just maybe the reason.

INTERVIEWER: So the next year did you have to take all those courses over, or just the one you failed?

STUDENT 2: Well that last two years that I was in ninth grade were finally classes that I passed and got credit for. But before, they would put me in the same classes again, so then they would catch that later in the year, which they couldn't do nothing about, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Were those courses through the year or the semester?

STUDENT 2: Through the year. So I just took a class, like, basically for nothing.

INTERVIEWER: How about you, [STUDENT 3], what were your experiences?

STUDENT 3: Oh, yeah, they had me taking Algebra for, like, three years straight. I passed the first year, so in the second year I just decided not to go. I tried to get it fixed, but they wouldn't fix it. So after the third week trying to get it fixed I just stopped going.

INTERVIEWER: So did they count you as absent?

STUDENT 3: Yeah, and when they tried doing that I just got more aggravated and stopped coming to school period.

Attendance Policies

■ Policy Assumption

Requiring students to attend 90% of the time will ensure that they come to school to receive instruction.

■ Actual Effects

- Serious consequences for normal adolescent behavior.
- Alienates students from school and discourages them from returning.
- Criminalizes minor infractions.
- Students reluctant to endanger or incur costs to parents.
- Schools create non-academic or lower quality “credit recovery” systems.

SAMPLE DATA: THE EFFECTS OF ATTENDANCE POLICY AND TICKETS

-Sample from an individual interview at a high poverty school

I went to three elementary schools...then Middle School. Then I came to ninth grade. When I got to ninth grade, you know, I just made it as a fun thing, you know. I had more freedom than what I had in other schools. Learned – made new friends, you know.

Well I flunked ninth grade and back to ninth grade again. Kept going in circles and circles, and my mom used to get tickets and tickets so, you know, it's just left for me to drop out instead of me just giving my mom nothing but tickets. So I dropped out, and I stayed, like, a whole year without being in school.

Curriculum Degradation

■ Policy Assumption

High stakes testing combined with accountability for test scores will drive schools to focus on instruction and closing the achievement gap.

■ Actual Effects

- Curriculum that is increasingly fragmented and shaped by the forms and priorities of the standardized tests themselves.
- This fragmentation leads to inauthentic curriculum that further alienates students, who become bored and frustrated.

SAMPLE DATA: DEGRADATION OF CURRICULUM

--Focus group from a high poverty, majority African-American/Latino School

INTERVIEWER: Do you do practice tests?

STUDENT A: Yeah.

STUDENT B: Yeah, we have previous TAKS tests.

STUDENT A: We use the test from, like, the year before to study from and try and take examples from that to know what we're going to have coming up.

INTERVIEWER: Like, how much time do you spend on that?

STUDENT A: Every day.

STUDENT B: Every day.

INTERVIEWER: Every day around when? Like from September – August or every day just for a few weeks?

STUDENT A: Well since the programs – most of our classes are TAKS prep.

STUDENT B: Yeah.

STUDENT: So its like TAKS preparation in each one will revolve around TAKS stuff.

STUDENT B: Well since we got our schedules fixed, it's been like that. We're studying TAKS in all of our classes. (Interview took place in February)

Needed:

**Non-ideological re-examination
of policies that take into account
unintended effects of policy**