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Educational Attainment of High School Dropouts 8 Years Later

Dropping out of high school is not necessarily the end of a student's formal education. Some students who drop out return a short time later to earn a diploma, some may pursue an alternative credential such as a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, and others may enroll in a postsecondary institution without having earned a high school credential. Using data on public and private school students from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), Berkthold, Geis, and Kaufman (1998) examined the educational attainment of the 21 percent of 1988 eighth-graders who had dropped out of high school at least once between eighth grade and the spring of 1994, 2 years after they would have graduated if they had finished with the majority of their cohort.¹ They found that about 44 percent of these dropouts had received a high school diploma or an alternative high school credential by 1994. Of the 56 percent of all dropouts who had not completed high school by 1994, 43 percent indicated that they were working on a high school credential.

This Issue Brief extends Berkthold, Geis, and Kaufman's analysis of the NELS:88 cohort another 6 years, by examining dropouts' high school completion status and postsecondary experiences as of the year 2000—8 years after the cohort's expected graduation from high school.^{2,3}

Defining Dropouts

There are a number of ways to define dropouts. For the purposes of this analysis, students were considered dropouts if they ever reported dropping out of high school or passing the GED exam, if their high school transcripts showed that they had dropped out or passed the GED exam, or if in the 1994 or 2000 follow-up surveys they reported that they were working on an alternative credential or that they had not completed high school and were not working on an alternative credential. Generally, a student absent from school for 4 consecutive weeks or more and not absent due to accident or illness was considered to have dropped out (see Ingels et al. 1994). Members of the 1988 eighth-grade cohort were classified as dropouts after they had dropped out for the first time, whether or not they

eventually earned a credential. This definition is consistent with the definition used by Berkthold, Geis, and Kaufman (1998) in the analysis upon which this Issue Brief builds.⁴

High School Completion Status

About 92 percent of NELS 1988 eighth-graders, regardless of dropout status, earned a high school diploma or alternative by spring 2000; 88 percent earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential by spring 1994, and an additional 4 percent did so after spring 1994 but by spring 2000 (table 1).⁵

Of students in the 1988 eighth-grade cohort, 20 percent—about 587,000 students—dropped out of high school at least once (not shown in tables). Among students who had ever dropped out, 43 percent earned a high school diploma or alternative credential by spring 1994 (14 percent earned a high school diploma and 29 percent earned a GED or certificate). An additional 20 percent earned a high school diploma or alternative credential after spring 1994 but by spring 2000 (5 percent earned a high school diploma and 15 percent earned a GED or certificate). Thus, 63 percent of students who had ever dropped out earned a high school credential by 2000. Forty-four percent of students who dropped out of high school at least once earned a GED or certificate and 19 percent earned a diploma by 2000. As of 2000, 37 percent of dropouts had not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential, with 5 percent reportedly working towards a high school diploma or equivalent and 32 percent reportedly not enrolled or not working towards a diploma or equivalent.⁶

Consistent with Berkthold, Geis, and Kaufman's (1998) analysis of high school completion status as of 1994, this analysis shows that high school dropouts' characteristics as of eighth grade (socioeconomic status, test performance, and expectations of eventually earning a bachelor's degree or higher) were associated with earning a high school diploma or alternative credential as of 2000. As shown in table 2, 7 percent of dropouts whose families were in the highest socioeconomic status quarter in 1988 had not attained a high school

Table 1. Percentage distribution of 1988 eighth-graders, by high school completion status: 1994 and 2000

| Dropout status | Completed by spring 1994 ¹ | | | Completed after spring 1994 but by spring 2000 ² | | | Not completed as of spring 2000 | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|--|---------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| | Total | High school diploma | GED or certificate | Total | High school diploma | GED or certificate | Total | Working towards diploma or equivalent | Not enrolled and not working towards diploma or equivalent |
| All students | 88 | 83 | 6 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 1 | 6 |
| Dropped out at least once | 43 | 14 | 29 | 20 | 5 | 15 | 37 | 5 | 32 |

¹ Includes students who earned a high school diploma or alternative credential by the time of the NELS third follow-up in spring 1994.

² Includes students who earned a high school diploma or alternative credential between the NELS third follow-up and the NELS fourth follow-up in spring 2000.

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Students were classified as dropouts after they had dropped out of high school for the first time, regardless of whether they eventually completed a credential. Students who completed or were working on a GED or an alternative credential were considered to have dropped out at least once.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88/2000).

diploma or alternative credential as of 2000. In contrast, 31 percent of dropouts in the middle socioeconomic status range and 49 percent of dropouts in the lowest quarter had not done so as of 2000. As of 2000, 43 percent of dropouts whose NELS reading and mathematics composite test score was in the bottom quarter had not earned a diploma or alternative credential and were not working towards a diploma or equivalent, compared to 26 percent of dropouts who scored in the middle range and 16 percent of dropouts who scored in the highest quarter.

Dropouts who reported in eighth grade that they expected to complete a bachelor's degree or higher were more likely to have earned a high school diploma or alternative credential by 2000 than their peers with lower educational expectations. As shown in table 2, some 50 percent of dropouts who expected in eighth grade that they would finish high school or less had not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential as of 2000; in contrast, 25 percent of dropouts who expected in eighth grade that they would earn a bachelor's degree or higher had not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential as of 2000. By 2000, 23 percent of dropouts who expected in eighth grade that they would earn a bachelor's degree or higher had not earned a high school credential and were not working towards one; by comparison, 44 percent of dropouts who expected in eighth grade that they would finish high school or less had not earned a high school credential and were not working towards one.

Postsecondary Experience of Dropouts

By 2000, 43 percent of students who dropped out of high school at least once reported having enrolled in a postsecondary institution (table 3). Of these students, 13 percent reported first enrolling in a

4-year institution, 58 percent in a public 2-year institution (i.e., a community college), and 29 percent in some other type of institution. Dropouts who had earned a high school diploma or alternative credential by spring 1994 were more likely to have attended a postsecondary institution than dropouts who had done so after spring 1994 but by spring 2000 (66 percent compared with 45 percent). Fifteen percent of students who had not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential as of 2000 nevertheless reported having attended a postsecondary institution, and of those students, 9 percent reported first enrolling in a 4-year institution, 38 percent in a public 2-year institution, and 54 percent in some other type of institution. Among dropouts who had some postsecondary experience, 27 percent reported earning a certificate or license and 9 percent reported obtaining an associate's degree or higher by spring 2000 (not shown in tables).

Summary

Overall, the results presented in this Issue Brief suggest that a majority of students who drop out of high school at least once go on to earn a high school diploma or alternative credential within several years (63 percent), and many enroll in a postsecondary institution (43 percent). These estimates offer an early look at the postsecondary experiences of students who ever dropped out of high school, particularly for those who delayed entry into a postsecondary institution. Some dropouts who were enrolled in a postsecondary institution in 2000 may eventually earn a certificate or degree, and others who dropped out of high school may decide to further their education at a later date. Future research could use NELS respondents' postsecondary transcripts to investigate the types of postsecondary coursework engaged in by students who ever dropped out of high school.

Table 2. Of 1988 eighth-graders who dropped out of high school at least once, percentage distribution according to high school completion status, by selected student characteristics: 2000

| Student characteristics | Completed by spring 1994 ¹ | | | Completed after spring 1994 but by spring 2000 ² | | | Not completed as of spring 2000 | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| | Total | High school diploma | GED or certificate | Total | High school diploma | GED or certificate | Total | Working towards diploma or equivalent | Not enrolled and not working towards diploma or equivalent |
| Dropped out at least once | 43 | 14 | 29 | 20 | 5 | 15 | 37 | 5 | 32 |
| Eighth-grade socioeconomic status | | | | | | | | | |
| Bottom 25 percent | 31 | 11 | 19 | 20 | 5 | 15 | 49 | 7 | 42 |
| Middle 50 percent | 50 | 14 | 36 | 19 | 5 | 15 | 31 | 3 | 28 |
| Top 25 percent | 74 | 21 | 53 | 19 | 7 | 13 | 7 | ‡ | 5 |
| Eighth-grade reading and mathematics composite test performance | | | | | | | | | |
| Bottom 25 percent | 28 | 10 | 17 | 22 | 8 | 14 | 51 | 8 | 43 |
| Middle 50 percent | 51 | 16 | 35 | 20 | 3 | 17 | 28 | 3 | 26 |
| Top 25 percent | 73 | 22 | 51 | 9 | ‡ | 7 | 18 | ‡ | 16 |
| Student's educational expectations in eighth grade | | | | | | | | | |
| High school or less | 30 | 8 | 22 | 20 | 4 | 16 | 50 | 6 | 44 |
| Some postsecondary education | 38 | 13 | 25 | 21 | 5 | 16 | 41 | 8 | 33 |
| Bachelor's degree or higher | 56 | 18 | 38 | 19 | 5 | 13 | 25 | 2 | 23 |

‡ Reporting standards not met.

¹ Includes students who earned a high school diploma or alternative credential by the time of the NELS third follow-up in spring 1994.

² Includes students who earned a high school diploma or alternative credential between the NELS third follow-up and the NELS fourth follow-up in spring 2000.

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Students were classified as dropouts after they had dropped out of high school for the first time, regardless of whether they eventually completed a credential. Students who completed or were working on a GED or an alternative credential were considered to have dropped out at least once.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88/2000).

Table 3. Percentage of 1988 eighth-graders who attended a postsecondary institution by 2000 and the percentage distribution of level of first enrollment, by high school completion status: 2000

| Dropout status | Ever attended postsecondary institution | Of those who ever attended postsecondary institution | | |
|---|---|--|--|---|
| | | First attended 4-year institution | First attended public 2-year institution | First attended other type of institution ¹ |
| All students | 78 | 52 | 39 | 10 |
| Never dropped out | 87 | 56 | 36 | 7 |
| Dropped out at least once | 43 | 13 | 58 | 29 |
| Completed by spring 1994 ² | 66 | 15 | 60 | 25 |
| High school diploma | 65 | 20 | 61 | 19 |
| GED or certificate | 67 | 13 | 59 | 28 |
| Completed after spring 1994 but by spring 2000 ³ | 45 | 11 | 64 | 25 |
| High school diploma | 47 | 19 | 49 | 31 |
| GED or certificate | 44 | 7 | 70 | 23 |
| Not completed as of spring 2000 | 15 | 9 | 38 | 54 |
| Working towards diploma or equivalent | 24 | ‡ | ‡ | ‡ |
| Not enrolled and not working towards diploma or equivalent | 13 | ‡ | 31 | 62 |

‡ Reporting standards not met.

¹ Other type of institution includes: private for-profit; private nonprofit, less-than-4-year; and public less-than-2-year schools.

² Includes students who earned a high school diploma or alternative credential by the time of the NELS third follow-up in spring 1994.

³ Includes students who earned a high school diploma or alternative credential between the NELS third follow-up and the NELS fourth follow-up in spring 2000.

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Students were classified as dropouts after they had dropped out of high school for the first time, regardless of whether they eventually completed a credential. Students who completed or were working on a GED or an alternative credential were considered to have dropped out at least once.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88/2000).

Endnotes

¹ The NELS:88/2000 base-year sample excluded about 5 percent of the 1988 eighth grade student population due to serious physical or mental disabilities and/or greatly limited English language proficiency. For more information about the base-year sample and for a discussion of issues of eligibility, inclusion, and the effect of exclusion on national estimates, see Spencer et al. (1990) and Ingels (1996).

² The estimates in this Issue Brief were produced using F4PNLWT, the panel weight for 8th-grade members of the NELS:88 base-year sample who also participated in the first, second, third, and fourth follow-ups. The unweighted sample size was 10,827 cases, representing the approximately 2.9 million people living in the United States in the year 2000 who were members of the 8th-grade class of 1988. This sample size is smaller than that used in Berkthold, Geis, and Kaufman's (1998) analysis and may yield slightly different results.

³ The data on postsecondary educational experiences presented in this Brief in table 3 are based on respondents' reports. These self-reports may encompass some error in recall and thus may differ from information based on the respondents' postsecondary transcripts, which became available after this analysis was completed.

⁴ A small number of students who were not classified as dropouts as of 1994 were considered dropouts for this analysis because they reported having earned a GED or alternative credential after spring 1994 but by spring 2000, or indicated that they had not earned a high school credential as of 2000.

⁵ The NELS third follow-up was conducted between February and June 1994 (referred to as "spring 1994" in this Brief), and the fourth follow-up was conducted between January and August 2000 (referred to as "spring 2000").

⁶ Some dropouts who responded to the base-year and first three NELS follow-up surveys did not respond to the fourth follow-up survey. Estimates

presented in this Brief may be biased slightly if these nonrespondents were less likely to have received a high school credential than those who responded to all surveys. One way to estimate the potential magnitude of this bias is to assume that none of the fourth follow-up nonrespondents earned a high school credential. Using this unlikely assumption yields a high school completion rate of 57 percent for dropouts, while this Brief reports a completion rate of 63 percent for dropouts. Because some fourth follow-up nonrespondents most likely completed high school, the true magnitude of this bias is expected to be less. A more detailed nonresponse bias analysis is available upon request from Edith McArthur, NCES, at 202-502-7393 or Edith.McArthur@ed.gov.

References

- Berkthold, J., Geis, S., and Kaufman, P. (1998). *Subsequent Educational Attainment of High School Dropouts* (NCES 98-085). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
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The Issue Brief series presents information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences are statistically significant at the 0.05 level, according to two-tailed student's *t*-tests. In the design, conduct, and data processing of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) surveys, efforts are made to minimize the effects of nonsampling errors, such as item nonresponse, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error. For more information on NELS:88, visit <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/nels88>.

This Issue Brief was prepared by David Hurst, Dana Kelly, and Daniel Princiotta of the Education Statistics Services Institute (ESSI). This Issue Brief was formatted by Carol Rohr of Pinkerton Computer Consultants, Inc. For further information, contact Edith McArthur, NCES, at 202-502-7393 or Edith.McArthur@ed.gov. To order additional copies of this Issue Brief or other NCES publications, call 1-877-4ED-Pubs or visit <http://www.edpubs.org>. NCES publications are also available on the Internet at <http://nces.ed.gov>.