

At-Risk Students Achieve High School Graduation

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INTRODUCTION

This research proposes to identify key factors that contribute to the successful graduation of at-risk students from six high schools in Laredo, Texas. While much of the literature focuses on the elements that contribute to students' dropout rates, the research on the factors that help the marginal students to persist and succeed is much more limited.

This is an opportune time to study various areas within the public education system because of the tremendous attention this issue is getting at a national, region and local level. For example, at a national level, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is referring the status of public education to "The Silent Epidemic". There is the social movement, "Stand Up for Education," and *Time Magazine's*, documentary "Dropout Nation" stressing the breakdown of the educational system. Locally, there have been a series of newspaper articles on high school dropouts and the discrepancies in its accountability and reporting measures (Cortez, 2006). I believe this issue of high school completion and the quality of public education is currently on a high note in the consciousness of the general public as a result of the attention it is getting from the national media spurred by key national leaders.

Additionally, there is general agreement among social scientists that educational attainment is indispensable to the quality of life of a region and critical to a competitive workforce. Historically, the Texas-Mexico Border region has received the unwanted news that its student population is dropping out in higher numbers and underachieving in standardized tests compared to the rest of the State of Texas and the nation. Compared with Anglo American and African American students, Latino students have the highest high

school dropout rates and the lowest completion rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Within the midst of this disadvantaged educational environment, there are a number of students who manage to excel and succeed at first-tier Texas and nationwide universities and move on to become successful professionals. Thus, it is important to clearly identify the variables that contribute towards success in an effort to nurture and promote their replication. Decision-makers can benefit from the findings of this and similar studies and make informed funding-related decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the existing research on public school graduation rates is centered on the discussion and disagreements as to how the reporting of dropouts is done and who is included in these counts. Another major area of study in the literature is about the multiple factors that contribute towards what results in students leaving the educational system. All of these studies, while contributing to our overall knowledge, focus much more on the negative elements that keep students out of the graduating classes. The focus of this paper is, therefore, to identify factors found in common with at-risk students who are successful in graduating from high school. Velez and Saenz (2001), in a comprehensive study of the school leaving process, recognize that we need to study and document the high school completion of students previously identified as being at risk. This paper will contribute to the knowledge base, but does not claim to provide a complete explanation of successful students, any more than all of the studies which identify the factors in common with the students who dropout of high school. The factors most reported in the extensive literature on Latino dropouts are complex and multiple such as: “poverty, pregnancy, poor academic

achievement, parent's educational attainment, lack of motivation or low aspirations, disengagement from learning, and single-parent families" (Velez and Saenz, 2001, p. 447). Other studies identify the student's perceptions of teacher's ethnic bias (Wayman, 2002) while others claim it is the size of the school (Fry, 2005) or the failure of Latinos to assimilate (Huntington, 2004).

The concept that *place matters* is relevant here where location on the Texas-Mexico border has historically represented one of the most destitute regions of the state and the nation. The population along the Texas-Mexico border is characteristically of Mexican-origin and this is significant in education studies because Latinos have the highest proportion of school dropouts nationwide and among Latinos, the Mexican-origin population is the least educated (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). Additionally, within a city, such as Laredo included in this report, we find that spatial stratification exists within the geographic boundaries of the city limits, namely the inequality that persists between the south and the north sections of town, as an example. Lobao and Saenz (2002) address the significance of geographic space as an emerging and relevant issue for social scientific research. The U.S. Department of Education (1996) is also concerned with geographic location and resource apportionment. Students are relatively limited in what they can do to change their location of neighborhoods and the city where they live.

I take as a given the fact that educational attainment is a desirable goal of most Latinos, in contradiction to the anecdotal myth that these students and/or their parents have little interest in educational pursuits. San Miguel and Valencia (1998) have meticulously documented the struggle of many Mexican Americans and their determination for educational equality evidenced in litigation, advocacy, grassroots organizing and both

confrontational and peaceful demonstrations. Without belaboring the fact that there are numerous obstacles to graduation completion, a look at the factors, which have shown positive results amidst social and economic barriers, is the emphasis of this study.

Katz (1999) found that a teacher-student relationship based on trust facilitates learning. In a previous research, McDermott (1977) concluded that where trusting relationships occur, learning is possible. A number of other factors attributed to success in school could just as easily be applied to management skills applied to subordinates such as a sense of competence, meaning, belonging, risk-taking, excitement and creativity.

A study by Lucas, Henze and Donato (1999) on success stories of otherwise at-risk students found eight factors present in the schools: “valuing the student’s languages and cultures, making the education of language-minority students a priority, offering a variety of courses and programs for language-minority students, encouraging the parents of language-minority students to become involved in their children’s education, and being committed to empower language-minority students through education”. In a review of various studies, Rodriguez (1999) found that one key factor repeatedly voiced by students is the presence of teachers with high expectations of Latino students. Students interpreted the setting of high expectations as the teacher’s belief in their intelligence and their abilities, which motivated them to aspire to higher goals and thus break the stereotypical cycle.

Additionally, Conchas (2001) contends that cultural-ecological and institutional explanations clarify either the failure or success of Latino students. Conchas (2001) describes that the simultaneous interplay of culture and structure engages students to fully participate and succeed while preventing marginalization. The strongest recommendation is the collaboration between students and teachers towards academic rigor and institutional

support systems. Finally, Jasinski (2000) and others conclude that the diversity of the Latino population and the socioeconomic factors play a much stronger role in educational attainment rather than placing such ardent emphasis on language deficiencies or recent immigrant status.

METHODOLOGY

For this particular research, I propose to use a micro-level of analysis to study and identify factors that have proven to be efficacious towards helping at-risk high school students to stay in school and graduate. This study is a continuation of a series of studies within the discipline of the sociology of education (Garza, 2006). I believe the nature of this social problem requires a profound and thoughtful review that may produce insights not easily obtainable using macro-level studies. A micro-level of analysis facilitates a deeper examination and centers the attention at variables that may go undetected with survey and questionnaire-type studies. This qualitative research documents the status of twelve students from six different high schools identified by school counselors as being at-risk of not graduating. However, these students beat the odds and graduated in May 2006. In order to protect their identity, the student's profiles are identified by numbers.

FINDINGS

Included in this study are twelve students, five males and seven females, from two local school districts, the Laredo Independent School District (LISD) and the United Independent School District (UISD). The three schools within LISD are: Cigarroa, Martin and Nixon

High Schools. The three schools within UISD are: Alexander, United and United South High Schools. These students can be considered fortunate to have had the support of their high school counselors. The following is a brief synopsis of the student's profiles:

Cigarroa High School

- Student No. 1

This student is one of three children, the middle child, whose father works as a truck driver and a stay-at-home mother. The family is struggling financially and has difficulty making ends meet which places her at-risk. This student, however, is a leader among her peers and recognizes the value of higher education. She has a B+ average and aspires to earn a master's degree in education. Student feels she has the support of her family and school personnel.

- Student No. 2

Student is one of three children, the middle child, whose father is a truck driver and whose mother works as an office clerk. Student also works as a cook after school. The family is financially disadvantaged and is part of the working poor. His counselor describes this student as quiet, hard working and although he has a B average, he is struggling academically. Student sees his parents struggle because neither has a high school education. This student recognizes the value of an education as a path to a career.

Martin High School

- Student No. 3

Student is the oldest child of three. She comes from a single-parent household where the father is absent and the mother works as an office clerk earning no

better than minimum wage. The family lives below the poverty level. Her counselor greatly admires this student's determination in spite of multiple obstacles facing her. Student sees high school as a path towards bigger and better things.

- Student No. 4

This student is the younger of two children. Her father is a self-employed laborer and her mother is a housewife. Her counselor describes her as intelligent, shy, but with great aspirations and hopes for her future. Student has the moral support of her parents. Financially, the family faces many hardships and the children will not receive any financial assistance from the parents.

Nixon High School

- Student No. 5

Student is the oldest of five children ranging in ages from two to seventeen. His home environment is troubled because he lives with a stepfather with whom he has a very poor relationship. There is no positive communication with the stepfather and thus, no moral support. Student has a C average. Nevertheless, this student is positive about his own future and has great insights that show an understanding of the value of an education if he is to be in a position to help others, especially children. Student also recognizes that just having a job is not enough and that minimum wage jobs are dead end jobs and no life at all.

- Student No. 6

Student is the younger of two who lives in a single-parent household. Her mother is a maid at a local department store and she is working as a salesperson in a different store. The family lives below the poverty level. Additionally, student is struggling academically, which places her at greater risk of dropping out of high school. However, student does realize the importance of an education as a means to an end towards independence.

Alexander High School

- Student No. 7

Student is the second child among three. His stepfather works as a forklift operator and his mother is an office clerk. The student is also working as a laborer in a warehouse. Student's father died when he was quite young and his mother has remarried. His family is considered economically disadvantaged. Student has a C average and is not strong academically. He sees education as the most practical road to economic independence.

- Student No. 8

Student has had to bear the death of both of his parents who died in separate incidents. His mother and two sisters died in a house fire while living in San Antonio. He was the only one saved in the house fire. He lives with his stepsister and her son, his aunt and his cousin. Student has experience working especially in fast food restaurants. His grades are averaging a C+. He was successful to get out of a gang and determined to make a better life for himself.

United High School

- Student No. 9

Student is the youngest of four children. Her father works as an office clerk and her mother is a saleslady in a department store. She has a B average and prides herself to have perfect attendance. Her family is considered economically disadvantaged and part of the working poor because although both of her parents are working, their combined income is minimal. Two of the older children are attending college with the help of financial aid. Student is involved in many school activities and wants to become a teacher.

- Student No. 10

Student is the oldest of four children. His father is a self-employed construction worker. His mother is a homemaker. His family is considered economically disadvantaged which places the student and the three younger siblings at-risk. Additionally, this student has legal resident immigrant status that prevents him from qualifying for a variety of scholarships. This obstacle has crushed him because he is a hard worker and quite involved in many extra curricular activities. This student is ranked 13 out of 531 classmates, which indicates his discipline and dedication to his studies. His counselor was emotionally moved by his devotion to his education and career goals in spite of the barriers he faces.

United South High School

- Student No. 11

Student is the oldest of six children in the household where the youngest is her own one-year old baby. Her father works as an electrician and her mother is a maid at a local hotel. The family is considered economically disadvantaged and school-age children qualify for the school lunch program. Having a baby places

her at-risk of dropping out of school. This student aspires to get a college education because of the financial advantages that this would bring and because she does not want her son to think that he was to blame for her not getting an education. Her parents are very supportive of her educational goals and encourage her and assist her as best they can.

- Student No. 12

This student is the oldest of four children. Her father is a ranch hand and her mother is a maid for a local health care organization. The family lives below the poverty level and the school children qualify for the lunch program. Student has a baby. There is no financial support from the baby’s father. Her counselor recognizes in her the motivation and determination necessary to complete her education, but the obstacles she faces are many. Neither of her parents completed high school. Her academic accomplishments are limited and she finds high school difficult. This student, as most others, views an education as the passport towards job security and financial independence.

An outline of the student’s profiles helps to summarize the narratives as demonstrated in

Table 1 below.

Table 1. Selected Characteristics of At-Risk Students

	Percent	Average
Fathers with no high school education	100%	
Mother with no high school education	100%	
Father and Mother present in the household	66%	
Father only present in the household	- 0-	
Mother only present in the household	33%	
Father employed	75%	
Mother employed	50%	
Student employed	42%	

Students involved in extra curricular activities	50%	
Economically disadvantaged households	100%	
Average number of children in the household		2.8
Average grade point average		82.02

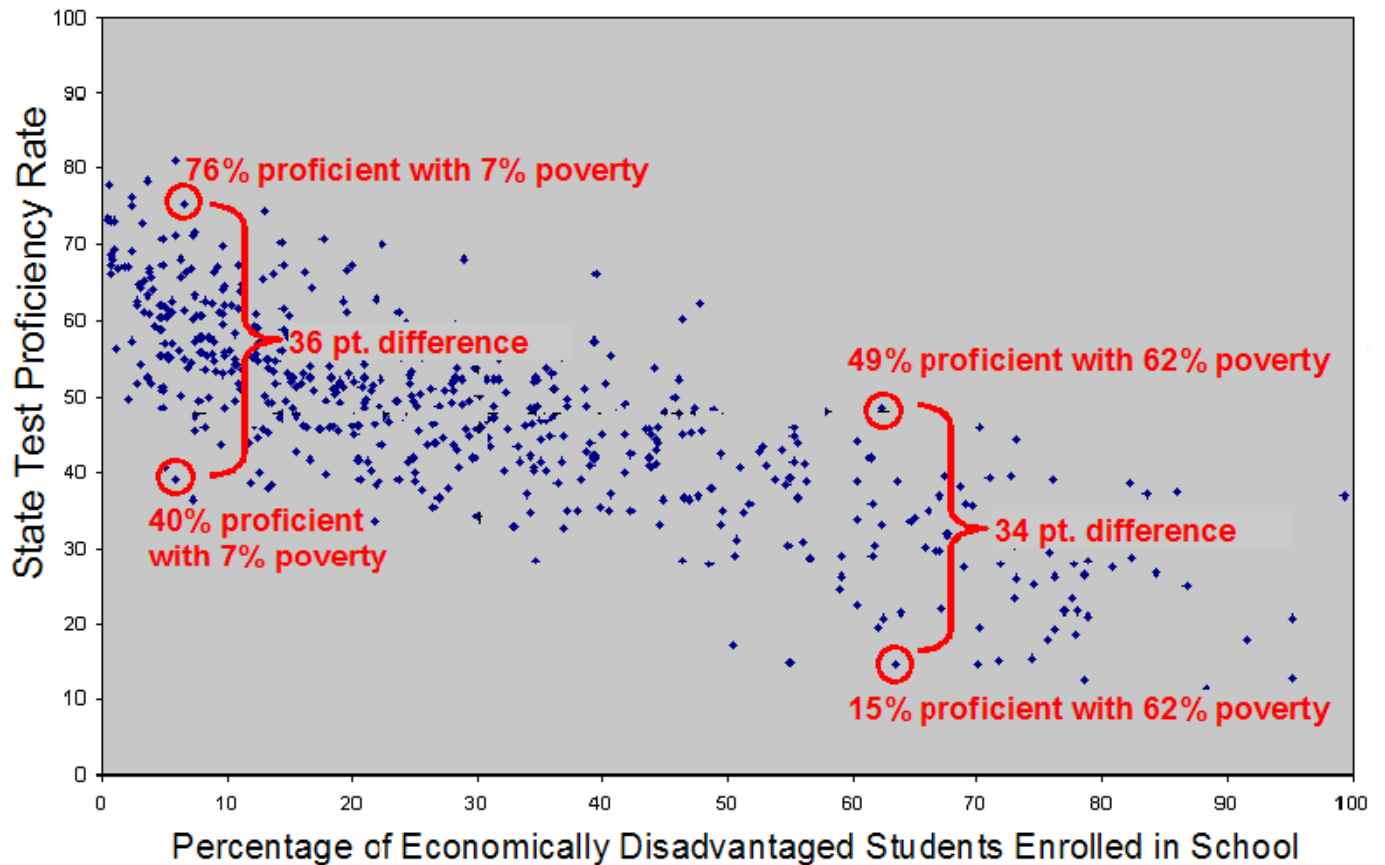
The students in this study were clearly at-risk of dropping out and yet, managed to graduate. The three elements found in common with all of the students were that both father and mother had no high school education and this contributed to the third collective element, which is the economic disadvantage of all of the families. However, poverty and student achievement is not a cause and effect relationship as shown in Figure 1 below. The correlation demonstrated is between poverty and achievement where achievement is in reference to the state's proficiency tests that are said to be predictive of high school completion rates. To emphasize these conclusions, poverty is a contributing factor but not a sufficient factor to predict educational attainment.

These students had one or more adults in their lives who provided the thrust, encouragement and moral and practical support necessary to reach graduation. This individualized support system is analogous to prescribed medication, which follows after much diagnosis and analysis and concludes with a personalized treatment of care and not a singular cure for all. In the educational system, treatment may originate from a parent, a sibling, a peer, a counselor, a social worker, a teacher, a school janitor, a coach, the band director, a club sponsor, a neighbor or anyone, but someone who persists and has the best interest of the student.

Figure 1

Correlation Between Poverty and Achievement

Despite this correlation, there is still a wide range of proficiency rates at any given enrollment level of disadvantaged students, as shown by the two bracketed examples.



Source: School Matters, 2005

RECOMMENDATIONS

The dropout problem affects an entire community and as such we must move beyond denial that all is well and blaming parents, children, teachers, administrators, the state and federal government, poverty, the educational preparation of teachers, etc. etc. Public education impacts our nation and as such requires that public and private entities invest in its solution. This will require a willingness and commitment to implement programs with proven success.

One such effort is the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), a non-profit organization developed in 1994 by teachers Dave Levin and Mike Feinberg. Today, 52 KIPP schools are serving over 11,000 students in 16 states, including Texas, and the District of Columbia. In Texas, KIPP schools are found in Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio. The Texas Education Agency has recognized KIPP Academy in Houston as an "Exemplary School" for every year of its existence since 1995. The KIPP model is mentioned here not as an endorsement, but as an example of a new and fresh approach to address a chronic problem. Briefly, KIPP students spend 62 percent more time in school than other students because classes start at 7:30 am, end at 5:00 pm and have half-day sessions on Saturdays. At the core of KIPP's success after much research and practical experience are five principles, referred to as the five pillars: 1) high expectations, 2) choice and commitment, 3) more time, 4) power to lead, and 5) focus on results (KIPP, 2005). Another example is the High Tech High School in San Diego California where there is no football, band nor pep squad and even no paper books, but where students are being prepared for today's competitive job market with the latest technology (Standup.org, 2006).

In conclusion, educational attainment is definitely reachable for many more students and responsible adults must work incessantly to see that the goal of an educated workforce becomes a reality. For the Texas-Mexico border, the challenge is greater because of the high concentration of Mexican-origin population that has the greatest proportion of school dropouts among all of Latinos. We should heed the warning from respected researchers that "failure to invest in the education of Latino youth, and all youth from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, will come back to haunt the country in the future" (Murdock, et al; National Research Council, 1993).

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