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Understanding the Dropout Rate in Hartford: 1996-Present

Introduction

When one considers the problems associated with the school systems in Hartford, Connecticut, it is no surprise that the City has been struggling with high dropout rates for numerous years. In a city full of poverty, lack of opportunity, and failing schools, one might argue that Hartford's disadvantaged students do not have an equal chance of graduating when they walk into the classroom on their first day of school. The dropout rate, which has been linked to numerous social and economic factors that can be predicted very early in a child's life, is not improving. Students who belong to minority groups or come from low socioeconomic backgrounds have a significantly greater chance of dropping out of school. Though the statistics might lead people to believe otherwise, policy makers are aware that dropout rates have not changed the way they had once hoped. Rather, it is perhaps the method of data collection, reporting, and sheer embarrassment that lead to declining dropout rates, rather than an actual decrease in the number of students who leave high school. This idea will be further expanded upon throughout this project.

Background

The dropout rate in the United States has been a serious crisis for numerous years. Since the mid 1980s, there has been a crusade devoted to reducing the high percentages

by encouraging students to stay in school. Many suggestions and ideas have been put forth in order to overcome this huge social problem in American society. However, one might argue that this mission has been somewhat unsuccessful. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in October 2000 “five out of every 100 young adults enrolled in high school in October 1999 left high school before October 2000 without successfully completing a high school program.” More importantly, however, is the fact that the report claims that dropout rates have remained “relatively unchanged” since 1987. That is, with all of the money, time, and effort that the United States has devoted to the dropout cause, very little has been accomplished. The method that American policymakers use to “reduce” dropout rates needs to be thoroughly reexamined.

There are extreme, unavoidable societal consequences for those who drop out of high school. First, dropouts have a significantly smaller chance of finding any sort of adequate employment. That is, “today’s economy requires of the labor force increased literacy, more education, enhanced technological skills, and lifelong learning” (Woods) and dropouts lack this type of knowledge. In addition, those who dropout are much more likely to become sexually active earlier, abuse drugs and alcohol, engage in violent behavior, and commit crimes. It has also been proven that dropouts are the segment of the population most likely to end up receiving government based assistance. Finally, as the number of “unskilled laborers in low-wage jobs” (Woods) continues to swell; a huge underclass population has developed. This results in a great deal of poverty and joblessness, which is becoming a very serious social problem. Clearly, dropouts are at an extreme disadvantage in American society today.

Over the years it has been difficult to obtain a national definition as to exactly what qualifies a dropout. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), “a school dropout is an individual who was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year; was not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year; has not graduated from high school or completed a state- or district approved educational program” (NCES). This definition is now considered applicable in all states and is supposed to be enforced by the federal government. However, there are still questions as to whether districts all maintain the same standards and report their statistics accurately. It is impossible to inspect and compare the dropout rates among numerous states when statistics are calculated differently

In Hartford, the dropout rates in recent years have been extremely puzzling. The changes that occurred in the dropout percentages, specifically for the classes 1998 through 2000, have raised questions all over the City and State (Appendix A). It is nearly impossible that in only three years, the dropout rate could have declined from 51.0% to 28.3%. This is why it is important to understand how and why these rates changed the way they did.

Research Question

I have decided to examine the dropout rate in Hartford more carefully. In particular, I wonder how dropout rates are calculated. Also, I wonder what accounts for the dramatic change in the dropout rates over the past ten years. More specifically, how did the cumulative dropout change so dramatically? These questions, though extremely difficult to answer, will be addressed throughout the research project. It is important to

note that when searching for an justification or clarification of statistics put forth by a government affiliated agency, it is very difficult to get any real explanation. Though I have done the best I can with the information I have, there will undoubtedly be gaps throughout my study, of data that I was unable to trace or uncover.

The information that I have gathered thus far leads me to my thesis. I believe that this shift in the dropout rates was not due to Hartford's efforts to reduce their numbers and percentages. Rather, before the 1996-1997 school year, data was not collected accurately. This shift in methodology led to the dramatic change in percentages. Also, based on interviews and gathered information, I argue that the data provided by the city of Hartford and the state of Connecticut needs to be much more translucent and easy to obtain. Dropout rates are an important piece of information to be able to understand. The residents of Hartford, the state of Connecticut, and the entire nation should not have to spend time trying to decipher the numbers.

Literature Review

There has been a plethora of information written about dropouts and dropout rates over the years. For more than three decades, the educational system has been dedicated to studying and reducing these rates. Decreasing the dropout rate is so critical, it was labeled as one of the most important educational goals in the United States, as early as 1987. Based on extensive research, it is now clear who is more likely to dropout, why people drop out, what the effects of dropping out are. Though much has been written, the statistics show that on the whole, dropout rates have remained constant over a period of many years.

According to many experts on the subject, people in the United States today are “kidding [themselves] about school dropout rates” (Fossey). Organizations like the National Center for Education Statistics and the Department of Education have explained that dropout rates in this country have really begun to change in recent years. However, when one takes a more critical look, it becomes clear that there is very little that has changed. According to Richard Fossey, the declining rates in many “at risk” areas may be a result of large urban districts preventing themselves from humiliation at the huge number of students who dropout. He explains that “some districts have constructed obscure dropout definitions and measurement techniques that hide the fact that large numbers of students fail to graduate on time (Fossey). In addition, other well-respected journals have argued that “the nation’s high school dropout rate may be...almost three times higher than the government estimates” (Black). Clearly, there are some perplexing questions about how much the dropout rate has realistically changed in the last twenty years. Finally, Fossey argues that “a crisis in urban schools is being covered up by slippery definitions, inaccurate reporting, and an unwillingness to face reality” (Fossey).

It has been proven that students who are minorities and/or are in the lower classes are more likely than their middle and upper class counterparts to dropout of high school. According to a longitudinal study conducted in 1987, “inner city samples have consistently shown a high prevalence of dropping out among black students” (E). This studied also overwhelmingly proved that students who are at risk of dropping out of high school can be identified based on many social and economic factors. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “the dropout rate for whites in 2000 remained lower than the rate for blacks” In addition, Hispanic young adults in the United States

continued to have a relatively high dropout rate” (NCES). If one looks at the need in Hartford, it becomes clear why dropout rates remain high. During the 2001-2002 school year, 94.3% of the student population in Hartford was minority and 60.4% were eligible for free lunch (Strategic School Profile, 2002). Based on these factors, it is clear why Hartford has been struggling to control its dropout rates for many years.

In the state of Connecticut, much has been done to reduce the dropout rate. In 2003, Senators Chris Dodd and Joe Lieberman announced “the “Safe Schools/Healthy Students” grant, which was awarded by the U.S. Department of education [and] allot[ed] 2.8 million” (press release) to the Hartford’s schools. This money is “aimed at reducing the dropout rate,” and funding will continue until 2006. Though this money is supposed to be helpful, one can argue that there no amount of money will really have an effect on the dropout rate. In addition, teen researchers in Hartford have begun asking questions as to why so many people in their city, and other cities like it, drop out of school. Based on a series of interviews, they found out that “teen pregnancy, violence, racism, peer pressure, harassment and work were cited as the main reasons for dropping out of school” (Hartford news). It is important to see that students are also curious as to what causes their peers to dropout of school, and what can be done to prevent this. It is important to get students themselves motivated and involved in the quest to reduce the number of high school dropouts.

Finally, though the literature on dropout rates in Hartford is not very prevalent, the enormous change in the rates has been questioned before. One of Trinity College’s experts on collecting data in the city of Hartford embarked in a similar project before the publication of The Hartford Primer and Field Guide (2nd addition) in 2003. He did not

have much success in finding answers. He states, “In the months preceding the publication [of the Field Guide in 2003], neither [the Connecticut State Department of Education], nor the Hartford School Board, could explain how the dropout rates in Hartford were calculated” (Kuzyk 2003). Clearly, it is interesting that this experienced researcher was unable to find a clear, supported answer for the decline in these rates. This piece of literature sparked my interest in pursuing this topic.

Research Design

The first step of this entire project was to find contacts that would help me begin my research. I decided to track down employees at The State Department who would assist me on my quest of understanding the dropout statistics. I was able to come into contact with two people. The first, Allison Zhou, is an expert statistician who works for The Division of Evaluation and Research at the State Department. She is also the author of a 2001 Data Bulletin entitled “High School Dropout Rate in Connecticut.” I knew that she was a knowledgeable and intelligent source, who could provide me with a great deal of quantitative information. The second, Marcus Rivera, was recently appointed by the State Department to work closely with the Hartford Board of Education to ensure statistical accuracy among all of the data that the school district produces. This job-title was very interesting; it led me to believe that Hartford’s Board of Education was indeed worried about the accuracy of its statistics, and had hired someone to organize this specific task. Both of these contacts became essential throughout the project; we were in constant communication.

I compiled a list of questions that I planned on asking Zhou and Rivera. Basically, I wanted to know how the dropout was calculated in the city of Hartford, the State of Connecticut, and in the United States. Next, I wanted to know what the “cumulative dropout rate” meant, and how it was calculated. I also wanted to know how this differed from the “annual dropout rate.” I was also curious as to how the State Department obtains its data from the schools. Do they go into every school and calculate the number of dropouts themselves? Do they rely on people within the public schools to do this work themselves? Finally, I wanted to ask them questions about the dropout percentages in Hartford. Carefully, I thought I would ask them if they truly believed that the dropout statistics were accurate; especially from the cumulative dropout rates for the classes of 1998, 1999, and 2000. Though I knew these would be a series of very sensitive interviews, I had to take my chances.

In addition, I decided to use whatever statistics that I could obtain from local, national, and federal sources about dropout rates in the United States. I utilized reports that claimed that dropout statistics tend to be widely inaccurate. I also used quantitative data to back-up my qualitative data. I also used two State Department documents to further clue me into what had been published about the dropout crisis in Hartford. All of these sources came together to help me build a strong, well supported case which conclusively proves that Hartford itself is not responsible for the decline in dropouts.

Interpretation of Primary Sources

After completing these consultations, there were many interesting issues to think about. First, there was a general sentiment that both of my interviewees seemed to share.

That is, they both felt that before the 1996-1997 school year, the dropout data in the city of Hartford and the state of Connecticut was largely inaccurate. Though they could not provide information as to why this was the case, they did explain that the State Department has hired all new personnel since this time. That is, there is only one person working at the State Department in 2004 that was employed there before 1996. It is, therefore, difficult to get anyone to directly explain how rates were calculated in the past and how dropout rates are calculated today. This gap in the information that they were able to provide seemed extremely “convenient;” if the answer to my question really was a secret, this cover was a very easy excuse.

The fact that districts “self report” their data allows much room for error. According to Zhou, many of the organizers in these districts are either unfamiliar with what constitutes a dropout or are simply inexperienced in the process of data collection. Rivera believes that “people who collect data within the Hartford Public Schools are in no way qualified [to do this job].” Though it is nearly impossible to correct this problem, Zhou has now started running monthly training sessions on exactly how to collect dropout data. And, there is a sort of system that the Hartford Public Schools now follow in terms of understanding what dropouts mean. Finally, there exists a standard definition of exactly which students should be considered “dropouts.” I decided that I needed to figure out more specific details of this “standard system of accountability.”

Both Zhou and Rivera explained that this issue was extremely “politically sensitive.” Because the Hartford Board of Education had received accusatory comments about this dropout data, they do not tend to freely give out information on this topic; especially to students who are looking to exploit a system’s inadequacies. Zhou explained

that this project should be discontinued, as there is no way I would be able to acquire any meaningful evidence. Rivera, on the other hand, believed that somehow, I would be able to find documentation to support my theory. Though the only person who remained at the State Department since the layoffs in 1996 was unable to talk to me, I was able to continue my research without her assistance.

My hypothesis was further supported when I located a fascinating report written by the Hartford Public Schools in response to criticisms about their dropout statistics from 1990-1997. This report, submitted by Hartford to the State Department of Education, outlines the exact reasons why the dropout statistics seem so absurd. According to The Commissioner of Education at the time, Dr. Theodore S. Sergi, there were some serious questions as to why Hartford's dropout rates did not correspond with its attrition rates, as is the case in most public schools in America. The report responds claims that it is a result of the mass exodus from Hartford – and more specifically the Hartford Public School system – over the past decades that these percentages do not match up. That is, “Hartford's school enrollment numbers...declined from 26,420 in 1991 to 24,227 in 1997” (Report). This fact certainly responds to the Commissioner's claim, but fails to address the dropout statistics themselves. It is interesting that this report was prompted by a small claim and amplified into a full review of the precautions taken to maintain exactness.

I was also struck with the fact that this report states that “the key factor in compiling the ED-535 report has always been the accuracy of the records maintained by the schools.” However, I had previously heard that it was the schools themselves that were responsible for collecting data seemed to have no idea what the actual definition of

a high school dropout in the city of Hartford was. It is impossible to count on reliable data from a source that does not understand the data collection process. If the Hartford Board of Education really expected to trust guidance counselors and others who collect the data, they should have been well-trained from the start. As Zhou and Rivera suspected, “because of personnel changes [in the Hartford Public Schools], it would be difficult to determine the procedures used to verify the accuracy of the dropout data for the years prior to October 1996 (Report, 3).

The real meat of the report claims that it is because of “a new system of accountability [which] was implemented in the fall of 1997 prior to the collection of data for the 1996-1997 ED-525 report” (Report). Although indirectly, it seems that it is here that Hartford admits its mistake in the years before 1997. Before this point, the city was understaffed in terms of workers who were able to accurately make count of the dropouts; in addition, people were seemingly unclear as to exactly what constituted a dropout. Because of this, rates were likely inaccurate. Also, according to interviews with Zhou and Rivera and the acknowledgements of this report, most of the personnel who worked for the State Department are no longer working there. This regime change was likely a result of the negative publicity that the City of Hartford has gotten for their dropout statistics throughout the 1990s.

Another assertion within the report was mentioned to me first by Marcus Rivera. He hinted that “an improved and comprehensive accountability system was implemented for the fall 1997 report. This system is *the major factor* in explaining the change in the dropout rate for the 1996-1997 school year” (Report). This system is very detailed, and the report claims that it has been thoroughly taught to everyone involved in correctly

reporting the dropout rate. In addition, the City began using a computer program to “calculate the numbers of continuing, exiting, and entering students” (Report). Clearly, a computer is a much better way of keeping track of the large number of students in Hartford’s three public high schools. This could certainly account for a much more clear and precise way of monitoring students.

According to the report, there have been many measures put into place to ensure accuracy in 1996-1997, extra precaution was taken in calculating and reporting dropout data to the State Department of Education.

To interpret this information further, one must keep in mind that the dropout rates For 1995-1996 (noted as incorrect data) are included in the cumulative dropout rate in 1998-1999.

Discussion

From these consultations and the documents, I now understand how districts know who the State classifies as a dropout. There is very specific definition in place so that there are no questions. According to a 2002 Data Bulletin put forth by the Connecticut State Department of Education, there are four categories of dropouts:

1. those students 16 years of age or older who officially drop out of school;
2. students who leave school and do not return, but for whom not transfer information to another regular secondary program is available;
3. students who are on a class roster from School A to attend School B but never report to that school and for whom no transfer information to another regular secondary program is available; and
4. students who leave school to enroll in a training program, including GED classes, unless the GED classes are a required part of an alternative secondary education program, such as Job Corps or National Guard.

Zhou reported that students who are in jail (and do not return to classes before October 1st of the next school year) are not considered dropouts. In addition, Zhou claimed that

she does not believe every child who is home schooled is counted in State Department data. Finally, Zhou emphatically claimed that today, *this* is the way that dropouts are supposed to be counted in all districts, in all states, across the country (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2004/2004310.pdf>). Whether this occurs on a year-to-year basis is questionable, but these categories have been presented as the standard that each state ought to follow.

In addition, in Hartford and in the rest of the country, there is a standard definition of dropouts that now applies.

In terms of the cumulative dropout rate, I learned that It is based on a very specific formula that calculates “the proportion of students within a high school class who dropped out of school across four consecutive years” (Data Bulletin). That is, to construct the cumulative rate, one must utilize data “across four consecutive years.”

In addition, Zhou seems to be in control of calculating and analyzing the data she receives from the computer program of the (now reliable) Hartford Public Schools

Conclusions

Clearly, the dropout data in Hartford, Connecticut before the 1996-1997 school year ought to be considered erroneous.

Appendix A

Cumulative 1996	Cumulative 1997	Cumulative 1998	Cumulative 1999	Cumulative 2000	Cumulative 2001	Cumulative 2002
48.9	44.1	51.0	45.6	28.3	22.9	29.7

(Connecticut State Department of Education, 2002).