



Arizona Minority Dropout Solutions

*Arizona Minority Education Policy Analysis Center
(AMEPAC)*

*A Policy Analysis Center of the
Arizona Commission for Postsecondary Education*

Fall 2001

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Executive Summary

Arizona is in the midst of a crisis. Far too many students are not reaching their high school graduations and here in Arizona, a significant number of these students are from economically and socially disadvantaged ethnic minority backgrounds. Arizona's last place ranking in a recent study of dropout rates only reinforces the significance of this problem. Furthermore, continued growth in the minority population in Arizona may only increase the level of crisis as more and more minority students enter the education pipeline.

The dropout rate for students in grades 9-12 for 1999-2000 is 11.1%. However the true dropout rate should reflect the loss of students over their four years of high school where the cumulative result becomes staggering to the point that a recent New York Time's article stated that "26 percent of Hispanic girls leave high school without a diploma". According to the Kids Count Data Book, Arizona ranks worst in dropouts with 17% of 16 - 19 year olds not graduating. This is almost double the national average of 9 percent, ranking Arizona 49th, tied with Nevada for the highest dropout rate in the nation.

The Arizona Minority Education Policy Analysis Center (AMEPAC), a policy analysis center of the Arizona Commission for Postsecondary Education, has worked with school administrators, policy makers, and education researchers to brainstorm solutions to this problem. During a series of round table discussions these stakeholders, along with members of the state legislature and community activists developed a set of recommendations for parents, school staff, and the community that must be considered to ensure the success of Arizona students. Three sets of recommendations emerged from the discussion: support the student, support the teacher, and use student assessment data to help students, parents, and administrators.

Support the Student. Community members must develop a resource manual for teachers on available programs, develop mentorship programs, and urge existing programs to share ideas and resources. Parents must be encouraged to learn about assessment tests, develop relationships with school staff, and use those relationships to establish reasonable performance expectations for their children. Teachers and administrators must maintain high expectations for their students, be sensitive to the needs of at-risk minority students, and develop local K-16 Councils that focus on improving the dropout rate.

Support the Teacher. Teachers need the support of the community, parents, and school administrators in their efforts to help students graduate. Community members can turn the simple act of voting into a dropout prevention effort by electing board members and state officials who support quality public education. Parents can help teachers by meeting with them to develop an atmosphere of respect and provide opportunities to exchange information. School administrators and parents can help teachers by attending community-building events to provide the opportunity for interaction between teachers, parents, and students. Hiring and retaining quality teachers and providing professional development funds will also improve the education environment.

Use Student Assessment Data. Support for student assessments can be gained by showing how assessment data can be utilized to gauge student achievement. The use of student assessments such as AIMS and the Stanford 9, however, must be coupled with adequate education for parents and the community as well as teacher and student preparation. These tests, which can provide useful data on the quality of public education as well as student achievement can also be intimidating and complicated for students to take, parents to understand, and teachers to implement. The education community must take an active role in providing financial and other resources to prepare teachers to teach to the standards, prepare students adequately, and provide information regarding standardized testing and the uses of scores to parents and other stakeholders. Test results should be carefully examined to assess student performance and develop appropriate education plans to address weaknesses.

AMEPAC will work with state officials, parents, teachers, and school staff towards implementation of these recommendations. AMEPAC is encouraged by the commitment of state leaders towards decreasing the dropout rate, and looks forward to working with all of the stakeholders in an effort to encourage minority students to stay in school.

Introduction

*This **Position Paper** has been compiled to provide a perspective on the Arizona minority student dropout crisis. The recommendations within arose from a series of Roundtable Discussions, research, and insights provided by AMEPAC members.*

The Arizona dropout rate has reached epidemic proportions. Newspapers, policy makers, community organizations, and the public at large have begun to pay attention to the shocking statistics. *The Arizona Republic* recently noted, “the sky is falling...Arizona’s rising population means that the sheer number of dropouts will climb rapidly unless there’s a cut in the rate of teens abandoning school.”¹

Arizona high school students are at a greater risk for dropping out than any other group of students in the country, with minority students being the most at-risk. This sad fact was recently revealed when Arizona’s dropout rate tied for last place in a recent nationwide study. Students in Arizona schools experience the highest dropout rate in the country. The situation is even worse for Arizona minority students, almost double for Hispanic students and more than double for American Indian students. If this trend continues, it will have a grave effect on the number of graduating students, because it is projected that, beginning with the high school class of 2009, the majority of graduates will be minority students.² This imminent trend is based on population changes and projections and will continue to color the landscape of Arizona’s public school enrollment and graduation rates.

In order to address this problem, it is important to understand that dropping out is a process, not an event. Students decide after a series of events to drop out, and actually disengage from school over a length of time.³ Steps must be taken during a student’s entire academic career to ensure that signs of disengagement are recognized and addressed. Programs must be developed to capture students at the first signs of trouble, rather than after the decision has been made to leave school. Specific programs should address the needs of minority students – the group most at risk for dropout.

The economic stability, future growth, and Arizona’s ability to compete for high tech industries are at risk if the dropout trend is not reversed. A family’s level of income is directly correlated to educational attainment. Family income level is tantamount to purchasing power and economic gains. In order for Arizona to compete in the new economy, its population, specifically its minority population, must be well educated, trained, and able to compete in fueling the economy. According to the U.S. Census Bureau 2000 report, minorities now make up slightly over 36% of the state’s population. Future population estimates show that the minority population will continue to grow at an accelerated pace and well before 2040, the Arizona minority population will become the majority in Arizona.⁴

AMEPAC, a policy analysis center of the Arizona Commission for Postsecondary Education, hopes to provide resources, support, and information to schools, communities, and policy makers taking action. Ideas abound for increasing student and teacher support, as well as helping parents, communities, and policy makers use and understand student assessment tools. This paper contains suggested programs, projects, and efforts to be undertaken to affect the minority student dropout rate and encourage action to prevent what could be a difficult future for Arizona’s minority youth, as well as Arizona’s economic future.

Painting a Picture: National and State Data

FACT: Over the last decade, between 300,000 and 500,000 10th - through 12th -grade students left school each year without successfully completing a high school program.⁵

FACT: Hispanic young adults in the United States continue to have higher dropout rates than either Whites or African Americans⁶

A National Perspective. Nationwide, schools struggle with the problem of minority dropouts. National agencies, policy centers, and universities have approached the problem from a number of different ways. Studies have examined a variety of areas: the most accurate methods of determining the number of students who fail to return to school; factors that indicate dropout risks; and the effects of state standards and assessments on dropout rates. Accusations have been pointed in a number of directions: unsupportive parents, insufficient school budgets, administrative mismanagement, and teachers who are too busy or too tired to take the time to detect problems or have low expectations of their students.

At the federal level, the focus on dropout rates is provided via one of the six official goals of America 2000 – a 90% graduation rate. “America 2000” was an effort made by the US Department of Education to create a plan of attack to improve education nationwide. President Bush has refocused this commitment with his education policy statement: *No Child Left Behind*. Though this document does not make specific reference to dropout rates, it does make commitments to move students with limited English proficiency to literacy, establish technology centers in high poverty areas, improve teacher quality, and build schools for American Indians.⁷ All of these efforts, combined with state and community programs, could positively affect the minority dropout rate by encouraging language proficiency and improving the quality of school personnel and facilities.

The federal government operates a number of programs to address minority student dropout rates and also provides research funds to enable other agencies and institutions to develop their own programs and research projects. TRIOⁱ, for example, is a collection of programs that provide grant money to organizations helping at-risk students enter college and graduate. TRIO dollars are used for programs such as Talent Search, an early intervention program that provides counseling and information about educational opportunities to at-risk students. Programs provided by TRIO both encourage students to remain in school and to strive to be successful at college.

GEAR UPⁱⁱ, a federal program similar to TRIO, requires dollar-for-dollar matching funds from universities, schools, and outside programs to implement programs for low-income students. Pipeline NAU, a collaboration between Northern Arizona University and Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Flagstaff, was a recent recipient of a GEAR UP grant. The project matches up NAU faculty to local high-risk students, pairing them up when the student is in the seventh grade and

ⁱ Between 1964 and 1968, three programs were created to help disadvantaged students (Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services). The term "TRIO" was coined to describe these programs.

ⁱⁱ GEAR UP - Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs.

encouraging the continuation of the relationship through high school. Each student who meets the program requirements and graduates from high school will be awarded a full scholarship to college. Programs such as these that combine federal, state, and local resources show what can happen when the community comes together for students.

Even with these efforts towards educational improvement, the situation has not changed significantly. A study of schools and students at risk notes that “many young people today are becoming at risk of failure in America’s schools for the same reason that their parents and grandparents became at risk: limited educational opportunities and incentives (p. 3).”⁸ Education organizations such as the College Board, the teacher’s unions, and a number of non-profit organizations have all created programs to supplement federal and state programs and provide opportunities for minority students.

Equity 2000, for example, is a national program initiated as a five-year pilot by the College Board. The program, now called Pathways to Equity and Excellence, works to close the gap between minority and non-minority students enrolling in college. Partnering with superintendents, parents, administrators, teachers and counselors, Equity 2000 piloted its program for education reform in 14 urban schools districts in six cities: Fort Worth, Milwaukee, Nashville, Prince George’s County (Maryland), Providence, and San Jose (California). The program is based on a theory of challenge and support: challenging students to take algebra by the 9th grade and geometry by the 10th grade, and providing the enrichment and support necessary to ensure their success. The program is based on research that indicated that low-income and minority students who master algebra and geometry and intend to go to college enroll in the same rate as non-minority students.⁹ Therefore, Pathways to Equity and Excellence (“Pathways”) uses mathematics as its initial tool, encouraging districts to raise their math requirements and provide the support students need to meet this challenge.

Based on the success of the pilot project, Pathways developed six programmatic elements that could be explored in Arizona as a framework for affecting change in minority student retention.

¹⁰ These elements are:

1. District-wide policy changes to end tracking and raise standards for all students;
2. Ongoing professional development for teachers, counselors, and principals;
3. Development of a “safety net” for students through academic enrichment;
4. Increasing parental involvement;
5. Formation of school-community partnerships that include links with colleges and universities; and
6. Use of student enrollment and achievement data to monitor progress.

The last element of the Pathways plan, the use of data to monitor progress, has both national and state implications. Even the definition of “dropout” is under debate, and differences in how it is defined, and therefore how data is collected, affect the ability to make state and national comparisons. Along with the use of data to monitor goals, effort needs to be made to come to consensus on the definitions of terms such as “dropout,” “dropout rate,” and “graduation rate.” Only when schools are using the same data and analysis can a true picture of the dropout problem be fully developed and solutions implemented.

FACT: 38% of Arizona's minority population are under 18 years of age as opposed to 21% of the White population.¹¹

FACT: Hispanic 8th graders in Arizona score nearly three years behind White 8th graders in the state in science, and more than two years behind in math, reading, and writing.¹²

FACT: African American 8th graders in Arizona score more than three years behind White 8th Graders in the state in science and writing, and more than two years behind in math and writing.¹³

An Arizona Perspective. Arizona's overall high school dropout rate is one of the highest in the nation – tied with Nevada for last place. The minority student dropout rate is even more alarming. While the dropout rate for the American Indian and Hispanic populations exceeded 15% in 1999-2000, it is important to realize that the dropout rate increases dramatically in the 9th grade with 1 in 10 students or more dropping out at each grade level. The end result is a large percent of minority adults not having graduated from high school.

Population data predicts a steady increase of minorities in Arizona, which will further impact schools and community resources. The low rate of Hispanic school completion in particular would indicate that a large percent of Arizona's largest minority group will be underprepared for employment, for making personal choices, and for engagement in civic life.¹⁴

African-American	13.0%
American Indian	16.8%
Asian	4.8%
Hispanic	15.4%
White	8.1%

The 1999-2000 total dropout rate for high school is 11.1% ¹⁵

American Indian students demonstrate the greatest amount of risk for dropout. Cultural, financial, and social issues interact in a way that can make it difficult for American Indian students to remain in school. High unemployment rates on the reservations require parents to travel vast distances for work, resulting in students coming home to empty homes. The high rate of single parents also creates more opportunities for students to be left responsible for themselves and their siblings, leading many to drop out in order to take care of their families. American Indian students are also often taught by non-Indian teachers who have no knowledge of their culture and societal norms, which can lead to miscommunication in the classroom. All of these factors lead to the high dropout rate for this group of students.

The Arizona Legislature recognizes the specific needs of American Indian students and has assisted in establishing programs to help them succeed in school. The American Indian Institute

(AII), for example, was established in 1989 through HB2108 (passed in 1988) in an effort to increase American Indian student recruitment and retention. The program, initially funded by the legislature but now funded by Arizona State University, addresses the recruitment and retention of American Indian students at ASU. Services include a facility for students to use for studying and socializing, scholarship support, and sponsorship of programs for education professionals to increase the discussion of American Indian recruitment and retention issues. According to Cal Seciwa, Director of the AII, over the last 10 years the American Indian student population at Arizona State University has increased by 86.6%. Retention of students in the program during the last academic year was approximately 91%. Programs such as this could be studied and replicated at other educational institutions in order to continue to improve the American Indian graduation rate.

Arizona's high dropout rate has not escaped the notice of policy makers. Governor Jane Dee Hull recently commented on the state's abysmal dropout rate, directing the new State Superintendent for Public Instruction to make the study of this issue a priority. The interest of the community in improving the educational system was indicated by the passage of Proposition 301, which directs six-tenths of one percent of the state sales tax to education. Schools have been making plans for the use of these funds to increase teacher pay, improve facilities, and extend the school year to allow for more professional development.

The development of the Arizona Minority Education Policy Analysis Center (AMEPAC), a policy center within the Arizona Commission for Postsecondary Education, also indicates the state's interest in minority student issues. AMEPAC was created in 1996 to assist Arizona in rebuilding its minority student achievement public policy agenda. The strategic plan developed by AMEPAC showcases its commitment to excellence in research and an expanded community role. Its board hopes to act as an advocate for change, representing all education sectors in an effort to improve, among other things, the minority graduation rate. Through non-partisan activities such as grant programs, conferences, and careful, accurate, independent publications, AMEPAC hopes to advance opportunity, clarify priorities, and assure public support.

Minority Dropout Solutions: Practical, Strategic, and Systemic Solutions

“Make today the day minority students of all groups no longer become the victims of our education process...What will be said of your contribution tomorrow?”

- Joseph Donaldson, Mayor of Flagstaff, AMEPAC Conference, May 2001

In May 2001, AMEPAC challenged a group of education professionals to develop solutions to the minority dropout epidemic. Three roundtable discussions focused on specific questions regarding student support, teacher support and student assessment. The following recommendations, compiled from those discussions as well as previous AMEPAC roundtables, cover a variety of options that can be pursued by parents, students, school staff, and the community to affect change.

Support the Student

Active support of minority students is fundamental to their retention in school. That support can be provided in a variety of ways: from parents, from the community, and from teachers and school administrators.

Community Involvement. The engagement of external resources in the support of minority students has demonstrated a significant impact on retention. Schools such as the Amphitheater Public Schools in Tucson developed partnerships with local community colleges to provide help for students who dropped out and want to complete a high school diploma and go on to college. The Maricopa Community Colleges have also worked in partnership with local school districts to develop several programs for at risk students. Examples of these partnership efforts include the ACE and ACE+ Programs at South Mountain and Glendale Community Colleges, Genesis West at Estrella Mountain Community College, and Gateway Community High School at GateWay Community College. “Jobs for Arizona’s Graduates” is a non-profit program using private and public funding to work with youth at risk of dropping out by helping them to stay in school, graduate, and get and keep a quality job. A central collection of programs such as these would provide information for students, parents, counselors, and teachers regarding locations, activities, and resources available to students.

RECOMMENDATION: A resource manual of programs designed to assist students at risk of dropping out should be developed for students, parents, school counselors, and teachers. The manual should contain addresses, contact information, a description of the program, and other resources and should be available both in print and on the Internet.

In conjunction with the development of a resource manual, community programs should also look to each other for partnership opportunities. This would provide the programs with the opportunity to share resources, facilities, and ideas for minority student outreach and increase local business participation in the education community. These partnerships would expand the options available for students and schools, while minimizing the costs for the programs themselves.

RECOMMENDATION: Community and education institution outreach programs are encouraged to develop partnerships in an effort to increase resources available to students while minimizing costs and duplication of efforts.

Mentoring is commonly defined as one-to-one interaction between an adult volunteer and a student who needs help in achieving personal and academic goals. Community programs such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, the nation's oldest and largest mentoring program, champion the value of one-on-one interaction in helping children reach their full potential and achieve their dreams. Research indicates that programs such as these can help students develop more positive attitudes towards school, a powerful weapon for decreasing the dropout rate.¹⁶ Mentoring programs such as these should be supported and new mentorship programs specifically focused on minority students should be developed with community organizations and businesses. Engaging local business members would provide the students with positive role models who may be able to introduce the student to exciting new learning opportunities.

RECOMMENDATION: Existing minority student mentorship programs with a proven success record must be supported and new programs developed with participation from community organizations and businesses.

Community members have the most power when organized and active in the governance of their schools, district councils, and legislatures. Grassroots activities such as voting drives, attendance at board meetings, and involvement in school programs all demonstrate the interest and devotion of the community to its students and schools. This activity can relay a powerful message to state legislators and other elected officials who may be encouraged to take further action to support Arizona schools. Alliances formed by parents, teachers unions, the public community colleges and universities, and the Governor's office helped pass Proposition 301, which will provide additional revenue to Arizona's educational institutions.

Initiatives such as these, as well as individual actions such as voting can have a similar dramatic effect when focused on minority student retention. Groups interested in advocacy could consider ideas such as the reduction of school class sizes, the use of current technology in classrooms, the development of local K-16 Councils, and increased teacher pay as places to begin.

RECOMMENDATION: Grassroots organizations and individuals must develop local advocacy groups to promote policies that will make a difference in the dropout problem.

Parental and Family Involvement. There is remarkable consistency among research studies that suggest parent and family involvement is an essential factor in a student's academic performance. Research also notes that parent involvement can have a positive impact on improving school attendance and lower drop out rates.¹⁷ However, that same research points out that the concept of parental and family "involvement is not universally defined."¹⁸ Because of these differences many parents, educators, and educational policy makers may have very different perspectives on how parent and family involvement is characterized.¹⁹ Therefore, these different perspectives about parent and family involvement can manifest in a variety of ways. Consequently, minority parents are often misunderstood and they are often held accountable to school policies and guidelines on how to support their children's educational goals, which do not

take into account “external factors such as work schedules, family commitments, and social ills that impact communities across the nation.”²⁰ For that reason, researchers are asking:

“Under what circumstances and conditions are parents expected to participate in their child’s educational process? Moreover, what are the best means by which public educational institutions can support parents and make accessible to them the information they need to help their children succeed in school?”²¹

Children of families with limited economic resources and whose primary language is not English regularly face additional obstacles that may impede a child’s K-12 educational progress. A 1998 report notes that, “a common stereotype about language minority parents is that they are unconcerned about their children’s education and do not want to become literate in English. Often these parents are characterized as ignorant, poor, products of bad schools, in conflict with their children, and in general, culturally deprived.”²² Yet, the same report notes that the authors of the Hispanic dropout project observed Hispanic parents acting like any other parents of school children: they worked with schools and community organizations, valued learning, and supported their children in school.

A 1995 study of American Indians emphasizes that there are over 252 languages spoken by 505 federally recognized tribes, and 365 state recognized tribes. The economic hardship and social problems experienced in these communities are well documented. Yet despite their many tribal and cultural differences, they have similar ways of interacting with the “mainstream” culture.²³ A 1999 report issued by the New Mexico Research and Study Council suggests that American Indian students drop out of school as a direct result of the friction that exists between the mainstream “White” and American Indian cultures. The major differences are seen as, “family relationships, the conception of property, and the values of sharing and community (as opposed to individualism and competition).”²⁴

Despite these many challenges, school administrators and teachers must emphasize the development and implementation of school policies and community outreach programs focused on both parents and students gaining a better understanding of the potential benefits of staying in school.

Taking that lead, research suggests that school programs be established that foster supportive relationships between school administrators, teachers, students, and parents based on self-esteem, self-respect, motivation, and accepting of responsibility. These types of programs promote cultural respect, parental support, and concern, which are important in identifying factors focused on student success. Additionally, to foster parental involvement, all oral communications and written materials should be language sensitive. Many successful school and community outreach programs that promote parental involvement report that having bicultural materials and bilingual staffs helps establish trusting relationships between parents and educators.²⁵

RECOMMENDATION: Schools must be sensitive to different cultures and circumstances of underrepresented populations and help parents play a meaningful role in their students education.

One method of increasing the ability of parents to understand the educational challenges of their children is to ensure that they fully understand the different assessment tools used in Arizona schools. Assessment tests such as AIMS and the Stanford 9 provide valuable information to teachers and parents on student strengths and weaknesses. These tests, however, can be intimidating. Efforts should be made to ensure that parents understand the different information available in each of these tests, and what the implications are for students.

RECOMMENDATION: Parents must have the opportunity to learn about assessment tests and the meaning of the results.

Parents can also take an active role in their child's education, indicating their commitment to their child, by developing a relationship with the student's teacher(s). Such a relation could be formalized through the development of a contract between the student, parent, and teacher. This contract could require attendance and class participation from the student, prompt grading and positive reinforcement from the teacher, and a quality study environment, significant time for study, and an expectation for excellence provided by the parent. This type of agreement defines expectations at the beginning of each school year or semester and provides important proof of external interest to the student.

RECOMMENDATION: Parents and teachers must consider developing a contract between the student, the teacher, and the parents that clearly defines expectations.

School Staff. Teachers, administrators, and other school support staff spend a significant amount of time with students and therefore are an important source of support and recognition. A culture of concern coupled with high expectations and a wealth of resources (both monetary and programmatic) produce an environment that encourages minority student retention.

A positive teacher/student relationship is fundamental to student success. Teacher approval can be a strong influence on a student, and the motivation derived from a supportive teacher can lead to student retention. This is illustrated by a survey of dropouts which cited concerns regarding getting along with teachers as close to the top of students' reasons for dropping out of school.²⁶ An environment in which the student is challenged and supported, as seen with the Pathways program described earlier, can also lead to academic achievement. "A teacher who communicates low expectations of a student's ability to learn challenging material will usually discourage the student's own confidence as a learner and interest in earning the teacher's recognition for good schoolwork."²⁷

RECOMMENDATION: Teachers must maintain high expectations for all of their students and create an environment of challenge and support.

One way for teachers to be inclusive of minority students is to be sensitive to the diversity of at-risk children and respect their indigenous orientations and values. Hispanic children, for

example, are often taught that it is not respectful to look adults in the eye, speak to adults unless spoken to first, or volunteer answers. Teachers who are unaware of this could construe this behavior as either disrespectful or showing a lack of interest in school lessons.²⁸ Professional judgment should be used in determining the appropriate reaction to such behavior, which might be a conversation with the student regarding expectations for behavior in the classroom.

RECOMMENDATION: Teachers and administrators must be sensitive to the specific needs of at-risk minority students and have resources available to assist in helping these students.

School administrators and education policy makers have the ability to affect the dropout rate by developing programs that benefit students, regardless of the school in which they are enrolled. The development of K-16 Councils, supported by national education advocacy organizations such as the Education Trust, bring together local education, business, and community leaders to increase success rates among all students, from kindergarten to college.²⁹ Councils in Atlanta, El Paso, and Long Beach have begun work to bring together reform efforts, revise incentive structures to promote student success, and shift decision-making to the faculty in exchange for increased accountability. These councils open lines of communication between sectors and encourage systemic change, rather than promoting individual projects in one or two schools.

RECOMMENDATION: School administrators and education policy makers must consider the development of local *K-16 Councils* that focus on improving the dropout rate.

Support the Student: Summary of Recommendations

- A resource manual of programs designed to assist students at risk of dropping out should be developed for students, parents, school counselors, and teachers. The manual should contain addresses, contact information, a description of the program, and other resources and should be available both in print and on the Internet.
- Community and education institution outreach programs are encouraged to develop partnerships in an effort to increase resources available to students while minimizing costs and duplication of efforts.
- Existing minority student mentorship programs with a proven success record must be supported and new programs developed with participation from community organizations and businesses.
- Grassroots organizations and individuals must develop local advocacy groups to promote policies that will make a difference in the dropout problem.
- Schools must be sensitive to different cultures and circumstances of underrepresented populations and help parents play a meaningful role in their student's education.
- Parents must have the opportunity to learn about assessment tests and the meaning of the results.
- Parents and teachers must consider developing a contract between the student, the teacher, and the parents that clearly defines expectations.
- Teachers must maintain high expectations for all of their students and create an environment of challenge and support.
- Teachers and administrators must be sensitive to the specific needs of at-risk minority students and have resources available to assist in helping these students.
- School administrators and education policy makers must consider the development of local *K-16 Councils* that focus on improving the dropout rate.

Support the Teacher

The teaching profession is undergoing a crisis almost as dramatic as the dropout crisis discussed in these pages. There are currently about 2.8 million teachers working in the U.S., with an estimated 2 million additional public school teachers needed in the next decade. In Arizona the average teacher is 44 years of age, and many are expected to retire over the next two decades. Over the same time period, enrollment in Arizona schools is expected to increase by 66%, with minority students making up a significant portion of that enrollment increase. These students pose unique challenges for teachers because their social and economic backgrounds often include factors that make them a high risk for dropout.³⁰

Minority students are also at risk due to the quality of teachers they sometimes encounter. These students, often from low-income households, attend schools that can't afford the salaries of richer districts. Low-income students are often assigned to the least-qualified teachers and often lack the rigorous courses needed to enter college, which further widens the gap between minority and non-minority students. This lack of challenging coursework, coupled with low standards for performance, does little to compel students to stay in school.³¹

The implications of these enrollment increases, combined with the teacher shortage, are enormous. Arizona will need a substantial number of teachers, and due to this demand the teachers that are recruited are likely to be less skilled, less experienced, and responsible for larger classrooms. Therefore, it is important for Arizona to develop a plan to support its teachers in order to maintain the quality of education that students receive, maintain sufficient numbers of staff, and ensure that the specific needs of minority students are not overlooked.

Teacher support can come from a variety of sources. Parents, administrators, and the community all play a role in developing positive working environments, supplying classroom assistance, and providing help to students. Only a combination of efforts such as these can help minority students stay in school.

Community. The community plays a large role in providing support for Arizona teachers, both in terms of individual participation and the participation of the business community. Participation in the political realm is the major tool that community members can use to impact policy issues affecting teachers, and therefore students. Simple actions such as voting, and more complicated efforts such as participation at board meetings or in mentoring programs all provide a number of opportunities for citizens to get involved in their schools. Empowering teachers with monetary resources and assistance inside and outside the classroom creates an environment that encourages experienced teachers to keep teaching and emboldens individuals interested in joining the profession.

One of the strongest weapons a community member has is the vote. Issues such as Proposition 301, passed by voters in November 2000, will provide over \$480 million annually for teacher pay, classroom renovations, and smaller class sizes. Voters also choose school board members, legislators, superintendents of public instruction, and other elected officials who share their

concerns. In addition to voting, community members can become involved in shaping policy decisions by attending meetings and contacting their elected representatives.

RECOMMENDATION: Community members (parents included!) must support teachers by taking an active role in the education community via voting in district, state, and national elections.

Parents. Parents have a special role in regards to supporting teachers. Through supporting their students via some of the methods mentioned in the previous section, parents can make a teacher's life much easier. Parents can also play a political role by participating in school board meetings and electing education-friendly public officials.

The parent/teacher relationship can be a great source of information and support for both parties. A few moments with a teacher can provide a parent with information on their student's performance, an opportunity to ask questions, and the chance to build a friendly relationship with someone who spends a significant amount of time with their student. These contacts are also valuable for the teacher. The teacher can learn more about the student's background, provide advice regarding how to help the student at home, and teach parents about academic standards and how well their student meets them. Students benefit from these interactions, as well. These meetings demonstrate to the student a parent's interest in his or her education, which has a significant effect on decreasing student dropout.

RECOMMENDATION: Parents must meet with teachers to develop an atmosphere of respect and provide an opportunity for the exchange of information.

Parents can have a significant impact on the operation of their child's school. Public school board meetings are open to everyone, and many private schools also have parents' associations that encourage parents to get involved in the school. At these meetings or events, parents have the opportunity to meet teachers and administrators, learn about issues facing the school, and share their concerns. In this way, parents help the school by improving the environment for teachers and students.

RECOMMENDATION: Parents must get involved in school activities and/or parents' associations.

School Administrators. The school administration, including school board members, has the most direct impact on the teaching environment. Quality classrooms and classroom equipment, appropriate pay, and support for innovation help to provide the materials and encouragement teachers need to be successful. Successful teachers, in turn, reward the students and staff with support on issues and longevity in the position.

School administrators must also recruit quality teachers and provide them with on-going professional development. Arizona is currently experiencing a shortage of teachers - a shortfall that often leads to the hiring of inexperienced or unprepared teachers who may not have the resources necessary to recognize students at risk of dropping out. Opportunities for professional development, coupled with quality teaching staff, contributes to an environment where the

teacher's skills are respected and developed and where students can benefit from the investments made in their instructors. These practices will increase teacher retention, increase staff morale, and reduce the dollars spent on the recruitment and training of new staff.

RECOMMENDATION: School administrators must hire and retain quality teachers and provide support for professional development.

Building community within the school benefits students, teachers, administrators, and parents. School climate affects both student and teacher performance, and can impact an individual's willingness to cooperate during the changes or challenges encountered by all schools. By creating a positive climate in which parents, students, teachers, and staff interact on a social basis, school administrators can encourage the development of successful relationships. Simply planning school picnics, fairs, and other casual events can make a significant impact on school climate. These events also provide an opportunity for parents to learn more about the school and the resources that are available.

RECOMMENDATION: School administrators must plan community-building events to provide the opportunity for interaction between teachers, parents, staff, and students.

A positive climate can also be developed through the encouragement of innovation. Innovation, in conjunction with the autonomy to make changes in the classroom, enables teachers to keep their craft fresh and interesting while increasing student learning.

Support the Teacher: Summary of Recommendations

- Community members (parents included!) must support teachers by taking an active role in the education community via voting in district, state, and national elections.
- Parents must meet with teachers to develop an atmosphere of respect and provide an opportunity for the exchange of information.
- Parents must get involved in school activities and/or parents' associations.
- School administrators must hire and retain quality teachers and provide support for professional development.
- School administrators must plan community-building events to provide the opportunity for interaction between teachers, parents, staff, and students.

Student Assessment

Arizona has a number of methods for assessing student learning in order to determine if established goals or standards are being met. Tests such as the Stanford 9 and AIMS have been developed to demonstrate student competency in subject areas such as math, science, and English and enable schools to compare their performance with other schools both inside and outside of Arizona. The Stanford 9 is an exam given to students in 3rd through 12th grades across the country. It allows Arizona students to be compared to their state peers, as well as students in other participating states in the subject areas of math, reading, and language. AIMS, or Arizona's Instrument for Measuring Standards, is a test developed specifically for Arizona students and linked directly to Arizona's academic standards. It is important to note that criterion-referenced tests that are aligned to standards can be valuable in assisting students to achieve academic success. The initial plan was to administer versions of the test to 3rd, 5th, and 8th graders, as well as high school students. Full implementation of the AIMS test would result in students being required to pass the high school portion in order to graduate.

The implementation of standardized testing has encountered significant resistance. Proponents argue, for example, that minimum competency tests encourage schools to improve performance; opponents argue that they penalize low-income and rural schools that don't have amenities such as computers, teacher's aides, and state-of-the-art classrooms. Arizona's historically uneven financial support for the school districts has created significant dissimilarities between school districts, and only recently has an effort been made to develop a more equitable, balanced system of providing financial resources.

Opponents also argue that standardized testing discourages students who fail the exam from continuing in school and that teachers have not had the time, training, and resources necessary to prepare students from varied academic backgrounds.³² A single classroom of students, for example, varies widely in terms of academic and social experience. Standardized testing, however, assumes that all students are equal in their academic preparedness and thus challenges a teacher's ability to equally prepare all students. For these reasons, it is important to ensure that competency tests take these concerns into account and do not negatively impact the students needing the most help and support.

RECOMMENDATION: The education community must provide teachers the resources necessary to implement standardized testing. Teachers must be given adequate time, training, and institutional support to address the diverse academic needs of their students in order to ensure a standardized level of preparedness.

Standardized test results can also be analyzed by categories such as race and ethnicity to determine how different groups of students are performing, indicate the success or failure of intervention programs, and provide data on what factors contribute to academic difficulty. Comparing test results to studies on dropout rates can help education policy makers develop programs that can best help students. For example, a U.S. Department of Education study noted that when African-American and white students from similar backgrounds are compared, dropout rates for the African-American cohort are not higher, and in some cases may be lower

than whites.³³ Information such as this helps eliminate stereotypes of minority groups, and helps schools create programs to affect the root causes of high dropout rates.

RECOMMENDATION: Standardized test results must be used appropriately to assess student performance, determine the effectiveness of teaching methods, and develop educational plans that address weaknesses revealed by the results.

Stakeholder buy-in is central to the success of standardized testing. Teachers, staff, parents, and students must be familiar with the standards, as well as the efforts made to include them in the curriculum. Parents especially must understand the process behind the development and administration of the test, as well as how to interpret the results. School staff can use a number of opportunities such as parent/teacher conferences, tribal events, school board meetings, and school events to provide information on these tests and give parents the chance to ask questions.

RECOMMENDATION: School staff must make every effort to ensure that parents understand all aspects of standardized testing.

The media, the university and business communities, the tribal affiliates, philanthropic organizations, and elected officials also have an interest in state academic performance. Education organizations, the Department of Education, and schools should make a concerted effort to share this information, as well as information on how to interpret the scores and use them to improve education in Arizona.

RECOMMENDATION: The Arizona education community must develop a plan for providing information about standardized testing and the uses of scores to all stakeholders.

There are a number of methods the education community can use to convey this information. Here are just a few:

- Identify people in the community who will take responsibility for developing an education plan.
- Form community partnerships to share the information (i.e. – recruit private donations to cover the cost of publishing mailers to parents, businesses, etc.)
- Train volunteers to teach community groups, parents, and philanthropic organizations about standardized testing and data collection.
- Develop a centralized resource that describes how the data can be used, as well as programs that have been developed to improve performance.

Student Assessment: Summary of Recommendations

- The education community must provide teachers the resources necessary to implement standardized testing. Teachers must be given adequate time, training, and institutional support to address the diverse academic needs of their students in order to ensure a standardized level of preparedness.
- Standardized test results must be used appropriately to assess student performance, determine the effectiveness of teaching methods, and develop educational plans that address weaknesses revealed by the results.
- School staff must make every effort to ensure that parents understand all aspects of standardized testing.
- The Arizona education community must provide information regarding standardized testing and the uses of scores to all stakeholders.

Conclusion

Jaime Molera, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, has promised that the State Education Department will “be there as a resource for local schools, as a partner with the community and as a strong advocate of high standards”.³⁴ AMEPAC is encouraged by this commitment, and looks forward to working with all stakeholders in an effort to encourage minority students to stay in school.

The recommendations in this paper will hopefully serve as a starting point for individuals and groups interested in improving the minority student dropout rate. Suggestions range from the simple act of voting, to the more complicated task of developing an outreach program regarding standardized testing. Each of these suggestions, however, will have a significant impact on at least one student, and every Arizona student deserves the best effort possible.

The future of Arizona will be determined by how we as a state address our dropout crisis. If we continue down the path of allowing our minority graduation rate to decrease or maintain the current level, it will effect the economic future of all Arizonans. For Arizona to flourish and become globally competitive we must commit to improving our schools, our teachers, our students, and make graduation from high school a priority.

The future of Arizona will be reliant on an increasing minority population that within the next four decades becomes the majority of Arizona citizens. For Arizona to reach its potential we must ensure that this population is a well educated, skilled workforce capable of competing in the new economy. Our efforts in the next few years will set the path for the following decades, let us not let the mistakes of the past become the 'norm' for the future.

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