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July 12, 2006

**Section:** EDITORIAL

**Edition:** FINAL EDITION

**Page:** A12

### Target at-risk freshmen to prevent dropping out

**ANDREA NEAL**

If Hoosiers didn't already grasp the extent of the dropout crisis, they do now. The 17th annual Kids Count data book, just released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, labeled our high school dropout rate -- 13 percent a year -- the worst in the nation. That report came just days after Education Week pegged Indiana's graduation rate at 73 percent, slightly above the national average of 69.6 percent but far below previous estimates by state education officials.

How Indiana determines its dropout/graduation rate has been a subject of controversy for years. A consensus has emerged: It's awful. Almost three out of 10 kids who start high school don't graduate with their classmates.

There's less consensus over how to attack the problem. While many advocates insist that funding early-childhood education is the most effective dropout prevention program, research suggests that the best time to spot and treat a potential dropout is freshman year of high school. First-quarter grades and conduct are accurate predictors of future achievement. Smother struggling students with tutoring and mentoring, and things can turn around quickly.

"I'm advocating for paying close attention to the transition to high school," says Elaine Allensworth, associate director for statistical analysis at the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago. Allensworth elaborated on her views during a July 6 online chat sponsored by Education Week. "We can't fix every problem at once . . . What we can do is identify those students who are struggling right away, in the freshman year, and help them develop strategies to improve their academic performance.

"We need to pay attention to students who are just getting by in their freshman year: those with D's and one or two F's," Allensworth says. "Often these students are seen as doing all right and not in need of monitoring or support, compared to students that are really struggling. But these are the majority of the

students at high risk for dropout, and they are also more amenable to support and intervention. This also doesn't mean assigning just one person to support potential dropouts, but getting all teachers and staff to see monitoring and support as part of their job."

A study by the consortium found that freshmen who fell behind schedule to graduate with peers had a four-year graduation rate of 22 percent compared to 81 percent for those "on track" to graduate.

Programs aimed at assisting students make the transition to high school are working. Among the most noteworthy is a readiness program run by the College of Education at Northern Arizona University in a state whose graduation rate is just below Indiana's at 70 percent. The program identifies seventh-grade classrooms in high poverty and high minority areas and sticks with students until they graduate.

Each participating school has an intervention team consisting of the principal, guidance counselor, finance manager and a special coordinator paid with federal grant money. The coordinators' job is to track individual student needs -- academic and social -- and make sure those needs are being met by tutoring and other services. Grades and credit hours are tracked constantly; students who fall behind pace for graduation are steered immediately into classes designed to help them recover the credit hours they need.

For the Class of 2006, the program's graduation rate was 88 percent, 18 percentage points higher than their peers. Also, 75 percent of the students reported they planned to continue their educations at a two or four-year college, compared to 31 percent for the state as a whole.

In Indiana, House Bill 1347, enacted by the 2006 legislature, forces high schools to report annually the number of freshmen not earning enough credits to become sophomores, a first step toward identifying those at highest risk of dropping out.

But schools can't wait until sophomore year to intervene or it will be too late for too many. Allensworth reiterates the need to spot poor grades and poor attendance during the first few months of high school. Freshman absences, she notes, are 20 times more predictive of eventual graduation than incoming test scores. "The freshman year sets the stage for performance throughout the rest of high school."

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