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School Dropouts and School Disengagement

Research Report

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Abstract

This report examines dropping out of school in Israel and describes how this phenomenon is addressed; its findings can serve as a basis for improving how the service system meets the needs of youths who drop out. The report is based on empirical and theoretical knowledge about this phenomenon from Israel and other countries, as well as on a special, integrative statistical analysis of studies recently conducted by the JDC-Brookdale Institute, and of a study of the social welfare, risk behaviors and health of youth in Israel conducted by the JDC-Brookdale Institute and Bar-Ilan University (the "HBSC" study).

This report addresses both school "dropouts" - that is, youth who have already left school - and "disengaged" youth (usually referred to in Israel as "hidden dropouts") - that is, youth who still attend some educational framework, but who are often absent, have poor scholastic achievements, feel alienated from their school and the learning process, and have behavior and social problems at school. The prevailing view is that dropping out is a process, and that this process is the consequence of a cumulative, evolving relationship between students who have unique adjustment needs, and schools' responses to their below-standard behavior and achievements. The deterioration of the relationship between students and their school can result in their leaving school – that is, dropping out – or in their formally remaining at school even though they have become detached from the learning process – that is, disengagement.

Estimates of the Dropout Rates and Trends Over Time

Various measures have been used in Israel to estimate the extent of this phenomenon. The Ministry of Education defines a "dropout" as a young person age 5-17 who does not attend a school that is under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. Ministry of Education data indicate the following:

- 7.4% of youth ages 14-17 do not attend school.
- At present, 4.5% of Jewish youth and 20.7% of Arab youth do not attend school. The percentage of youth age 17 who do not attend school and do not complete 12 years of education is 10.4% among Jews and 31.7% among Arabs.
- Since the 1980s, a trend of significant decline has been noted in the dropout rates of both Jews and Arabs. The dropout rate of Jews has declined from 20.5% in 1980 to 4.5% in 1999, while that among Arabs has declined from 48.7% in 1980 to 20.7% today.

Disengagement in the Israeli education system was first examined in this study, using data from the HBSC on several attributes of this phenomenon: frequent absences (truancy), student reports that the homeroom teacher perceives them as being a weak student, feelings of alienation toward school, social problems at school as reflected in feelings of rejection, and being victims of violence or engaging in violent behavior. The data reveal that the prevalence of these attributes is notable: According to a summary measure of them, 18% of all students have two attributes, while 10% of the students have three or more of these attributes.

Dropping out and disengagement take different forms among different sub-groups of Israel's population.

- *Arab youth:* The dropout rates of Arab youth are much higher than those of Jewish youth. Information regarding disengagement rates is unclear.
- *Immigrant youth:* The dropout rates of immigrant youth from the former Soviet Union are higher than those of non-immigrant youth. A worrisome picture is painted of immigrant youth from the Caucasus, as dropping out and disengagement are particularly prevalent among them. In contrast, dropping out is relatively limited among immigrant youth from Ethiopia, but disengagement is rather more widespread, and the rates of transfer from one school to another are high.
- *Boys:* The dropout rate from normative educational frameworks is higher among boys than among girls, and disengagement is also more extensive among boys.

Characteristics of Dropouts and Their Needs

Youths who drop out of regular schools have many and varied needs.

- While in the education system, they typically have trouble adjusting to school. This is reflected primarily in poor scholastic achievement, frequent absences, and behavior problems.
- Dropouts are also characterized by extensive marginal behavior, such as substance abuse and delinquency.
- High school dropouts have been found to have poorer self-efficacy than their peers who remain in school.
- Many dropouts live in families that have low socio-economic status and suffer severe financial hardship, or come from single-parent families, or from large families with four or more children.
- A large percentage of dropouts come from families in which one or both parents have a serious problem functioning (e.g., a chronic illness or disability, involvement in crime, unemployment). Significant percentages of these youth are exposed to neglect and violence.

The main reason young people leave school is difficulty adjusting to the school framework. As noted, this may be reflected in poor achievement, frequent absences, and behavior problems. Some of the students who choose alternative vocational frameworks do so to receive vocational training while still in high school. Only a minority of students leave school in order to contribute to their family's income.

The study findings indicate that there is great similarity in the characteristics and difficulties of students who drop out and students who disengage, and in the causes of dropping out and disengagement. The study found the following regarding students with several attributes of disengagement, compared to their peers:

- Larger percentages of them are at risk or in distress (includes substance abuse).

- Much larger percentages of them feel helpless, lack self confidence, and have difficulty talking to their parents about issues that trouble them.
- Larger percentages of them come from single-parent families and families with low socio-economic status.

Coping with Dropping Out

Israel's education system has been coping with the phenomena of dropping out and disengagement for many years. As noted, there is a trend of ongoing decline in the formal dropout rates. Similarly, school disengagement, in its various forms, has been declared a focus for intervention. Chief paths of action include the following:

- Offering a variety of courses of study in both regular and alternative schools.
- Expanding opportunities to take matriculation examinations.
- Implementing unique programs to prevent dropping out, to help students who have difficulty, to improve the school atmosphere, and to deal with violence.
- Providing a system of support in and outside of schools.

Nevertheless, the study revealed the following dilemmas and limitations in how the Israeli service system copes with the needs of dropouts.

a. Comprehensive attention to the needs of the student – even beyond the scholastic realm

The findings indicate that youth usually leave school because they have had a negative experience there. In order to effectively meet the needs of students who drop out or disengage, the education system must take responsibility for promoting their adjustment and improving their experience of school. Given the complexity of these phenomena, a comprehensive view of the student's needs must be adopted. In addition to his scholastic needs, his emotional and social status, as well as his family's situation and its implications for him should be taken into account. The education system needs to develop policy and activities that are geared toward helping all students - with their varying preferences, abilities and needs - and that are founded on principles of flexibility and differential treatment of each student as an individual.

- *Increasing the contribution of special school programs:* As noted, a variety of programs are offered in schools to cope with the various attributes of disengagement. Implementation of these programs raises three main issues. First, the choice among the programs is usually left to school principals. However, there is no systematic information on the success of most of these programs with different populations - information that could enable principals to choose the programs most suitable for their particular schools. Second, it is necessary to ensure that conditions in the schools facilitate the programs' successful implementation - something that should not be taken for granted. Third, coverage is not extensive enough, especially in the Arab sector.

- *Limited support services:* The extent of support services in the education system is not sufficient to meet the needs of students. In particular, there are significant gaps in the

extent of support services for Arab students. If the education system is to cope successfully with the phenomenon of dropping out, the system of support services must be developed appropriately.

◆ ***Expansion of the teacher's role:*** While support services usually supplement and complement the work of the general staff, changes in the teacher's role will primarily affect work with the entire student body of an educational institution. It will extend perception of the teacher's responsibility beyond teaching the curriculum, to concern for the student's adjustment to school and learning experience. The teacher's repertoire of strategies will also expand to allow wise choice from among a rich variety of teaching methods and ways of approaching students that are appropriate for individual needs, as these change over time and according to circumstance. It is claimed that when a student perceives the attitude of his teachers as being caring and fair, the curriculum as being relevant and interesting, and the learning process as being suited to his needs, the ground is laid for a significant relationship between the teacher and student, and for a shattering of the alienation that typifies dropouts and disengaged students.

Changes in the teacher's perception of her role must be accompanied by effective pedagogical tools. In Israel, programs have been developed to help teachers learn to effectively address the varied needs of students. However, these programs are still limited in scope.

◆ ***Prevention with younger pupils:*** Early attention and response to problems related to dropping out can ameliorate and even prevent this phenomenon. The early detection of learning disabilities and other problems that impede learning, the teaching of study habits, awareness of the child's family situation, and recognition of the decisive role the family plays in supporting a child during schooling are preventive activities that may be used with younger pupils.

b. The variety of frameworks
In formulating policy to meet the needs of dropouts, the following issues should be considered.

◆ ***Constructing a mix of programs:*** The professional literature indicates the need to develop a variety of programs, so as to enable youth with differing needs, abilities and preferences to obtain a quality education that will be of value to them in the future. In order to appropriately meet a variety of needs, policymakers must determine the desired mix of frameworks and courses of study that will comprise a comprehensive system of services for youth who drop out.

◆ ***Ensuring the quality of the frameworks:*** A question arises concerning the degree to which these frameworks are valuable alternatives for students with different needs. The primary alternative for students who leave regular schools is vocational training, usually at a vocational school under the supervision of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. These vocational schools are not uniform in their ability to provide quality training in occupations for which there is a demand in the labor market, and which will open doors to employment

and advancement for graduates. Nevertheless, these alternative frameworks have advantages: The youth who attend them express great satisfaction with the opportunity to experience work life and earn wages. Moreover, as these frameworks are small and allow for personal attention to each student, they have the potential to provide appropriate solutions to the unique needs of each and every student.

The quality of the various frameworks and courses of study and their appropriateness for students must be ensured by adapting them to the needs of the labor market, providing teachers with educational and other tools that will help them address the students' needs and problems, and reinforcing the system of support provided by therapeutic professionals.

- *Eligibility for a matriculation certificate at the conclusion of studies:* In recent years, the education system has set itself the key goal of enabling as large a percentage of students as possible to receive a full matriculation certificate. This trend is reflected in expanded possibilities for taking matriculation examinations in a broad variety of frameworks. While there has been a notable annual increase in the percentage of students eligible for a matriculation certificate, this increase has been very slow. About half of all Jewish youth and most Arab youth are still not eligible for a certificate. Consequently, the system must consider the formal educational products attained by youths who complete secondary education but do not earn a matriculation certificate. What are the educational goals of students who are not expected to gain a matriculation certificate? With what tools do these youths enter the world as adults?

c. Partnership with external services

Because of their varied needs, youths who drop out need the intervention of professionals and community services that will help them either return to school or enter an appropriate employment framework.

- *Distribution of services:* The distribution of services throughout Israel is not uniform. In some regions, services are provided to a much more limited extent than in others. A lack of services is particularly notable in the Arab sector, especially given the higher dropout rates in this sector.

- *Clear division of roles and coordination among services:* Services directed at helping dropouts are implemented by various agencies. They focus on myriad problems, and are geared for a variety of population groups. As a result, dropouts are liable to "fall between the cracks", to not receive treatment at all or to receive treatment that is not suited to their needs.

- *Increasing coordination and cooperation between services and schools:* Cooperation between services and schools will facilitate the construction of a comprehensive system of solutions for dropouts, which will offer more flexible opportunities to return to school or transfer among frameworks.

d. Coping with dropping out in different population groups

Policy should be designed to meet the unique needs of youth from different groups.

- *Arab youth*, in light of high dropout rates and gaps in the extent of service provision.
- *Immigrant youth*, especially those from the Caucasus and Ethiopia.
- *Girls*. Although dropout rates are lower among girls than among boys, the findings of this study suggest that the implications of dropping out are liable to be particularly serious for girls.

e. Partnership with families

Since the family plays a key role in the lives of youth, it should be given a central role in the system of services that is directed at reducing and preventing dropping out. It is important to develop and implement comprehensive interventions that address the child in the context of his family, and to make families full partners in educational and other services that address the needs of dropouts.

f. Partnership with youth

We conclude by noting the importance of the youths' own perspective. Findings indicate that most youths - whether or not they drop out - are aware of their situation, know its advantages and disadvantages, and also understand the advantages and disadvantages of the various educational frameworks and services available to them. They further indicate that it is necessary to see the youths as partners in the design of their own path of study and in formulating interventions.

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