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ABSTRACT

In response to the problem of school dropout, a Las Vegas school district initiated a Dropout Prevention Plan, a multi-strategy approach to reduce the number of students dropping out of school. The approaches used included staff development; after-school programs for students; community outreach; and targeted middle school interventions. It was determined that these measures were insufficient in reducing the dropout rate without an understanding of why students were dropping out. A study was designed to contact and survey all non-returning students using telephone interviews. Results of these interviews were significantly greater than anticipated. (Not all non-returning students were contacted so there are some limitations in the data.) Overall, the results demonstrated the importance of contacting students who do not return to school. The paper offers suggestions on how best to proceed with this goal. Other findings from the survey include: (1) the dropout rate was inflated due to high student transiency; (2) students leave school to work in response to economic pressures; and (3) it is best to call non-returning students during the first few months of school. (Contains 6 tables and 6 references.) (JDM)

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Clark County School District

1999 Dropout Phone Survey Report

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Background

Clark County School District (the Las Vegas Valley's only school district) has struggled with high levels of student dropout over the past decade[1]. Table 1 illustrates the dropout rate for Clark County School District (CCSD) since 1991. In 1997-1998, the Nevada Department of Education ranked CCSD as having the highest dropout rate in the state of Nevada. CCSD continues to grapple with the dropout problem, while confronted by a tremendous growth in student enrollment. CCSD is now the nation's 7th largest school district.

Seven-Year Dropout Summary – Table 1

DROPOUT PERCENTAGES							
GRADE	1991-1992	1992-1993	1993-1994	1994-1995	1995-1996	1996-1997	1997-1998
9	3.9%	4.7%	4.7%	4.2%	4.2%	3.8%	4.80%
10	6.4%	7.2%	7.5%	7.4%	6.7%	7.6%	7.90%
11	9.9%	12.2%	12.6%	13.6%	12.4%	15.0%	15.30%
12	14.4%	15.6%	20.4%	24.0%	22.6%	22.8%	22.10%
TOTAL	**8.3%**	**9.6%**	**10.9%**	**11.6%**	**10.8%**	**11.7%**	**11.8%**

In response to the problem of high school drop out, the Clark County School District adopted a *Dropout Prevention Plan* that included numerous strategies designed to reduce the dropout rate. The plan, approved in 1996, implemented various programs that included staff development, after-school programs for students, community outreach, and middle school interventions. While these programs have attempted to meet the needs of students who might drop out, the dropout rate remains unacceptably high.

In updating the Board's 1996 *Dropout Prevention Plan*, it became apparent that there was a need to better understand students who actually dropped out. A better understanding of these students might help identify gaps in current services, both inside and outside of the school district. Contacting these students might also increase the accuracy of CCSD's data on student dropout. As a result of these discussions, it was suggested that a phone survey of students who did not return should be conducted.

A study was designed to contact and survey all non-return students. The study had several goals:

- Determine how many students on the non-return roles could be accurately categorized as dropouts.
- Find out why the non-return students left school.
- Distribute information about obtaining a degree to non-return students.

Definition of Terms

The Nevada Administrative Code (NAC) defines a **dropout** as any student who was withdrawn from school who:

- Should have re-enrolled but did not (non-return);
- Was a twelfth grade student and did not satisfy the requirements to complete the twelfth grade and failed to return to school;
- Was withdrawn from school based on the following reasons:
  a) At the request of the school for failing to attend
  b) At the request of the parent or the student

[1] Crothers, C. (1999). *Nevada Public School Dropouts, 1991-1998*. Nevada Department of Education, Reno, Nevada.

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c) At the request of the school for ten consecutive absences and the whereabouts are unknown
d) Incarceration[2]

This definition conforms to the National Center for Educational Statistics and is reported to the Department of Education on December 1 of each year.

This study focused on the category of students defined as non-returns. This group represented 28% of the total dropouts reported by the Nevada Department of Education for the 1997-1998 school year.

Prior Studies

The Clark County School District conducted a study in 1996[3] and found the following five reasons why students dropped out of school:

- Too many credits required for graduation;
- Little care and support from school staff;
- Excessive absences;
- Financial problems;
- Pregnancy/children.

In addition, CCSD operates a Clearinghouse of Student Tracking and Replacement (COSTAR). The clearinghouse surveys students who visit the office to obtain information about earning a high school diploma. Many of these students are potential or former dropouts and consequently are defined as high at-risk students. The following five reasons were identified in 1997 by COSTAR as reasons why students had dropped out of school:

- Did not enjoy school;
- Problems at home;
- Trouble with the law;
- Medical problems;
- Pregnancy.

Phone Survey Procedures

The first step in conducting the phone survey was to develop the questions to be asked when calling students. The questions were developed by the Clark County School District and reviewed by the Nevada Department of Education. The questions were designed to determine whether the student attended school and whether the student completed a diploma program or a GED program. The questions also sought to determine whether the student still resided in Clark County. An evaluator in the Office of Federal Projects of the Clark County School District reviewed the survey for reliability and validity. Once the questions were finalized, the next step was to create written instructions on how to administer the phone survey.

The instructions for conducting the phone survey followed a step-by-step approach. The staff members who conducted the calls were trained on how to record responses. Several trial examples were completed under the supervision of the Director of Secondary Success Programs. The phone-calling list was created from exact parameters provided to the records department. The parameters included:

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[2] Nevada Administrative Code 387.215-387.220.
[3] Young, L. (1996) *Student Dropout Study*. Clark County School District Secondary Education Division.

- Student name, home phone number, parent work phone, and listed emergency phone;
- Only students who had enrolled in the 1997-1998 school year and had not returned to a school or graduated from a school in CCSD as of July 10, 1999 were included;
- High school in alphabetical order.

The phone calling started in July and continued until the end of November 1999. The target of the phone survey was the parent or guardian of the child. Several calls had to be made due to non-responses and disconnected phones. Bilingual callers were used when the home language was Spanish. The response data was entered onto a Teleform® form and scanned into an SPSS® database. Dr. Randy Brown, a faculty person from the University of Nevada, Reno, Cooperative Extension, analyzed the data.

The results from the phone survey were used to update student records. For those students who were reported to have graduated or to have reenrolled, their dropout status changed and they were no longer counted as dropouts. For students who were reported to have dropped out, their status did not change. For the students who reportedly dropped out, the person contacted was asked if the student wanted to return to school and information on how to re-enroll was mailed to encourage the student's return to school. The letter included information on what school district and community-based programs exist to help students obtain an adult education diploma or a GED. A total of 32 letters were mailed to students.

Results

The results of the interviews are detailed in the tables below. A short discussion of the results follows each table and any problems encountered are described. Table 2 is the result of the phone contacts.

Table 2
Phone Survey of Students Who Did Not Re-enroll in School for 1998-99

	Number	Percent
Unable to locate via phone	934	78.4%
Able to locate via phone	257	21.6%
Total	**1191**	**100%**

The above table illustrates that the vast majority of students were unable to be contacted and therefore verification of their enrollment status was not completed. These students could be in a program leading to a high school diploma or they could be dropouts. The high number of unable-to-locate calls confirms what was hypothesized; many students are transient and unable to be located by school personnel. This finding suggests a need for a statewide system of tracking students regardless of their place of residence in Nevada.

When phone contact was established, a series of three questions was asked. The answers to these questions are listed in the following tables.

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Table 3
Responses to Questions to Students Contacted During the Phone Survey

Questions	Responses Yes	No	Total
Is the student still in Clark County?	166 (64.6%)	91 (35.4%)	257
Did the student finish high school, GED, or is the student still enrolled in school?	142 (55.2%)	15 (44.7%)	257

These questions helped determine student's educational status. If the student had graduated, was still enrolled in school, or had passed the GED, he/she would not be considered a dropout. As a result, 142 students were removed from the dropout count. If the respondent said the student had dropped out of school, they were asked to choose the reason using a list of answers. The results of the *reasons for dropping out question* are listed in Table 4.

Table 4
Phone Survey Response for Reasons for Dropping Out

Survey Question Do you know why he/she did not graduate?	Response Number	Percent
To find a job/work	36	31%
Did not like school	23	20%
Other	22	19%
Pregnancy	14	12%
Family pressures	6	5%
Marriage	5	4%
Trouble with another student	3	3%
Poor attendance	3	3%
Credit deficient	2	2%
Safety concerns	1	1%
Total	**115**	**100**

These findings suggest economics may play a role in a student's decision to leave school. The most frequent response validates the school counselors' concern that students often need to support themselves or their families and therefore drop out to find work.

Prior studies identified that students with adult responsibilities such as being employed or having to take care of a child, are more likely to drop out than are their counterparts without these responsibilities[4]. The highest-ranking response from high school dropouts was the need to work. This reason for dropping out reflects both economic pressures outside the school setting as well as a need to make sure our instructional programs are meaningful and relevant to students.

The second most frequent reason has been stated in prior studies. Students drop out because they do not like school. What we do not know is *why* they don't like school. Other research has suggested that the answer might be failing grades, personality conflicts with teachers, low academic self-esteem, or other

[4] Dynarski, Gleason, (1998).

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Note that the official number of non-returns reported to the Nevada Department of Education was 1,356. The final figure included 416 students who were non-graduates. The non-graduate students were not included in the original design of the study and therefore were not included. Future efforts to contact non-return students should include the non-graduate student since these students are included in the official dropout report.

The phone survey did substantiate the high transiency rate of families. Unfortunately, the State of Nevada defines students who cannot be located as dropouts. This aspect of the definition makes it difficult for districts like Clark County because families move in and out of the district often failing to notify schools of their intent to not return to school.

Adaptations to the Phone Survey

In September 1999, all secondary schools were asked to call their non-returns for the current school year. Each secondary school was instructed to call all students who did not continue to attend for at least one month. The schools were instructed to use the same phone survey protocol described above.

School registrars were invited to attend an in-service training on how to use the same phone survey protocol used to contact the non-returns. Schools were encouraged to use the phone survey form to document their phone calling efforts. Information that was gathered from the phone calling was to be used to update student records so that actual dropout status could be verified. The results of the schools contacting their own non-returns seemed to be very positive. While it is too early to tell, it is believed that the dropout rate for 2000 will be lower based on the phone calling effort.

The results of the phone calling in September 1999 were significantly greater than anticipated (see table below). More students were recalled and the impact in reducing the official dropout rate was greater than prior years. The findings are illustrated in table 6.

Table 6
Phone Survey of Students who did not re-enroll in 1999-2000

	Number	Percentage
Unable to locate via phone	529	38%
Able to locate via phone	878	62%
TOTAL	1407	100%

Note that all non-return students were not contacted. Some schools did not return the Teleform® forms for data tabulation. Therefore, the total impact of the non-return phone survey could not be determined.

Recommendations

- Schools should attempt to locate non-returning students using a structured phone survey. Timing is critical in making these calls. The data obtained by phone will help reduce the number of students erroneously reported as dropouts and verify the students' whereabouts. Calling non-returns should be done during the first month of the school year when the student is expected to return to school. Additional phone calling might be helpful in June and July for those who have not pre-registered in a

problems in school[5,6]. These issues are ones that should be addressed by schools. Schools need to work toward trying to make school more interesting or inviting so that even students with a desire to leave stay and graduate.

The final category "other", included various responses including: runaways, imprisoned youth, learning disabled, or parents stating that the youth no longer was living at home. Again, are these students really dropouts or just unable to be located? Additional follow-up would be needed to determine their enrollment status.

What Has Worked?

Is Nevada's dropout rate accurate or is it inflated due to high student transiency?

The phone survey clearly documents that dropout figures are inflated and do not correctly reflect actual dropouts because of the district's high student turnover rate. The results show that by the time phone contact was attempted, many families had moved or changed their phone numbers. In all likelihood, the family had moved to another residence since at least three phone numbers were called in order to locate the student. This survey was valuable because we were able to verify that many students reported as dropouts are in reality students who could not be located.

What are the reasons students say they dropped out of school?

This question was answered by a relatively small sample of 115 out of 1191. The findings confirm what prior studies have reported: students leave school to find work in response to economic pressures. What can schools do to ease such pressures? Other than sending the message that those with a diploma earn more than those without, it appears the real focus should be the family. The family will need to support high school graduation if we hope to change this push-pull dynamic. Families should be informed about the long-term earnings loss when students enter the workforce prematurely. Enforcement of child labor laws would also send a message to employers that if they hire students, it should not interfere with their education. Positive messages from employers about the value of a high school diploma and requiring 18-year-old students to have a diploma or GED might also make a significant impact.

Is surveying all dropouts a cost-effective method to reduce the dropout rate?

This study found that very few students were actually available to be surveyed. This suggests that waiting until summer months to call non-attending students may not be the most effective method. When school personnel called students in mid September and early October in 1999, the response rate was higher and appeared to help reduce the number of students who would have been counted as dropouts inaccurately. Verifying students' actual status of enrollment was important in reporting accurate data on high school dropouts. Table 5 shows the number of students reported as non-returns before and after. This indicates that the dropout rate was lowered slightly by the phone calling. The dropout rate reported for the 1998-99 school year decreased slightly due to the non-return phone survey.

Table 5

Non-Returns	1998-1999	
Before Calling	1191	After calling 940

[5] Finn, J. (1989). Withdrawing from school. *Review of Educational Research*, **59**, 117-142.
[6] McNeal, R. (1997). High school dropouts: A closer examination of school effects. *Social Science Quarterly*, 78, 210-222.

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school. Emphasis with the summer phone calling should be on high school juniors and seniors since these students often need an alternative school placement to continue their education.

- A computer-generated list of non-returns should be done twice a year. The list should be generated once before the official enrollment count is done for apportionment purposes and again in late October after year-round school enrollments have been verified. This will provide schools better information on who is still listed as a non-return. A final attempt to locate non-returns should be done in June or July as part of the District's dropout retrieval efforts. The non-return list of non-graduates should be reviewed by the Adult Education Office and the GED Testing Office to eliminate students who may have re-enrolled. Any student wishing to enroll back into school should receive information on what programs and services are available.
- CCSD recommends that the Nevada Department of Education consider revising the definition of a dropout to exclude students who have not been located by schools. This number, when added to the dropout count, inflates the true figure and makes it difficult to implement effective remedies for dropout prevention.
- CCSD recommends that the Nevada Department of Education offer technical assistance to local school districts on how to manage student records when a high student turnover exists. Better methods for tracking students who enroll for a short period of time need to be sought so that schools are not burdened with excessive paperwork when trying to locate non-returning students.
- CCSD recommends that the Nevada Department of Education publicize local school district efforts that have been successful in lowering the dropout rate. Grant funding or public recognition should be provided when success is found.
- The non-return phone survey instrument should be shared with other school districts in Nevada. Other districts may want to use the form to document efforts to contact students. The appendix contains a revised phone survey form that can be used by other districts in Nevada.