



Girls' Dropout Prevention Report

Prepared for
The Women's Foundation of Colorado
By The REFT Institute Inc.

September 2010



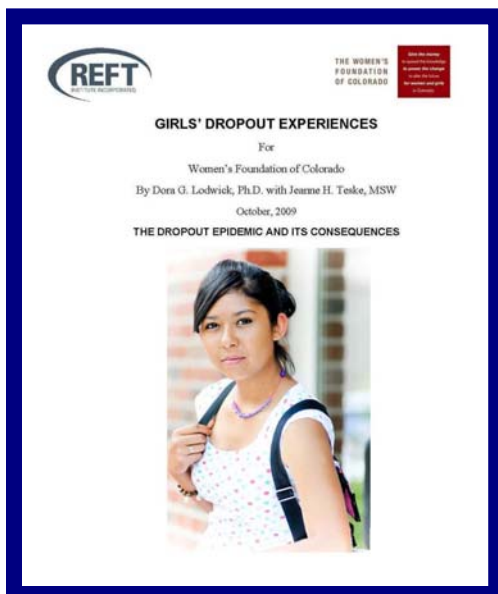
Background

In 2008, The Women’s Foundation of Colorado set out to explore and answer the question, “Why do Colorado girls drop out of high school?” A national search revealed that while research is performed on why all students (girls and boys) drop out of school, there is little research that puts a gender lens on the issue to pinpoint why girls drop out of school. In addition, much of the literature that does exist is very heavily oriented to urban areas, leaving the stories of rural and resort areas mostly untold.

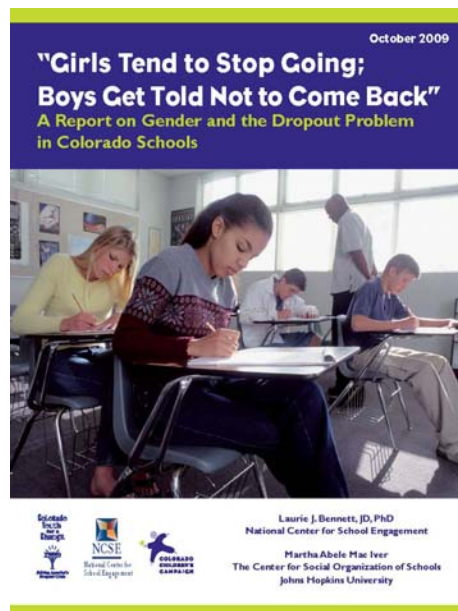
This report tackles the Colorado girls’ dropout issue by summarizing recent dropout data in Colorado drawn from the Colorado Department of Education. It also highlights the economic and social effects of this problem by reviewing several recent studies, including two earlier reports supported by The Women Foundation of Colorado (Bennet & MacIver, 2009; Lodwick with Teske, 2009). Furthermore, a detailed analysis is provided of two additional reviews of dropout literature completed by the National Dropout Prevention Center and the Institute of Education Sciences in the U. S. Department of Education. In analyzing these two reviews, we attempt to draw out implications for girls from their more general recommendations for best practices in dropout prevention.

This report is built upon the information obtained from two previous reports funded by The Women’s Foundation of Colorado. To gain a better understanding of the girls’ dropout problem, we invite you to read:

- “*Girls Dropout Experiences: The Dropout Epidemic and Its Consequences*” – Dora G.Lodwick with Jean H. Teske (REFT Institute, Inc.)
- “*Girls Tend to Stop Going; Boys Get Told Not to Come Back: A Report on Gender and the Dropout Problem in Colorado Schools.*” – Laurie Bennett (National Center for School Engagement) and Martha Abele MacIver (The Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University)



Available for download at www.wfco.org



Introduction

Why should we focus on the girls?

The school dropout issue is a persistent crisis in the United States. Approximately one million students¹ drop out of school every year (Editorial Projects in Education 2008). Based on calculations per school day (roughly 180 days of school, seven hours per day), one high school student drops out every nine seconds (Reimer 2005).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 2008, the dropout rate for the nation was 8.0 percent. Nationally, the dropout rate was 18.3% for Hispanic/Latino students; 9.9% for African American students; and 4.8% for Caucasian students. The female dropout rate was 7.5%, compared to 8.5% for males (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Even though dropout rates are measured differently by different organizations, the reality is that students of color drop out at higher rates than Caucasian students; and girls consistently drop out at lower rates than boys. From a gender perspective, **dropout prevention efforts are more inclined to focus on boys** (Lodwick with Teske, 2009, p. 3).

Table 1: Colorado Dropout Data by Gender and School Year (The Colorado Department of Education)²

	School year 2006-2007	School year 2007-2008	School year 2008-2009
Female Total Pupil Count	199,639	200,216	203,155
Male Total Pupil Count	210,065	211,233	213,798
Female Total Dropouts	8,052	7,092	6,808
Male Total Dropouts	9,975	8,432	8,167
Female Total Dropout Rate	4.0%	3.5%	3.4%
Male Total Dropout Rate	4.7%	4.0%	3.8%

Even though the girls' dropout rate is slightly lower than for boys, a significant number of girls are still dropping out of school in Colorado. These young women are faced with economic, and health challenges. **The expense absorbed by the community, state and nation for a female dropout far exceeds the cost of a male who drops out of school.**

¹ This problem is measured by counting the number of 16-24 year olds who drop out of school each year (Editorial Projects in Education 2008).

² The Colorado dropout rate, as calculated by the Colorado Department of Education is an annual rate, reflecting the percentage of all students enrolled in grades 7-12 who leave school during a single school year without subsequently attending another school or educational program. It is calculated by dividing the number of dropouts by a membership base which includes all students who were in school any time during the year. In accordance with a 1993 legislative mandate, beginning with the 1993-94 school year, the dropout rate calculation excludes expelled students. 2003-2004 was the first year the Colorado Department of Education collected Student End of Year data for each individual student using State Assigned Student Identifiers (SASIDs). Tracking students individually rather than in aggregate allows a more accurate accounting of students' progress through the public education system than was possible under the old data collection method.

Table 2. Annual Earnings and Employment Rates for High School Dropouts and Graduates (Levin et al. 2007, 7)³

	High School Dropout		High School Graduate	
	Employed	Earns	Employed	Earns
White women	46%	\$7,800	65%	\$16,500
White men	71%	\$22,800	79%	\$33,900
African American women	46%	\$10,000	63%	\$14,200
African American men	49%	\$13,500	66%	\$21,800
Latina/Hispanic women	51%	\$9,990	57%	\$14,500
Latino/Hispanic men	70%	\$21,400	78%	\$24,000
Other women	48%	\$8,600	62%	\$15,700
Other men	71%	\$22,300	79%	\$30,100

At every level of education, women earn far less than men. Being a high school dropout significantly impedes a women’s earning potential. In addition, girls who drop out have a harder time finding employment than boys; their jobs generally provide lower earnings; they have poorer health and they often need to rely on public support programs for their family’s basic needs (Lodwick with Teske 2009, 5). Female dropouts⁴ receive a lifetime average of approximately \$80,550 in Medicaid and Medicare services, while males receive roughly \$61,625 for this benefit (Levin et al. 2007, 12).

Why do girls drop out of school?

Pull-out and Push-out Factors

Stearns and Glennie (2006) found significant differences in dropout patterns by gender and ethnicity in the North Carolina public school system. Boys had the highest dropout rate in the ninth grade, while girls had fairly constant dropout rates in 9th through 11th grades. The girls’ dropout rates fell sharply in the 12th grade (Lodwick with Teske 2009, 5).

Various paths lead to a girl dropping out of school. These pathways are created through interactions of the student in the context of her family, her community, and her school. These three contexts differ, but generally include peers, family, employment opportunities, and service providing organizations (Lodwick with Teske 2009, 5). Stearns and Glennie (2006) explain these pathways as “pull-out” and “push-out” factors. Pull-out and push-out factors create a conceptual framework to help interpret drop out patterns that have been identified by many researchers. This framework also helps identify some of the risk factors which affect girls more than boys.

Pull-out Factors

Pull-out factors assume that young people are operating within a broader community where schooling is only one part of the adolescent’s life. This focus is on the non-school aspects of a student’s life. Pull-out factors include (Lodwick with Teske 2009, 6):

³ These figures are not adjusted for incarceration, which affects African American men more than other groups.

⁴ This refers to females across all races and ethnicities.

- Employment
- Care giving
- Economic Resources
- Family Disruption
- Justice System
- Safety

The factors that affect girls more than boys are:

- Employment – For girls the pull of employment is less to become the family breadwinner and more to earn spending money or to pay for the expenses of parenting (Bennett and MacIver 2009, 13). This factor also comes into play when parents are working one or more jobs, and girls are asked to take care of the home, younger siblings, and/or older relatives.
- Care giving – Girls, more than boys, are likely to drop out of school to focus on family responsibilities. This may include early family formation (teen pregnancy and/or parenting), and taking care of younger siblings or older relatives (Stearns and Glennie 2006, 35).
- Family disruption - Divorce, illness, death, stepfamily creation, abuse, neglect, or family mobility⁵ can affect girls and boys. Girls tend to gravitate to the family to take on a care giving role. Being with the family then takes priority over attending school (Bennett and MacIver 2009, 14).
- Safety - The girls may not participate in after-school activities or attend school, either because their parents fear for their safety or because they themselves are afraid of being bullied or harassed (Lodwick with Teske 2009, 8).

Push-out Factors

Educators have focused on “push-out” factors in their efforts to create early warning systems (Hammond et al. 2007, 17). These are “factors located within the school itself that negatively impact the connection adolescents make with the school’s environment and which cause them to reject the context of schooling” (Jordan et al. 1996, 64). These factors influence some students, often based on their ethnicity or gender, to see the school as an unwelcoming place (Stearns and Glennie 2006, 31). Push-out factors include (Lodwick with Teske 2009, 10-15):

- Behavior
- Academic Performance
- Attendance (School engagement)

Behavior and disciplinary issues affect boys’ decisions to drop out of school more so than girls, since they tend to actively misbehave in the classroom. Girls tend to express themselves more through absenteeism. While both boys and girls can show poor academic performance, girls make a concerted effort to try to accumulate more credits (if lacking) or work to improve their grades. Attendance does affect both genders, though for different reasons. Boys may skip school because of out-of-school employment; while girls are absent because of care giving and family responsibilities, as well as safety issues (Bennett and MacIver 2009, 15-16).

⁵ Family mobility refers to frequently moving. This can occur as a result of a need to find employment.

Poverty

The effects of poverty on the dropout rate should not be ignored. A well-known study on student achievement was conducted in 1966⁶ to look at the equality of educational opportunity in America. The Coleman report found that “schools had very little impact on student achievement compared to the background of the students who attended these schools (Rumberger 2002, 2).” It was also found that the social composition of the student body was the most important factor affecting student achievement, more so than teacher qualifications and facilities at the school. It follows that racial and ethnic segregation is linked to socio-economic segregation since many African American and Hispanic/Latino families experience higher poverty levels than other racial/ethnic groups. Since school poverty and individual poverty affect achievement at school, African American and Hispanic/Latino students are gravely disadvantaged since they are overrepresented in the lowest income groups.

Best Practices in Dropout Prevention for Girls

The following section looks at two studies that reviewed best practice strategies in the field of dropout prevention, and how these factors can be applied to the pull-out and push-out factors that affect girls’ dropout rate.

1. ICF International and National Dropout Prevention Center/Network Report⁷

In 2008, The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) at Clemson University and ICF International reviewed 597 evaluations of dropout prevention programs. Using the best evidence-based programs from this group, fifteen effective strategies for dropout prevention were identified. Programs that had the strongest positive effect on dropout prevention were multi-faceted and incorporated at least four effective strategies. The review found that the eight strategies listed below were frequently employed in programs with the most successful results. Though not ranked in order of importance, each of the following is important in addressing the push-out and pull-out factors that keep girls from graduating.

- *Family engagement* is the best predictor of a student’s success in school. To be successful, the program must:
 - Work on supporting and guiding families through their program and develop trusting relationships.
 - Share power with parents seeing this relationship as a partnership.
 - Train staff to work with families.
 - Make student learning and performance central to working relationships.
 - Adapt to the needs of families, including language, hours of availability, literacy levels, and comfort levels in the program environment.

The positive effects associated with this strategy include improved/higher student achievement, improved attendance, higher test scores, better behavior and greater expectations for success from teachers. *Investing in the belief that a high school education is key to a girl’s success, family engagement can effectively tackle pull-out factors of*

⁶ Coleman, James S. 1979.

⁷ See ICF International and National Dropout Prevention Center/Network. 2008.

employment, care giving, family disruptions and safety, along with the push-out factors of attendance/school engagement.

- *Mentoring* refers to the caring, trusting, one-on-one relationship between an adult and a youth. A successful program:
 - Trains mentors to have a clear statement of program goals, a careful recruitment and selection plan, and an evaluation of the program.
 - Supports mentors through available dedicated staff.

This strategy is effective in providing a positive role model and a consistent support system particularly for youth who may not have this within their families. By ensuring that the mentoring focus is on teaching and/or guidance, it can effectively tackle pull-out factors of employment, family disruption, and safety; along with the push-out factor of attendance/school engagement.

- *Tutoring*, like mentoring, is a one-on-one undertaking with a strong academic focus. It is especially good for addressing particular educational shortcomings experienced by the student, such as problems with reading, writing and mathematics. To be successful the program:
 - Should have at least a one hour session four days a week for 10-12 weeks.

This strategy effectively addresses the push-out factor of attendance/school engagement and academic performance, when absenteeism is linked to problems experienced in reading, writing and mathematics.

- *Alternative schooling* provides various schooling options that allow students to progress toward graduation while also imparting a focus on their individual social needs. Each variation allows for differing needs and interests of students who may have struggled at conventional schools or who require specific attention. To be successful, these programs should:
 - Have staff who believe that all students can learn and who have high expectations of students.
 - Provide training for staff to work with their students.
 - Ensure that there are less than 250 youth in the school with a maximum teacher to student ratio of 1:10.
 - Have a clear mission statement, disciplinary plan, and a flexible schedule.
 - Accept diverse learning styles.
 - Involve the surrounding community.

In addressing the girls' dropout rate, this strategy can effectively tackle pull-out factors of employment, care giving, family disruption, and safety, along with the push-out factor of attendance/school engagement and behavior.

- *School-Community Collaboration* takes place when groups in a community give collective support to the school to build good infrastructure and a supportive environment for the students. Successful school-community collaboration occurs through:
 - Volunteer or funding contributions.
 - Shared visions of having students succeed.
 - Collaboration and involvement of diverse community entities, eliminating duplication of work.

- Accountability by the groups to each other.
- Focus on a common goal.

This strategy is effective in recognizing that it takes an entire community to raise a child. *In addressing the girls' dropout rate, this strategy can effectively tackle pull-out factors of employment, care giving, family disruption, and safety; along with the push-out factor of attendance/school engagement.*

- *Career and Technical Education* integrates academic and career-based skills giving all students a solid academic foundation regardless of their career plans. This can be done in many ways such as career academies, apprenticeships, internships, tech prep and career-oriented high schools. To be successful, programs should incorporate:
 - Career guidance, such as career inventories and job readiness training.
 - Work-based learning where students work with community resources, such as internships, job shadowing, apprenticeships, and cooperative education.
 - Career pathways and academics providing courses giving basic academic skills and real world education.
 - Technical preparation, where plans for enrollment in community college and help in transition to post secondary education are given, along with real world information about careers in core academic courses.

This particular strategy allows students to develop a vision for their futures. *In addressing the girls' dropout rate, this strategy can effectively tackle the pull-out factor of employment along with the push-out factor of attendance/school engagement.*

- *Safe learning environment* require that schools maintain comprehensive violence prevention plans and training, including conflict resolution, dealing with potential violence and crisis management. They should also address fights, sexual harassment and rape, vandalism, theft and robberies. To be successful, these programs should:
 - Develop a safety plan and make it public.
 - Implement the plan and update it annually.
 - Teach life skills on social competence, problem recognition and evaluation, goal setting, planning, expecting challenges, controlling anger and expressing emotions appropriately, and stopping sexual harassment and rape.

This strategy is an imperative measure to ensure that students attend and remain in school without fear. *In addressing the girls' dropout rate, this strategy can effectively tackle the pull-out factor of safety; along with the push-out factor of attendance/school engagement and behavior.*

- *Active learning* uses teaching and learning strategies to engage youth in the learning process. It effectively allows visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners to understand in a way that makes sense to them. Successful active learning programs comprise:
 - Cooperative/collaborative learning that allows youth to learn from each other as they work toward a common goal.
 - Project based learning that allows youth to develop leadership and decision-making as they address real world issues.
 - Rewards-based approach that celebrates students' strengths.

Ensuring that students become lifelong learners, this strategy can effectively address the push-out factor of attendance/school engagement.

2. The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education report on Dropout Prevention⁸

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) practice guide on dropout prevention provides evidence-based recommendations to promote student engagement in school. The guide identifies the strategies and practices that are vital components in dropout prevention programs within schools. After a review of various interventions, those with similar components were grouped together and six recommended practices were identified to address how schools can reduce dropout rates. The practices are school-based compliments to the strategies addressed by the ICF International, National Dropout Prevention Center/Network report.

Practice #1: Utilize data systems that support a realistic diagnosis of the number of students who drop out and that identify students at high risk of dropping out. Having an effective ‘early warning’ system in place can help identify students at risk of dropping out. This is important in determining who is in need of targeted programs that help them stay in school and eventually graduate. In order for this recommendation to be successful, schools need to create and maintain comprehensive, longitudinal databases that accurately identify the students in need of help, assess their situation, and implement appropriate interventions.

Research suggests that combining an early warning system with tiered interventions is the more effective method of approaching dropout prevention. Most programs tend to focus on just the early warning systems (comprehensive school reform) or the tiered interventions (programs targeted to individual students). An integrated approach first warns teachers and administrators of students who exhibit behaviors that could lead to them dropping out (early warning/indicator system), and then allows them to use tiered intervention strategies to get the student back on track to graduation (M. Mac Iver and D. Mac Iver 2009, 2).

Schools typically use student absences, behavior problems, and course failure as early warning indicators for dropping out. However, for this practice to be successful in preventing girls from dropping out, schools must understand that behavior and course failure are indicators that reflect different underlying issues for girls and boys (Bennett and MacIver 2009, 6). Attendance can be used as an indicator for both genders, but girls are absent for different reasons.⁹ Interventions have to address these differences in order to be effective. *A successful representation of this practice will address the push-out factor of behavior and attendance/school engagement for girls.*

Practice #2: Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out. This targeted intervention allows students who are facing personal, family or social constraints that affect attending and remaining in school, to develop strong, meaningful relationships with trained adults. The adults are charged with relating with parents, advocating for the students, and focusing on academic and social barriers that they face. *As with the mentoring strategy discussed in the ICF report, practice 2 can effectively tackle pull-out factors of employment, family disruption, and safety, along with the push-out factor of attendance/school engagement and behavior.*

⁸ See Dynarski et al. 2008.

⁹ Attendance is often a girl’s way of addressing behavior and course failure issues.

Practice 3: Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance. Support in the form of tutoring or enrichment programs help students improve academic performance. This in turn lowers absenteeism as students feel engaged and interested in school because of the additional, intensive assistance they are receiving. The authors suggest that this practice be used in conjunction with other practices recommended in the report. *Providing academic support and enrichment effectively addresses the push-out factor of academic performance and attendance/school engagement, when absenteeism is linked to problems experienced in reading, writing and mathematics.*

Practice #4: Implement programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills. Problematic and disruptive behavior in the classroom and other areas of the school usually results in the unruly student being suspended. Suspension is strongly associated with dropping out (Bennett and MacIver 2009, 19). Female students have far lower rates of suspension, and fewer disciplinary/behavior issues than their male counterparts. *Thus, while it is vital to address disruptive behavior in the school setting, this particular practice is more of a focus for boys than girls. While girls express themselves more through absenteeism when feeling lack of safety, instruction in social skills is also needed to address some of their concerns.*

Practice #5: Personalize the environment and instructional process. Large school environments often leave students feeling isolated, unimportant, and undervalued. They disengage from school and eventually drop out (Bennett and MacIver, 2009, 19). Practice #5 is a school-wide intervention focused on the need to create a school culture of “caring and supportive relationships, respect, fairness and trust; and teachers’ sense of shared responsibility and efficacy related to student learning (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2004, 103).” Such an environment fosters support, encouragement and leads to improved achievement. *For girls, this practice can effectively address the pull-out factors of employment, economic resources as well as family disruption, and the push-out factor of attendance/school engagement.*

Practice #6: Provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and provide skills needed to graduate and serve them after they leave school. This practice is similar to the *Career and Technical education strategy* (see p.10), where students are taught skills that will help them graduate from high school, succeed in college and thrive in the workplace. *For girls, this practice addresses the push-out factor of attendance/school engagement.*

Recommendations

1. *Addressing issues of poverty:* Invest in schools or programs that address the equity imperative by creating new pathways to college for girls in low-income communities. Poverty has a negative effect on the dropout situation. The impact of a student's socio-economic background (i.e. her parents' income and education) on her likelihood of dropping out is startling. Students from the bottom fifth of socio-economic status in the country are four times more likely to drop out of school than children whose parents are in the top two-fifths (Almeida et al. 2006, 2). Even though this recommendation is to invest in girls in the communities, research shows that when girls' academic achievement rates improve, so do the rates for boys (Corbett et al. 2008, 3).
2. *Addressing pull-out factors:* Girls and boys are different. Dropout prevention strategies still tend to focus on school-wide interventions which identify more boys on the brink of dropping out, while girls slip through the system. Girls are affected more by pull-out factors. Invest in schools and programs that address pull-out factors, such as:
 - a. Academic-focused mentoring support for girls.
 - b. Alternative schooling for girls who require specialized attention, e.g. pregnancy/parenting.
 - c. School-community collaborations, especially between schools and community nonprofit organizations that are dedicated to creating stable and safe learning environments for girls.
 - d. Career and technical education for girls with a focus on career planning, internships and apprenticeships.
3. Colorado communities and their students are diverse. So too are their experiences with the girls' dropout issue. As an extension of this report, consider engaging communities across the state in a dialogue about girls dropping out of school, to gain a better perspective of the barriers facing Colorado's girls, and the successes they've achieved.

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