

Lee, V.E., & Burkam, D.T. (2003). Dropping out of high school: The role of school organization and structure. *American Educational Research Journal*, 2, 353-393.

Keywords: Leadership

Summary: The authors studied reasons why high school students drop out of school. Analyzing 3,840 students in 190 urban and suburban high schools, the authors found that rather than focusing on students' problems, the answer can be found in the schools themselves. Schools that stress curriculum, size, and social relations tend to have a lower drop out rate.

Assumptions:

- Much research in this area has focused on the student and, in particular, three factors: 1) social background; 2) academic background; 3) academically related behaviors.
- The American attitude of individualism – holding individuals largely responsible for their own success and failure - supports the dominant attitudes about school dropouts as well as the majority of research on the topic.

Results:

- In the restricted sample of 3,840 students, weighted results indicated that 5% (179 students) dropped out between the end of 10th and 12th grades.
- Dropping out is related to school size, although the relationship seems to be nonlinear. Large schools enrolling between 1,500 and 2,000 students had a higher proportion of students dropping out than other schools.
- School dropout rates did not differ among public, parochial, and independent schools once demographics, size, and organization were taken into account.
- Students attending schools defined by more positive student-teacher relations were less likely to drop out than those who attended schools with less positive student-teacher relations.

Conclusions:

- Explanations for students dropping out of school before graduation that rely solely on students' social background and school behaviors are incomplete.
- Schools can exert important organizational effects on students' decisions to drop out or stay in school, above and beyond their individual behaviors and backgrounds.
- Although the presence of low-achieving students had a marginal influence on school dropout rates in this study, neither average SES nor minority concentration was associated with this outcome after taking other school characteristics into account.
- Regardless of students' own academic background and school performance, schools with "a constrained academic curriculum," more challenging courses, and fewer remedial or nonacademic courses hold students in school.
- Students are more likely to drop out of larger high schools.

- The most important finding of this study is that students are less likely to drop out of high schools where relationships between teachers and students (as perceived by the students) are more positive.

Suggestions for Teachers:

- Teachers should try to enhance their relationships with individual students thus creating positive relationships.

Suggestions for Literacy Leaders and Administrators:

- High schools should maintain a curriculum of challenging courses with few remedial or nonacademic courses.
- If possible, high school enrollment should be kept low through either having more high schools or creating “smaller schools within the school.”
- Work with high school personnel across roles to explore school-based factors that can affect whether or not students drop out.