

**The Denver Post - denver and the west**

## **Colorado dropouts establish patterns early on**

**Warning signs of high school academic woes can be seen in students as young as 11 and addressed, researchers say.**

[http://www.denverpost.com/education/ci\\_11109613](http://www.denverpost.com/education/ci_11109613)

**By Allison Sherry**

**December 1, 2008**

Middle schoolers who fail a single math or reading class are much more prone to drop out of high school than those who do well, according to some of the most sophisticated research into dropouts ever conducted in five Colorado school districts.

The study, which mimics trends found in Philadelphia and Boston, followed dropouts in Denver, Aurora, Jefferson County, Pueblo and Adams County. The districts churn out almost half of the state's dropouts each year.

Among those who left school in these five districts, researchers looked at behavior records, grades and attendance as far back as middle school.

The numbers show that parents and teachers should take seriously student failures in core subjects even when they're as young as 11 years old.

"It's a commitment at the early stages. If a student gives off a warning sign, you make it someone's job that they notice that," said Martha Abele MacIver, a Johns Hopkins University research scientist studying the dropout data for Colorado. "I don't think it takes that many more resources; it's a commitment to do things differently."

The data in the five districts are mostly still incomplete and should be finalized this spring. Pueblo is the only district openly sharing what it has so far.

Researchers found that 52 percent of Pueblo's ninth-graders who were absent 18 or more days ended up leaving school altogether before graduation. Almost half of all dropouts had at least one suspension in four years. And 88 percent of all dropouts had at least one F in ninth grade.

The study also found that almost one-fourth of current sixth-graders in Pueblo had an F on their transcript.

Pueblo school administrators are already tackling policy changes to make the school district friendlier to struggling students.

For example, a suspended student used to be allowed to make up only 50 percent of the coursework assigned during suspension days. Now, district officials will allow suspended students to make up all of the work they missed.

Among Gov. Bill Ritter's top education priorities is to pare the state's high school dropout rate in half. Roughly 30 percent of the state's high school students now leave school without diplomas.

Group hopes for action

The Johns Hopkins researchers were brought to Colorado last year by private education reformers after Ritter's education task force disbanded its committee focusing on the dropout problem.

The education reform group, including advisers at the Colorado Children's Campaign and the Donnell Kay Foundation, decided to take on the problem themselves and try to fix it.

What they hope comes from the Johns Hopkins work is a strong will from the governor's office — as well as a little funding from the legislature — to give schools incentives to focus on troubled kids when they're younger.

"We hope there is action at all levels," said Alex Medler, a policy adviser at the Colorado Children's Campaign, which is partially funding the \$220,000 project. "We need to know what the kids are doing at a young age and say that's not OK. Maybe a parent could make that change in the child's life."

Medler thinks districts should alert parents to dropout warning signs.

State Education Commissioner Dwight Jones wants to start an office of dropout prevention and devote a state employee full time to "paying attention to it every day."

"Is there a way to get a lot more serious about the data?" he said. "I think the state has some obligation to parents and to kids that there is some accountability in the schools, that kids are attending schools where they have a chance to be successful."

At the governor's office, a massive data-sharing system is underway to allow the state education department, the Department of Corrections and the Colorado Commission on Higher Education to share information about students and where they end up, said Matt Gianneschi, Ritter's education-policy adviser.

Gianneschi said once the Johns Hopkins research is complete, state officials have questions to answer: What does the state do to try to lower the dropout rate? What do school districts need from the state?

"This is a huge priority for us, but we don't know the ways in which to go about it yet," he said. "Maybe you fund schools in a different way. We're really looking for our own superintendents and our own teachers to tell us what works."

Something school districts say they already need is a place for dropouts to go once they've decided to return to school.

In Aurora, this is a three- room schoolhouse called the Options School, where dropouts and those expelled from traditional schools take missing classes at their own pace in online programs.

In its first six months of existence, the school has no more slots. It will graduate nine dropouts this month and another 22 in May.

Striking to Steve Dobo, who helped find kids to go to the Options School through his nonprofit Colorado Youth for a Change, is how many students leave school close to graduation.

In Pueblo, 76 of 367 dropouts in the 2006-07 school year needed five or fewer credits to get a diploma.

"That's just heartbreaking," Dobo said.

Jose Rodriguez will graduate from the Aurora alternative school next year after dropping out of Aurora Central High School two years ago.

He thought school was boring. And he blames himself for getting mixed up in the wrong crowd and then falling so far behind in his classes that he had no incentive to start going again.

He drove a produce truck and worked at Denver International Airport before deciding to get his diploma so he could eventually start community college.

"I have choices," the 20-year-old Rodriguez said. "I can always work in these bad jobs, or I can go back to school and do something that will get me up, pull me up."

*Allison Sherry: 303-954-1377 or [asherry@denverpost.com](mailto:asherry@denverpost.com)*

**Copyright 2008. The Denver Post. All rights reserved.**

---

Statistics

52% Pueblo ninth-graders with at least 18 absences who drop out

88% Pueblo dropouts with at least one F as freshmen

*Source: Johns Hopkins University*