



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

The Importance of Data Systems for Dropout Prevention

Elaine Allensworth, Ph.D. • February 2009

Topic: Dropout Prevention

Practice: Data Systems

Highlights

- Longitudinal data systems that follow students from year to year are critical for understanding the nature of the dropout problem.
- Linking academic records across schools and districts can minimize the question of whether a student has transferred or dropped out.
- Once a data system is in place, it takes time and effort to develop the staff's capacity to look past the raw numbers to be able to identify patterns in what's happening in the school.

About the Interviewee

Elaine Allensworth is the Director for Statistical Analysis at the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago. She holds a Ph.D. in Sociology, and an M.A. in Sociology/Urban Studies from Michigan State University. Her work focuses on the structural factors that affect high school students' educational attainment, particularly the factors that affect graduation and dropout rates. She was the lead author on a number of studies on graduation rates in the Chicago Public Schools, including *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in CPS* (2007), *The On-Track Indicator*

as a Predictor of High School Graduation (2005), and *Ending Social Promotion: Dropout Rates in Chicago after Implementation of the Eighth-Grade Promotion Gate* (2004). Elaine is currently working on a mixed-methods study of the transition to high school, following a cohort of students from eighth grade into their second year in high school. She is also leading several studies on the effects of rigorous curricular reforms on students' experiences in their classes, grades, test scores, high school graduation and college attendance. As a member of the CCSR postsecondary project team, Elaine studies students' transition from high school to college. She was lead author on a study of the factors affecting students' performance on the ACT, *From High School to the Future: ACT Preparation—Too Much, Too Late* (2008). Elaine was once a high school Spanish and science teacher.

Full Transcript

I'm Elaine Allensworth. I'm the Co-Director for Statistical Analysis at the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University Of Chicago in Chicago, Illinois.

A data system that follows students' records as they move through high school is essential for measuring dropout rates. If you can't follow students from the time they start in high school to the time they leave high school, you will not accurately estimate the dropout problem in your school. Longitudinal data systems that follow students as they move from year to year is especially critical for understanding the nature of the dropout problem because dropout is a process that occurs over a number of years.

There are many different kinds of data systems that schools and districts and even states are using right now. Traditionally, if there have been data systems, they've been school-based or district-based. Increasingly, we're seeing more and more state-based systems. If we can link records from across schools within a district, we can tell if a student has transferred to another school within the district rather than just wondering if the student has transferred or if they've dropped out. If we can follow students as they move from district to district within the state, that takes away more of the question of whether students have transferred, or whether they've dropped out.

When you're designing the systems, you always have to balance the complexity of the system with the logistics and the actual staffing that you're going to have to make sure that that system runs well. You're going to have to always make tradeoffs in terms of thinking what will be the easiest to implement and think about what are the demands on the clerks, what are the demands on the teachers, what are the demands on central office administration who needs to process the data, on the demands of the technology folks?

It's a challenge putting together statistics that make sense and answer the questions that school staff really have about why students are struggling, why they are dropping out. A lot of times, you can start with some very basic kinds of questions: What are the dropout rates by student's incoming test scores? What are the

dropout rates by student's age at entry into high school, Special Education status? Things like that. And that can start giving you some idea of the scope of the problem and the structure of the problem in your school. But then the question is what more? What do we do with the data from there? What we find is, generally, the more that you can make comparisons across schools, across sub-groups of students and across schools, and even across districts, the more you get insight into the nature of the problem in your particular school.

To develop early warning indicator systems, the most crucial information that schools need is information on students' grades and their attendance in their classes. A lot of times, there's an assumption that students drop out because they have weak academic skills. But in reality, students drop out because they've stopped coming to class, because they're not putting in the effort, because they are failing their classes and as a result of failing their classes, they're realizing that they're not going to graduate.

Once the data system is in place, it takes time and it takes effort to develop people's capacity to look past the raw numbers to be able to identify patterns in what's happening in the school. But that's really critical because once you start looking at which students are failing, why they're failing, when they're failing, when absence is worse, when absence is better, that's when you can start making strategic decisions about how the policies and practices in your school and in your district are working and you can start really addressing the problems of dropout and making a difference for your kids.