

**THE SCHOOL BOARD OF BROWARD COUNTY, FLORIDA
OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT**

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Approved memorandum with signatures is on file.

November 20, 2007

TO: School Board Members

FROM: Katherine Blasik, Ph.D., Associate Superintendent
Research, Evaluation, Assessment & Boundaries

VIA: James F. Notter
Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: **RESPONSE TO ASSOCIATED PRESS “DROPOUT FACTORIES”
REPORT**

An article published by the Associated Press (AP) on October 30, 2007 was widely circulated in news media outlets, including newspapers and television stations nationwide (*1 in 10 Schools are ‘Dropout Factories,’* available at <http://www.ap.org/>). That article reported results from a study commissioned by the AP and conducted by Johns Hopkins University researcher Dr. Robert Balfanz concerning the ability of the nation’s high schools to keep students in school long enough to progress from 9th to 12th grade. Schools were dubbed “dropout factories,” if “no more than 60 percent of the students who start as freshmen make it to their senior year.” Nationwide, 12% of schools were found to register these low retention rates, 16 of the identified schools are located in Broward County.

The research design and analytic method used in the study is described on the Web site for Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Social Organization of Schools (CSOS) (<http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS/images/AP.html>) and on the researcher’s Web site (http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS/images/AP_Dropout_Factory_Story_2.pdf). Dr. Balfanz indicates that enrollment data acquired from the United States Department of Education’s Common Core of Data were the basis for the analyses. However, no reference is provided as to the specifics of the source of that data. The Web site includes links to two files that represent the final data output for the study cited. Fall enrollment counts of 12th grade students were compared with the fall enrollment counts of 9th grade students from four years previous. This ratio was computed for each of the nation’s high schools for the senior classes of 2004, 2005, and 2006 and the freshmen classes of 2001, 2002, and 2003. Schools met the researcher’s definition of ‘dropout factory,’ if the ratio of 12th to 9th grade students was 60% or less.

This study was published in the popular press and not in a peer-reviewed journal and the methodology and data sources are not fully articulated. Under these conditions, it is not possible

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to fully interpret some of the premises of the research. For example, the description of the researcher's analytic method includes the statement that schools that "continually have 60% fewer freshman than seniors are usually schools in which the majority or near majority of students who enter the 9th grade do not ultimately earn a diploma from the school" (<http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS/images/AP.html>). It is not clear whether this is a misstatement that should read "60% fewer seniors than freshmen" or whether there is some rationale for the statement as it is written. In either case, there is no explanation as to the basis for the statement and no reference to a data source that supports it. However, there do appear to be serious flaws in the methodology and in the data.

As far as the methodology is concerned, upon first glance, it appears that the computation indexed graduation rates for each school. This is not the case. The data entered in the calculations do not identify whether the 9th grade students entered high school for the first time that year. Similarly, the 12th grade data do not identify whether students progressed to 12th grade in less than four years, or whether they may have been retained. In other words, the two components of the computation were not limited to the same cohort of students. Moreover, the outcomes of the 12th grade students (i.e., whether these students obtained a high school diploma) were not considered in the computation. Consequently, students who successfully completed high school in more than four years were not considered.

In the AP article, Dr. Balfanz acknowledges that "while some of the missing students transferred, most dropped out." The basis for this statement was found in the description of methods on the researcher's Web site. Specifically, a substantial migration of students from a school district may cause the numbers to drop. For the reported study, data were computed for three school years (ostensibly three sets of high school cohorts), with the assumption that the impact of any mass migration would be limited to one cohort. This assumption is incongruent with a prolonged exodus that occurs over multiple years, such as is currently being experienced in South Florida.

To recap, the researcher examined each school's enrollment data at two points in time, defining this as "promoting power rate." They then inferred, erroneously, that this method would provide an estimation of graduation rates that could be used to compare schools across the United States. This is a major inferential leap.

A more appropriate measure of high school success in preparing students is an adjusted cohort graduation rate. The Florida Department of Education (FDOE) uses this method to compute graduation rates for Florida's high schools. Specifically, FDOE computes percentage of students who have graduated within four years of entering ninth grade for the first time. The tracked cohort is adjusted for each school. Students who transfer out of the school to attend another school or to enroll in an adult-education program are removed from the cohort. Students who transfer into a school are included in the count of the class with which they are scheduled to graduate. Student outcomes are also considered in the computation of the graduation rate. FDOE considers a student, who receives a standard diploma, a special diploma, or a diploma awarded after successful completion of the General Educational Development examination (also called the General Equivalency Diploma, General Education Diploma, or GED),

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as a graduate.¹ Table 1 displays comparisons of the FDOE graduation rates and the AP study data for the Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) identified as ‘dropout factories.’

Table 1

Comparison of Associated Press Study Data and FDOE Graduation Rates for BCPS Schools Identified as ‘Dropout Factories’

School	AP Study Data (%)				FDOE Graduation Rates			
	Average	2004	2005	2006	Average	2004	2005	2006
Blanche Ely High	50	64	44	44	60.4	61.3	60.8	59.1
Boyd H. Anderson High	45	45	45	44	45.8	45.3	45.7	46.4
Charles W Flanagan High	54	82	44	37	69.8	74.9	66.8	67.7
City of Coral Springs Charter	53	49	56	54	74.3	71.3	70.2	81.3
Coconut Creek High	55	61	50	54	58.1	62.8	56.1	55.3
Deerfield Beach High	52	54	49	54	60.0	63.2	56.8	60.0
Dillard High	52	48	43	66	51.4	52.7	42.2	59.2
Fort Lauderdale High	48	51	44	49	66.3	75.3	60.0	63.5
Hallandale High	51	50	49	55	55.9	60.5	55.7	51.6
Hollywood Hills High	57	63	56	53	70.2	69.4	73.9	67.2
Northeast High	54	55	51	55	68.0	67.3	67.2	69.4
Piper High	60	62	58	60	66.2	68.2	68.1	62.3
South Broward High	60	66	55	58	67.4	65.3	70.4	66.6
South Plantation High	56	61	49	56	69.6	68.5	69.5	70.9
Stranahan High	51	55	48	49	60.7	63.0	58.3	60.7
Western High	50	38	29	83	66.4	62.7	56.2	80.2

Examination of the data presented in Table 1 revealed substantial differences between the AP study and FDOE graduation rates. For instance, according to the AP study, across 2004, 2005, and 2006 an average of 50% of students at Blanche Ely High School remained in school until their senior year. However, when student mobility and educational outcomes are taken into account, Blanche Ely obtained an average graduation rate of 60.4% over the same three-year period. In fact, the FDOE average cohort-adjusted graduation rates were higher than the AP study’s indices in 15 of the 16 (93.8%) schools. Across all years, the FDOE cohort-adjusted graduation rates were higher than the AP study’s indices for 41 out of 48 (87.2%) comparisons reflected in the table.

Beyond the methodological issues with this study, there are also substantial causes for concern in the data themselves. Two of these warrant comment. First, at the state level, FDOE has reported that there are 865 Senior High Schools in Florida in 2006-07. Five hundred twenty four of those schools are designated as schools “offering primarily regular instruction” (www.fldoe.org/eias/eiaspubs/pdf/schoolsbytype.pdf). Dr. Balfanz’s data, however, indicate that Florida has 319 high schools that fit the criteria for his study, based on the Common Core of Data. More than 500 schools were not included in the analyses, and yet, Dr. Balfanz makes an inference about the whole of the state. Consequently, his assessment that “about half of high schools in those states [Florida and California] classify as dropout factories” is false.

¹ The graduation rate computed for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) differs to comply with the Federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Some diploma types such as the special diploma are not included in the definition of graduate for this computation.

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Second, errors in Dr. Balfanz's data have resulted in the removal of five schools across the United States from the original list of schools designated as dropout factories (<http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS/images/AP2.html>). Presumably this has occurred as a result of school districts that have questioned Dr. Balfanz's data. The reasons that the five schools (located in Pennsylvania, Iowa, Michigan, Idaho, and Virginia) were removed include the following:

- Two Schools Given the Same Unique School Identifier (affected one school)
- Incorrect Enrollment Data Reported to or Recorded by the Common Core of Data (affected two schools)
- A New School Opens and Students are Re-Zoned – Impacting Promoting Power (affected two schools)

Increasing the graduation rate in Broward County Public high schools is one objective of the Broward County Public Schools Strategic Plan 2010 (<http://www.broward.k12.fl.us/strategicplanning/StrategicPlan/miniposter.pdf>). Significant resources are being devoted to this effort. Making data-driven decisions that are based upon sound research design and analysis will be essential to success. Flawed research creates an obstacle to the development of appropriate programs and has the potential to divert limited resources to responses that do not address the fundamental issues.

To summarize, the conclusions offered by the Associate Press study were based on flawed analyses. A more precise assessment of school performance in retaining students through graduation is provided using an adjusted cohort method such as the one used by FDOE, which is commonly accepted in educational research. Please direct any questions concerning these analyses to me at 754-321-2470 or Dr. Russell Clement, Director, Research Services at 754-321-2500.

JFN/KAB/RWC:jp

cc: Executive Leadership Team
Area Directors
High School Principals