

# A Case Study of the Assignment of Withdrawal Codes for Reporting Dropouts in Two Disciplinary Alternative Schools

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**Abstract:** This study examined assignment of withdrawal codes by school administrators in two disciplinary alternative schools. Findings revealed: (a) codes were inaccurately assigned intentionally to keep students from returning to a regular school without notification, and (b) administrators improperly tracked students and failed to ascertain students' reasons for dropping out.

In 1986, Florida enacted the Dropout Prevention Act, Florida statute 230.2316, which authorized and encouraged district school boards to establish comprehensive dropout prevention programs designed to meet the needs of an increasing number of at-risk students who “were not being effectively served by traditional education in the public schools” (Schargel & Smink, 2001, p. 111). As a result of this act, disciplinary alternative schools were established particularly for at-risk students with a history of disruptive behaviors. These schools enforce compulsory school attendance through the use of codes to identify and record a student's reason for withdrawing from public school in the State of Florida (Butler, Davison, & Denbroeder, 2003). These withdrawal codes directly affect the accuracy of reporting dropouts. This study begins to identify and investigate the range of types of inaccuracies with a particular focus on inaccuracies in the assignment of withdrawal codes by school administrators in a large urban school district in Florida.

## Review of Literature

A review of extant literature (i.e., professional and academic journals, books, ERIC Clearinghouse, reports, internet, magazines, newspapers, and policy briefs) on student dropouts in the last decade indicates that dropout rates are decreasing (Horne, 2002; McMillen, Kaufman, & Whitener, 1996). However, the research on decreasing dropout rates has been challenged by many researchers (Clements, Ligon, & Paredes, 2000; Greene, 2003). Clements et al. (2000) asserted that “the definitions, instructions, leaving/dropout codes, and other administrative overhead are too complex” (p. 3). Boozer (1995) asserts that withdrawal codes can be used as an expedient measure by school authorities to show a decreasing dropout rate, even though the actual number may be rising. Historically, there have been problems comparing dropout data across states due to the lack of common definitions and reporting procedures (Clements et al., 2000). After extensive study, Greene (2003) concluded that dropout rates nationwide are higher than reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) because of the counting methods generally employed. Therefore, the accuracy of reporting withdrawal codes by administrators would help explain why counting methods are important. Since accuracy is arbitrary, and school districts like to put their best face forward, making comparison across states of dropouts can be meaningless without a systematically applied definition. Therefore, accuracy of administrators' codes directly affects reported dropout rates. Greene's (2003) study found that the national graduation rate for the class of 2000 was 69%. In contrast, in Florida, the graduation rate in 2003 was the lowest in the nation, 56% (Greene, 2003; Greene & Winters, 2004) for mostly *at risk* students.

Thompson-Hawkins, B., & Normore, A. H. (2007). A case study of the assignment of withdrawal codes for reporting dropouts in two disciplinary alternative schools. In S. M. Nielsen & M. S. Plakhotnik (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual College of Education Research Conference: Urban and International Education Section* (pp. 114-119). Miami: Florida International University.  
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Researchers often use the term *at-risk* or *marginalization* to include descriptors such as *poverty, low self-esteem, learning and physical disabilities, ethnicity, language barriers, socially deviant behavior* in both school and society, *low socioeconomic status, single-parent homes, grade retention, low academic performance, evidence of disengagement and maladjustment, and dysfunctional communities and homes* (Deschamps, 1992; Owings & Magliaro, 1998). Peck, Law, and Mills (1987) asserted that the issues of dropping out and dropout prevention cannot be separated from issues affecting our total economic and social structure. These issues include poverty, unemployment, discrimination, the role of the family, social values, the welfare cycle, child abuse, and drug abuse (p. 3). Records derived from statistical reports reveal that Southern states educate a vast number of Hispanics, African Americans, and Native Americans. Further research indicates that in Southeastern states in which the Hispanic population has greatly increased during the past decade, Hispanic students have the lowest graduation rate in the nation (Greene & Winters, 2004). In recent years, the educational system has appropriately paid greater attention to techniques for preventing migrant students from leaving school (Migrant Attrition Project, 1987).

#### *Calculating Dropout Rates*

Specialists in dropouts recognize that the high school completion rate goes hand in hand with the dropout rate (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). The Common Core of Data (CCD) collection used by NCES is used in dropout studies as a means of uniformity and standardization of data. The CCD dropout rate is calculated by dividing the number of dropout students from public schools in a given state by the total number of students enrolled in that state. Still, the Current Population Surveys (CPS) rate is based not only on public school enrollment but also on private school enrollment. CPS data include all students living in a state regardless of their school enrollment status. Another very important difference in the method of calculation between these two agencies is that the CCD includes grades 7 through 12, whereas CPS uses grades 10 through 12. In addition, the CCD data collection relies on administrative records instead of the household surveys used by the CPS. CCD counts General Education Diploma (GED) recipients as dropouts, whereas the CPS does not count GED candidates as dropouts (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001).

Given the discrepancies and methods of collection, research shows that only 46 states currently report dropout data annually to the CCD and only 40 states currently use the NCES definition (Clements et al., 2000). This gap has caused many adjustments to be made for the nonstandard reporting and in turn has made it difficult for statistics to be used for accurately counting dropouts across the nation. According to the NCES reports, it is common practice for a state to take a “snapshot” of the dropout rate at the conclusion of the year rather than at the beginning. States that usually understate high school dropout rates have a history of collecting their data across their own fiscal year, normally starting July 1, versus the Federal government’s fiscal year, starting October 1 (Kaufman, Kwon, Klein, & Chapman, 2000). Summer dropouts are not reported in some districts, but are in others whether or not the student returned after the summer. Districts also vary in the way nontraditional students (i.e., students who leave school to enroll in GED programs, correction institutions, or other facilities) are counted (McMillen et al., 1996). With the large discrepancies and variant methods of counting dropouts, the calculation and reporting of dropout rates is, as Greene and Winters (2004) stated, the “public schools’ dirty little secret” (p. 3).

#### *Disciplinary Alternative Schools*

Public disciplinary alternative schools provide a second chance for students identified as being at risk of dropping out of school for any of a number of reasons, including poor grades,

truancy, suspension, expulsion, and pregnancy (Paglin & Fager, 1997). According to Paglin and Fager (1997) the schools are widespread in the Southeast, and less prevalent in the West. Most poor states (e.g., Mississippi, Alabama) exist in the South than the wealthier West. The majority of students in disciplinary alternative schools come from schools and communities where poverty exists and students qualify for the free/reduced lunch program. The majority of students who are assigned to the disciplinary alternative schools have had a family member attend the same school or another alternative school who may have graduated or dropped out.

Disciplinary alternative schools were designed to offer students a high school education for entry to postsecondary education and the labor market, and this education is a key element as to whether students will remain in poverty-level jobs (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Antisocial behavioral conduct, anti-morality and values of social acceptance by deviant peers are significant negative predictors of high school dropout (Caspi, Wright, Moffit, & Silva, 1998). Provisionally, these schools have been instituted because social leaders recognize the value of teaching students to learn discipline, gain citizenship, and possess democratic values (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Students who are assigned to disciplinary alternative secondary schools have limited choices as to what other schools they can attend. In addition, attending school is important to the well-being of most students because of the number of restrictions placed upon them by state statutes, such as driver's license privileges and inability to obtain a job without a high school diploma.

*Profile of school x.* School X is located in a remote part of the district where there is little public transportation to and from the site. The building consists of portables that have been attached to simulate the appearance of a school. The student population consists of 85% African American students, 11.5% Hispanic, 2.5% Caucasian, and 1% with the majority of students eligible for free/reduced lunch. The school has a history of drug and/or gang problems that cause many students to be on suspension. The faculty and staff are well distributed in gender but predominantly African American in composition. The administrative staff is composed of three males, two African American and one Caucasian, and one African American female. The faculty is predominantly African American. Most of the students range between the ages of 18 and 19 and are living with relatives, boyfriends or girlfriends, other peers, or independently. Most of the students attend school sporadically, exhibit behavior problems, demonstrate low academic skills, have been retained in one or more grades, are behind in their grade placement, and use profanity as accepted communication.

*Profile of school y.* School Y is housed in the buildings of an old vacant hospital site, which clearly calls for replacement or renovation. The buildings are spread far apart, causing the students to spend much time traveling to and from classes. The student population is comprised of 45 % African American, 45% Hispanic, 8% Caucasian, and 2% other. The majority of these students are eligible for free/reduced lunch. The staff and faculty are male-dominant and predominantly African American, and administrators are Caucasian and African American. Research indicates that African American males are known to demonstrate good classroom management skills in supervising predominantly African American students (Druian & Butler, 1987). There was a deliberate attempt to assign African American assistant principals to handle most of the disciplinary problems at the school, including suspensions, and the Caucasian female registrar decides what withdrawal codes should be assigned to most of the students and enters suspensions and withdrawal coding into the computer. For the most part, participants from School Y have similar characteristics as those in School X, especially the African American students. Many of the Hispanic students, who come primarily from migrant and extended

families, have some difficulties in understanding English. As part of migrant families and without a fixed residence, some of the students traveled back and forth to their home countries with their families to maintain their legal status in the United States. The adults had blue collar jobs and the families lived in substandard housing located in the farming area on the south end of the district.

### **Research Design**

This study used the case study approach that involved two disciplinary alternative schools, X and Y, in the Florida school system. These schools were investigated for accuracy in their use of withdrawal codes. The primary codes examined were as follows: Code 05, any students over the age of 16 who leaves school voluntarily with no intention of returning; Code 15, any PK-12 student who is withdrawn from school due to nonattendance; Code 22, whereabouts unknown; Code 23, no other code can be used to identify the student's reason for leaving school, and Code 26, entering an adult program. To investigate the extent to which withdrawal codes are accurately or inaccurately reported, two similar disciplinary alternative schools located in the northern and southern region of a large urban school district were selected because of the similar underlying principles of the schools. A sample of 19 school personnel (i.e., school administrators, counselors, teachers) and 25 students who withdrew from Schools X and Y during August 2003-June 2004 was used in this study. Students from both schools came from diverse backgrounds, but were predominately African Americans and Hispanics. Parents were not willing to participate in the study, largely because students 18 years and older did not live with the parents.

The data collection included the acquisition of demographic data and recorded withdrawal codes to determine accuracy of codes assigned. Attendance documents of student withdrawal codes were acquired from Information Technology Services (ITS) at Schools X and Y and used with permission from the administrators of both schools and the district. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students, administrators, counselors, and teachers. Observations, field-notes and documents (i.e., school and district reports) were secondary sources. The researcher compiled and transcribed all taped interviews and categorized the data into coded interpretation and abstraction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). With documents, observations, interviews, and field notes, a progressive method of data analysis was used. During data analysis, the researcher used a matrix to develop common patterns and themes that emerged from the data and linked to the literature.

### **Findings**

Findings revealed inaccurate reporting of dropout in both schools. School X reported withdrawal codes inaccurately because of inability to track the students while school Y reported withdrawal codes inaccurately to keep students from re-entering a regular school without the district being notified. Neither school had a standard procedure as to how the school accounted for reporting students who withdrew from their school prior to graduating. The registrars, assistant principals, and counselors decided what withdrawal code should be assigned to students who withdrew for reasons other than graduation. Both principals were uncertain if any of the withdrawal codes were accurate. One principal commented, "It's the attendance registrar who records the codes so I can only rely on what she reports. I don't check it."

Neither school was able to enter the withdrawal code of W22, whereabouts unknown, because this particular code was controlled at the district level. District control of withdrawal code W22 stems from a need to accurately reflect that all measures had been taken to locate the student prior to sending final data to the state. Therefore, when the state assigned the student a

withdrawal code W23, no other code could be used to identify the student's reason for leaving school. Oftentimes, School X received information by word of mouth from other students and staff members, and based on that information, withdrawal codes were assigned. The School X registrar worked closely with the counselor and the assistant principal in deciding which withdrawal code should be assigned to any student, either before or after leaving. School Y used withdrawal codes W05 - any student over compulsory attendance age who leaves school voluntarily with no intention of returning, and DNE - any PK-12 student who was expected to attend a school but did not enter as expected for unknown reasons. The withdrawal code W05 was used to prohibit students from returning to a regular school without being reassigned from a disciplinary alternative school. Code DNE was assigned by the district. The consensus of school personnel in both schools was that since the students were no longer in their school, they were no longer their concern. A district staff member emphasized: "Once the schools assign the withdrawal code, the student is no longer of interest to that school....sometimes they move out of the country and there's no way the principal can track them...they can easily get misplaced in the system."

Students in both schools were often unaware which withdrawal code was assigned to them. In most cases, students left both schools without notification to any school personnel. The career specialists did not interview the students using the district's dropout survey record. Because of this omission, information was missing that could have aided accuracy of code assignments to students. Both schools used different withdrawal codes for reporting data to the district, even though the district provided a uniform policy that the schools were supposed to follow. School X used withdrawal codes closely aligned with the district policy, whereas School Y assigned one basic code regardless of why the student left school.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

This study concludes that withdrawal codes are assigned arbitrarily in these two disciplinary alternative schools, causing the district dropout reporting to be inaccurate. The documents used to acquire the assigned withdrawal codes of students from both Schools X and Y in 2003-2004 indicate that the district policies and procedures need to be examined for modification and a system in place to track students.

#### *Implications for Policy and Practice*

If the district controls withdrawal codes as well as those with high profile for at-risk students, the problem of accurately counting dropouts from disciplinary alternative schools may significantly decrease. Withdrawal code W22 - whereabouts unknown, and W23 - no other code can be used to identify the student's reason for leaving school, were controlled by the district. All withdrawal codes having a negative impact on dropout data should perhaps be entered and controlled at the district level and then transmitted to the state tracking system, which subsequently reports the state dropout rate to the NCES. This study points to the need for more precise and conscientious definitions and assignments of withdrawal codes, so that dropout rates are reported more accurately at district, state, and national levels. The alarming results of students incarcerated or deceased justify the need for different procedures for school administrators. Such a change may mean that district offices should control all negative codes since it is at this level that all requests are intercepted from other schools, other counties, and other countries.

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