

# *Sharing Success*

## Research Brief

*Summary of new research on topics of interest to New York State educators*

*Spring 2005*

### Indicators of High School Performance

For many years, researchers have sought to explain why some schools are more effective than others. Policymakers, too, have struggled with the question of what makes a good school and have focused their accountability systems on identifying and improving the performance of low-performing schools. In both the research and policy arenas, effectiveness is most often measured by students' test scores. Indeed, as "high-stakes" testing has come to dominate the educational landscape, states increasingly are relying solely on test results to rate their schools—rewarding the high-achieving schools and sanctioning schools with poor performance.

Yet, according to a study just published in the *American Educational Research Journal*, test scores alone are insufficient for measuring school performance. Moreover, failure to use other complementary measures of school performance, in addition to test scores, could lead to erroneous conclusions about which schools are effective and what characteristics promote effectiveness.

The study, conducted by university professors Russell Rumberger and Gregory Palardy, investigated the relationship among four complementary indicators of school performance using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study. These four indicators—test scores and three measures of school "holding power": dropout rate, transfer rates, and attrition rates (defined as the sum of dropouts and transfers)—were selected because they represent alternative, yet important measures of school effectiveness. The study also examined school characteristics that might explain differences in school performance such as student background characteristics; school size, location, and type (public, private); school resources, both fiscal and material; and school processes including climate, organizational practices, and school policies and procedures. The key findings were as follows:

#### *School Performance*

- ❖ High schools that are effective in promoting student learning/achievement are not necessarily effective in reducing dropout and transfer rates (and vice versa). For example, schools with high levels of student achievement may also have significantly high dropout rates, while lower achieving schools may have significantly low dropout rates. Although some schools may be effective (or ineffective) across all outcomes, the four performance measures are generally unrelated to each other.
- ❖ Student background characteristics explain a sizeable amount of the variation in student outcomes; still high schools have quite a bit to do with how much students learn.
- ❖ High schools also have quite a bit to do with whether students remain in their school rather than transferring out, and they have considerable control in regard to improving dropout rates.

## *School Characteristics that Affect Performance*

- ❖ The effects of school factors varied across the four outcomes. Significant findings included the following:
  - ❑ *School Size:* Small high schools were neither more effective in promoting student achievement nor in reducing the dropout rate than mid-sized schools (600 to 1,200 students). Large schools (1,200 to 1,800 students), on the other hand, were most effective in promoting student learning, although they had higher dropout rates than smaller schools.
  - ❑ *School Type:* Catholic schools and other private schools were no more effective in raising student achievement than comprehensive public high schools. In addition, while Catholic schools had significantly lower dropout rates than comprehensive public high schools, they had higher transfer rates and higher overall attrition rates.
  - ❑ *School Resources:* In general, resource variables had more of an effect on transfer rates than student achievement or dropout rates. But overall, their impact was small.
  - ❑ *Processes:* Among the process variables, the following were associated with higher test scores: hours students spent on homework, number of advanced courses taken by students, perceptions of school safety, and high teacher expectations. Advanced coursework and high teacher expectations also affected dropout and attrition rates in the desired direction.

## **Implications**

The results of this study, say the authors, have several implications relative to education policy:

- ❑ *Accountability Systems:* Accountability systems that rely solely on test scores provide an incomplete indication of school performance. Even systems that use achievement and dropout rates are insufficient because they ignore transfer or mobility rates. According to Rumberger and Palardy, **schools should be accountable for all students who enter, not only the ones who remain.**
- ❑ *School Performance Policies:* Policies designed to promote student performance in one area can lead to worse performance in another area. For example, schools facing the pressure of greater accountability demands may improve learning outcomes by discharging low-performing students. The finding that large schools have both higher learning rates and higher dropout rates may be a reflection of such activities, according to the authors. The policy implication is that **one size does not fit all—the optimal school size for learning may not be the optimal size for graduation.** Said another way, more stable students may benefit from attending larger schools, while students at risk of dropping out or transferring may benefit from attending smaller schools.
- ❑ *School Choice:* **To the extent that school choice is based on the belief that private schools are more effective than public schools, the present study does not support choice.** Catholic schools and other private schools were no more effective in raising student achievement than comprehensive public high schools. And although Catholic schools had significantly lower dropout rates than public schools, they also had significantly higher transfer and attrition rates.

## **Citation:**

Rumberger, R.W., & Palardy, G.J. (2005). Test scores, dropout rates, and transfer rates as alternative indicators of high school performance. *American Educational Research Journal*, 42, (1), 3-42.