

## Gradual Disengagement: A Portrait of the 2008-09 Dropouts in the Baltimore City Schools

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### Policy Brief

*Informing Policy and Practice to Benefit Baltimore's Children*

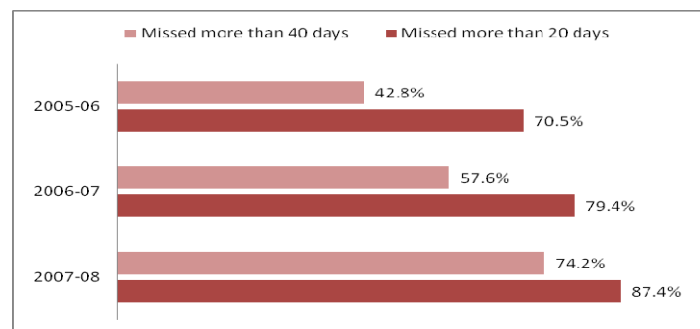
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Behind every dropout code entered into school district administrative files is a face and a story. Though each individual is unique, a study of high school dropouts from the 2008-09 school year, traced back for the seven previous years, reveals some commonalities that distinguish most dropouts from graduates.

#### Major Findings

**Dropouts.** Most dropouts (79.2%) were overage for grade during their first ninth grade year – generally a sign of a previous retention. Students who eventually dropped out were showing signs of gradual disengagement (chronic absence) for several years prior to actually dropping out. As Figure 1 displays, almost all (87.4% of those enrolled) missed more than 20 days the previous school year (2007-08), and three in four (74.2% of those enrolled) were absent more than 40 days that year. Chronic absence was also high in the two years prior to that.

**Figure 1. Percentage of 2008-09 Dropouts Chronically Absent in the Three Years Prior to Dropping Out**



Course failure was also a challenge. Nearly all (92.7%) dropouts with transcript records had failed at least one course, and six in ten (63%) had failed four or more courses the year prior to the dropout event. Four in ten (40.6%) of the 2008-09 dropouts earned zero credits in the two years preceding (2006-07 and 2007-08). Three quarters of the dropouts earned fewer than six credits during those two years (when the normal rate of credit accrual would be 14 to 16 credits, with at least 5.5 per year to arrive at 21 credits by the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade). On average, dropouts had accumulated a total of 5.2 credits over their entire high school career, compared to an average of 24.6 credits for graduates.

**Graduates.** By contrast, more than two-thirds of graduates entered ninth grade showing no sign of a prior retention in grade. Average attendance rates during the first ninth grade year were dramatically higher for graduates (92.0%) than for those who would eventually drop out (68.3%). Only a quarter (23.1%) of graduates were

chronically absent during ninth grade, compared to more than three-quarters (76.5%) of eventual dropouts. Few (6.4%) graduates missed more than 40 days of school during their first year in ninth grade, compared to more than half (55.5%) of dropouts. Graduates were also less likely to miss school in due to suspensions in ninth grade than were eventual dropouts (11.0% compared to 24.9%).

**Performance in Middle Grades.** Almost half (49.9%) of the eventual dropouts enrolled in the district three years prior to their first ninth grade year were chronically absent, compared to 20.2% of graduates. Among students who would drop out in 2008-09, the percentage missing more than 20 days of school grew steadily over the next three years, while it remained basically stable among those who would go on to graduate. There is a dramatic increase in the percent of students missing more than 40 days of school among those who would later go on to drop out in 2008-09.

### Policy Implications

Issues related to family (caring for siblings, other relatives, or one's own children), finances (the need for employment), and health (both physical and mental) certainly contribute to the behavioral warning indicators, but were not addressed in this study. The following discussion focuses on school-based policies and practices that could potentially get students back on track to graduation.

- A majority of dropouts are overage for grade by the time they enter ninth grade for the first time. It is important for alternatives to grade retention to be implemented to prevent the large numbers of overage students in middle and high schools.
- Most dropouts enter high school with a pattern of chronic absenteeism that goes back at least several years. Intensive interventions during the middle grades are required to prevent patterns of poor attendance from becoming entrenched.
- For current high school students aged 17 and older who have already become entrenched in negative patterns and have not succeeded in high school, it appears that more non-traditional options for earning a diploma would be helpful. It is important to note that reading and mathematics skills of most dropouts are likely to require significant remediation to enable them to be successful in course work and pass tests (e.g., the HSA or GED).
- At the same time, it is important not to track unsuccessful middle grades students into such alternative high school options. A more intensive focus on intervention and preventative measures during the middle grades (6-9) is one of the most crucial directions for district efforts in reducing the dropout rate. Alternative high school options should be a short-term strategy that can be eliminated over time as the factors producing the need for them are addressed.

For more details please read the full technical report at <http://baltimore-berc.org/pdfs/Gradual%20Disengagement%20final.pdf>