

## **Bridging a Gap**

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IT'S MIDSUMMER, the season when untold numbers of students quietly decide to take an extended, and often permanent, leave of education. Having graduated from middle school in June, they simply do not show up for high school next month.

No educator can reliably predict which students in the spring will become the dropouts of summer, since these youngsters disappear without a whimper and with no warning. And no agency or research group has their measure, since most dropout statistics deal with the high school years. But many middle-school administrators -- especially in low-income areas -- know the reality and have the anecdotes and the data to prove it.

"Look at your neighbor," Joe Trevino, principal of Edison Middle School in Houston's dominantly Hispanic East End, told graduating eighth graders in May. "Unfortunately the statistics tell us that between the two of you, only one is going to graduate from high school." A Temptation to Blame the Children

In response, some school districts across the nation are instituting "bridge programs." The services vary but the object is the same: to carry students through the summer between middle school and high school by bolstering their academic weaknesses, acquainting them with a new school culture and a new style of learning, and sometimes offering them money to stick with school. But these programs are still the exceptions.

"The temptation is to blame the kids, but they are just indicators of how poorly most schools handle the transition from middle school to high school," said Joyce L. Epstein, co-director of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

There is no way to measure how many students drop out after middle school because most school systems focus on high school dropouts, calculating the difference between the number of youngsters in ninth grade and the number who graduate four years later.

The Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics will start tracking dropouts from seventh through 12th grades in the coming school year. But several grim estimates already have emerged from a study published by the center in April: Some 6 percent of all eighth graders, and nearly 15 percent of eighth graders categorized as being of low economic status, had left school before completing 10th grade. These calculations were based on an ongoing survey of more than 24,000 students nationwide, which began in 1988 when those students were in eighth grade.

Although school systems are organized in many types of grade spans, nearly three-quarters of all public school students make the move to high school after eighth grade, according to Ms. Epstein. This transition period is attracting scholarly attention, as educators question the structure of a system that often treats students like children through junior high or middle school, then abruptly asks them to act like young adults.

It is a time, too, when "students reach a real break point in their education," said Robert Crain, a researcher at the National Center for Research on Vocational Education, at Columbia University's Teachers College.

"Suddenly they are confronted with a choice," Mr. Crain said, "and given that opportunity, some just decide not to go on." Not going on, middle school administrators add, is particularly attractive to students from low-income and immigrant communities, who are often 16 or 17 years old instead of the standard age of 14, having started late, missed years or been held back.

Mr. Trevino agreed that summer after eighth grade is a dangerous season. "When they come here, they are still little kids, and I think it is hard for them to leave," he said. "But by the time they finish they feel grown up. Over this summer they are so disconnected that it's easy for them to forget about school."

Addressing his school's graduating class in May, Mr. Trevino tried to offer an educational fact of life that would be hard to forget: that society's chain of prerequisites moves from high school graduation to college diploma to a good job. And over and over, he came back with the same plea, "The first thing you have to do is show up when school starts in August."

But for many students at Edison, as elsewhere, jawboning isn't enough. Mr. Trevino said that some will move on from Houston to another American city or back to Mexico or Central America, which is common along the border states; many others will have to work to help support their families. As for others, "I wish I had the answer," he said. "I really wish I did." Half Make an Effort to Curb Dropouts

A survey of 2,400 principals whose schools include a seventh grade found that about half conduct some kind of program to stop this volatile mass from dropping out, said Ms. Epstein, who helped conduct the study. Most bridge programs involved inexpensive activities: middle-school students visiting high schools for an introduction to the building and curriculum, or meetings among administrators and counselors from both schools, to provide continuity in oversight.

Thirty-one percent of the schools in the study went slightly further, bringing parents into high schools so they would understand what their children face and to draw them into participating in these children's education. Thirteen percent of the schools held summer sessions for recent middle-school graduates at their new high school -- everything from Introduction to High School 101 to highly structured academic programs.

One academic program is conducted in Houston by Jefferson Davis High School and the middle schools that feed into it. For 20 days of summer, up to 150 incoming ninth graders go to the high school for help in math, reading and writing. The visits also enable students to become familiar with the campus and its curriculum. Local companies pay for their fall school supplies, amusement park tickets and a \$5-a-day stipend.

For Charles Perez Jr., the inducements worked. A 14-year-old at Houston's Marshall Middle School, he was worried about his weak grades. Now he says: "I'm sure I'll finish school. I'm not worried about myself."

But inducements are not always enough. Charles has at least two friends who won't be joining him at Jefferson Davis in the fall. "One needed to get a job," he said, "and the other just didn't like school because he was 16 already and too old for his class." Some Must Work to Help Families

Lois Range, director of the program, said, "Believe it or not, some eighth graders have to work to support their families, and what we offer is just not enough." Last year, with an organized recruitment effort involving teachers, local business executives and community organizations, Jefferson Davis drew 132 students, Ms. Range said. This year, without a similar effort, only 49 students signed up.

Since 1985 the public schools in Portland, Ore., have participated in an ambitious bridge effort, the Summer Training and Education Program, developed by Public/Private Ventures, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization that focuses on low-income youths. For seven weeks, eighth and ninth graders identified as coming from low-income families spend four mornings a week taking classes in the high school, and afternoons working for nonprofit organizations. Public and private money finances the program and a stipend for students.

Replicated in more than 100 communities nationwide, Step serves more than 20,000 students at a cost of approximately \$2,000 per student, and has yielded encouraging results, such as improved student test scores. "Kids do well while they are involved," said Kurt Shovlin, who coordinates Step in Portland. "They increase their skills in reading and math and have a lower incidence of teen parenting. The dropout rate is lower overall while the kids are involved."

But without continued support for youngsters who cross the bridge into high school, the effects of Step fade. "The fact of the matter is that short-term programs do work," said Michael Bailin, president of Public/Private Ventures. "The problem is that there is no quick fix. The environment from which kids come and their circumstances will ultimately prevail."