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Retention, Social Promotion, and Dropout Rates in Mississippi

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The University of Southern Mississippi

RETENTION, SOCIAL PROMOTION, AND DROPOUT RATES IN MISSISSIPPI

by

Jennifer Jo Woodruff

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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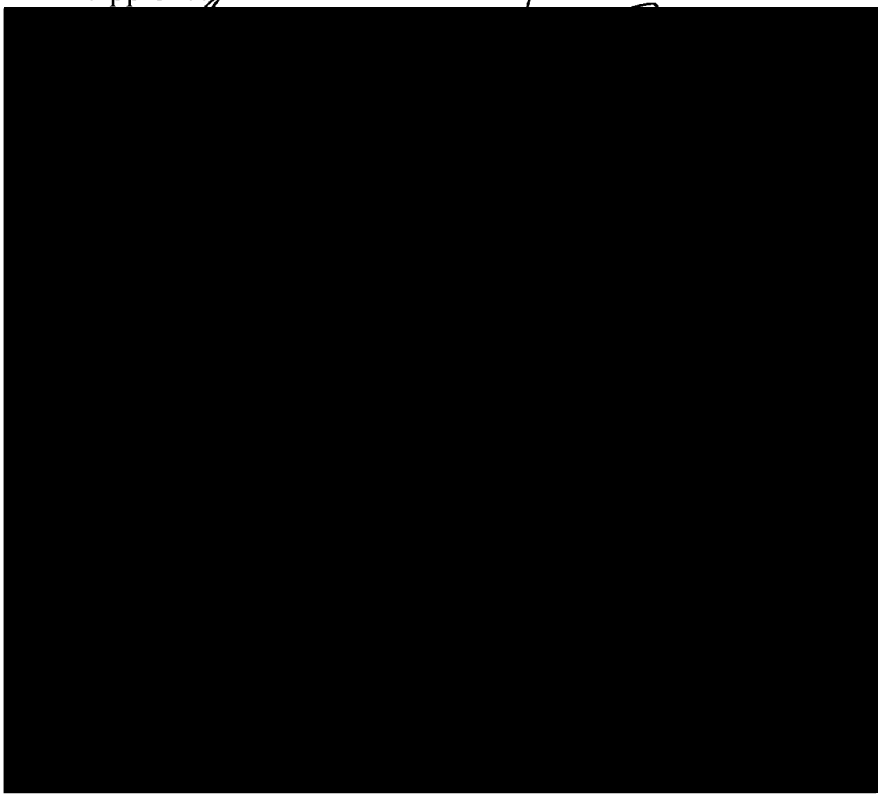

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ABSTRACT

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There has been much research in the past two decades about the dropout problem in America. Dropout rates have become a focal point for all public schools in the nation largely due to components of the No Child Left Behind Act and the Dropout Prevention Act that associate monetary rewards to schools that raise the graduation completion rates to 90%. The dropout rates for the United States rank the educational system 17th for graduation completion rates among developed countries. Mississippi has repeatedly earned the title of low-ranking among all states in the nation.

Dropping out of high school is followed by a host of poor outcomes. When individuals drop out of high school it creates a loss of productive workers and revenues in the economy while creating higher costs associated with social services. Mississippi's dropout rates are an indicator that students are inadequately prepared for entrance into in a highly competitive technologically advanced global work force. Abstract thinking and deductive reasoning are becoming more important in the labor market and public schools are expected to produce graduates who have obtained these academic and social skills so they will be successful in their adult lives.

The goal of this research was to examine student data to determine whether relationships existed among the variables of retention, social promotion, and dropout rates in Mississippi within the context of high stakes testing mandates. The results of the analysis of statistics for the 29,500 students that were enrolled in the 9th grade during the 2005-2006 school year do not show a significant relationship among retention, social promotion and dropout rates in Mississippi within the context of high stakes testing. The goal of this study was to present findings that will help educators and administrators implement strategies for their local district dropout prevention plans to improve the dropout rates within their districts.

DEDICATION

To

my parents, Chris and Lynn Wainwright,

for instilling within me the importance

of always doing my best and finishing what I start

Jace and JoLee

for being my inspiration and giving

me the incentive to succeed with this endeavor

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank God for orchestrating the timing and events that allowed me to complete this endeavor. Without Him, I would not have encountered Anthony Stevenson who provided me with the invaluable data that was vital for the completion of my study. To Dr. Ward I would like to offer my deepest gratitude for his time and numerous edits that took place to make this dissertation my educational masterpiece. I would like to thank Dr. Johnson for his efforts and time spent on creating and teaching me about the programming code necessary to complete the analysis. Last I would like to thank my family for supporting me in the choice to complete this process and being tolerant of me during this long, stressful event.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Countries all over the world measure their academic successes according to the educational level individuals attain (Kaufman, 2001). Since education in the United States became compulsory, completion of high school became an expectation of young adults before they became official members of society. When *A Nation at Risk* was published, low standards, watered-down curriculum and social promotion of students were criticized because ill-prepared graduates were being sent into society (Warren & Jenkins, 2005). Some policy makers and politicians then demanded that educators create national standards for all subject areas so parents and employers were ensured that graduates were highly prepared to enter college or the workforce (Gallagher, 2000). *Goals 2000* reiterated the belief from *A Nation at Risk* that students should meet national standards, but it added the perspective that students not meeting these criteria should be held back. *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) was enacted in 2002 and mandated that states be accountable for educating all students and that they measure students' success against national standards using standardized assessments. Because of the high-pressure atmosphere created by the demands of *Goals 2000* and *NCLB*, many states decided to implement "zero tolerance" and "no exception" policies that require students to pass the standardized-turned-high stakes tests in order to be promoted to the next grade or to graduate (Hancock, 2005). As demands from bureaucratic policies

intensified, student failure became more prominent, increasing the possibility that dropout rates would escalate (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) collects data on dropout rates through longitudinal studies, yearly surveys, and reports from states. Data collected from these studies and individual researchers show that there are numerous demographic, academic, and behavioral characteristics that predict the propensity of students to drop out (Zvoch, 2006). Profiles have been created to help identify students who are at-risk of becoming dropouts; however, risk factors are unique and individual for each dropout. A consistent conclusion in the research is the evidence of association between dropping out and reduced opportunities for employment, increased welfare assistance, and increased prospects of incarceration (Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). If the effects of dropping out lead students to a life of economic deprivation and family disruption then research on specific variables related to the likelihood of dropping out is needed to strengthen prevention efforts (Hauser, Pager, & Simmons, 2000).

"There is a substantial number of students, due to low IQs, impoverished family backgrounds, or other factors, that are unlikely to keep up with their classmates and will need long-term support services to keep them from falling behind" (Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Dolan & Wasik, 1992, ¶ 3). For many years educational institutions have debated what to do with children who fall behind, do not make passing grades, or do not master content standards. Legislative and bureaucratic policies have vacillated between retention or holding students back in the same grade, and social promotion or moving students to the next

consecutive grade level based upon reasons other than academic mastery. Research on retention and social promotion suggests that neither practice provides sufficient academic or remedial benefits, but instead causes long-term negative effects that may lead to a student deciding to drop out (Denton, 2001).

The purpose of this study was to identify relationship among retention, social promotion and dropout rates in Mississippi public schools within the context of high stakes testing mandates. The researcher has suggested implications for preventative strategies and curriculum options that can be utilized as alternatives to retention and social promotion to help lower the dropout rate.

Research Question

Within the context of high stakes testing the following research question was examined in this study:

Is there a statistically significant relationship among retention, social promotion, and dropout rates in Mississippi?

Definitions of Terms

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) -the minimum level of improvement that states, school districts, and schools must achieve each year to meet requirements of NCLB.

Class Size Reduction- reduction of students in a regular education elementary class to a maximum of 15 students per teacher.

Dropout- an individual who was enrolled at some time during the previous school year from August to May and was not enrolled in the current school year

by October and has not graduated from high school or completed a state or district approved educational program.

Goals 2000- Educate America Act that was signed into law on March 31, 1994. The Act provides resources to states and communities to ensure that all students reach their full potential. It is based on the premise that students will reach higher levels of achievement when more is expected of them.

High Stakes Testing- Any testing program or uniform, large-scale assessment whose results have important consequences for students, teachers, schools, and/or districts. Such stakes may include promotion, certification, graduation, or denial/approval of services and opportunity. Sometimes referred to as an exit exam.

Locus of Control- a concept in psychology, originally developed by Julian Rotter discussing the perception of the factors responsible for the outcome of an event. An individual with an internal locus of control believes their actions caused the outcome. Conversely, an individual with an external locus of control believes the outcome was determined by outside forces.

Looping- when students spend more than one consecutive school year with the same teacher.

Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT)- Tests given in three areas: Reading, Language, and Mathematics. The Mississippi Curriculum Tests are based on the standards the state uses to define what students should know in grades 2-8.

Mississippi Student Information System-_A database containing information from all public schools in Mississippi that provides reports for the retrieval of data about state, district, and school level information.

National Assessment for Educational Progress-__known as "The Nation's Report Card" is the only national standardized continuing assessment administered periodically by the US Dept. Of Education in reading, math, science, writing, US history, civics, geography, and the arts to random schools in each state to evaluate national performance of students ages 7, 12, 14, and 17.

Nation at Risk-_The U.S. Department of Education's National Commission on Excellence in Education published a report in 1983 that was the origin of current reform efforts; the report recommended the following:

- Graduation requirements should be strengthened so that all students establish a foundation in five *new* basics: English, mathematics, science, social studies, and computer science.
- Schools and colleges should adopt higher and measurable standards for academic performance.
- The amount of time students spend engaged in learning should be significantly increased.
- The teaching profession should be strengthened through higher standards for preparation and professional growth.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)-_reauthorization of a number of federal programs that strive to improve the performance of America's primary and

secondary schools by increasing the standards of accountability for states, school districts, and schools.

Retention- to keep a student in a grade they have already completed due to failing grades or non-mastery of the content standards for that grade.

Subject Area Testing Program (SATP)- consists of end-of-course tests in Algebra I, Biology I, English II, and US History from 1877, that are used to determine high school graduation eligibility.

Social Promotion- moving students to the next consecutive grade level based upon reasons other than academic mastery of the content standards for a grade.

Zero tolerance- a strict approach to rule enforcement that states no deviation will be allowed.

Delimitations

This study was limited to Mississippi public school students enrolled in ninth grade during the 2006-2007 school year. The data for these students was limited to four consecutive years due to MSIS collection beginning in the 2002 school year.

Assumptions

Data reported in MSIS was accurate with respect to student demographics and educational codes.

Justification

Education is deemed an equalizer among students regardless of ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status (Roberts, 1995). It offers individuals

opportunities to gain knowledge, become life-long learners, and contribute positively to society. Adversely, being a high school dropout is associated with economic, social, and criminal consequences. Dropouts are substantially more likely than high school graduates to live in poverty (Fine, 2005). They are also highly represented among the unemployed, the working poor, and those serving time in state or federal prison. (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Alliance for Excellent Education [AEE], 2007; Hansen, 2006; Fine, 2005; Russel, 2003; De Sousa & Gebremedhin, 2003). More than 50% of dropouts are single parents who are on government assistance programs for food, housing, and health needs (Barton, 2005). Research suggests that students from economically disadvantaged families are at a high risk of dropping out of school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Temple, Reynolds, & Meidel, 2000; Zvoch, 2006).

According to the Census Bureau and the 2006 Current Population Survey (CPS), Mississippi has a 48% poverty level, which is significantly higher than the national average poverty level of 36%. Thirty-five percent of those living in poverty in Mississippi are children ages 18 and under (Kaiser, 2006). The 2006 CPS survey shows that 23% of Mississippi households have non-workers, totaling almost 650,000 individuals. The 2005 State Government tax collections averaged a per capita of $1,860. With so many individuals unemployed, the state lost approximately $1 billion in revenues from income taxes (AEE, 2007). Based upon figures from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, Mississippi spends $94 per person for the 447,710 people participating in the food stamp program, creating expenditures in excess of $500,000,000 during 2006. The

National Association of State Budget Officers reported that Mississippi distributed $205 million for Medicaid services and $228 million for state correctional facilities in 2005. The Mississippi Department of Education reported 5,628 total dropouts during the 2005-2006 school year. If Mississippi's schools improved enough to graduate all of these students, the state would eventually generate approximately $10,468,080 more in state taxes plus significantly low the amount of expenditures spent on food stamps, Medicaid and correctional facilities (Kaiser, 2006).

There has been much research in the past two decades about the dropout problem in America. Many of the studies have identified academic and social predictors that are associated with dropouts. There is not a national standardized dropout rate calculation, so it is hard to compare results of the studies that have been conducted and generalize them to different areas in the nation (Kaufman, 2001). This study provides the public schools in Mississippi with statistics specifically related to the relationships among retention, social promotion, and dropouts in Mississippi. Because this study was based upon a state-wide sample of 9th grade students, the findings provide Mississippi specific and accurate data that can be generalized to all public schools in the state. The findings will impact and encourage school districts to implement strategies to improve the dropout problems related to their students.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The review of the literature is divided into three main sections. The theoretical framework is focused on motivational theories related to self-efficacy, attribution and self-determination that help educational researchers understand student performance and engagement in academic tasks. The dropout section reviews factors, characteristics, and effects that are associated with dropout rates. The final section is a review of literature on retention, social promotion and high stakes testing. The current era in educational reform uses high stakes testing as a measuring tool for student achievement and the practices of retention and/or social promotion as intervention strategies for students who perform poorly on the testing. The review will close with a summary of policies recommended to use in lieu of the current practices of retention and social promotion.

Theoretical Framework

Motivational Theory

Motivation is a quality that humans possess and rely upon to accomplish goals or tasks. High school graduation is generally held by parents and children to be an important life milestone, and as such, is impacted in a significant part by a student's motivation. But just as humans are individual, unique and different, each person's motivational drive is as unique as the individual. Motivation is displayed differently at different times, in different situations, in different ways,

and to different degrees (Piele in Renchler, 1992). A major focus for educators and parents is to help students remain motivated to succeed in school so that adequate academic achievement is gained each school year. To accomplish this goal, educators should be aware of students' attitudes and beliefs relative to learning so they can facilitate student learning in ways that will promote a desire to explore, construct, interact, and understand during the learning process. When students have opportunities to participate in activities for which they feel a sense of ownership or control, they are more likely to become motivated to engage in the tasks (Renchler, 1992).

Motivational theory generally focuses on the processes that individuals choose in activities. It helps educational researchers explain student behaviors and choices dealing with engagement, persistence, help seeking and performance (Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006). Current researchers of motivation are trying to formulate theories about actions in which humans decide to participate, how they process information, and how they perform in different situations. Because there are so many complex concepts that have accompanied the study of individuals' choices, it is virtually impossible to have one concise definition of motivation upon which theorists agree. Motivation is a multidimensional construct that includes cognitive, environmental, and behavioral components but in educational research, motivation is defined in terms of cognitive and behavioral components (Anderson & Keith, 2001; Weiner, 1974).

Motivational theory embraces several dimensions that relate to education, including interest, self-esteem, effort and self-regulation (Harlen, 2003). It also

relates to self-efficacy, or how a person views himself as a learner. Motivation is needed for learning to take place and for students to feel satisfaction when they achieve so that the learning process will continue for the rest of the student's life (Amrein & Berliner, 2003).

Self-Efficacy Theory

Albert Bandura spent over 40 years focusing his research on how the mind works in representing, processing, organizing, and retrieving knowledge. His research has helped educational researchers with an interest in humanistic orientation to formulate an understanding of self-efficacy, which refers to one's beliefs about his/her capabilities to learn or perform at different levels of success. Research shows that self-efficacy influences academic motivation, learning, and achievement because one's sense of self-efficacy focuses on processing functions such as attention, encoding, retrieval, metacognition, and the use of strategies (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). Schunk (1995) and Bandura (1997) both believe that self-efficacy influences task choice, effort, persistence, resilience, and achievement such that students who doubt their self-efficacy participate less in class, do not persist when they encounter difficulties, and do not work as hard or achieve as well as classmates who feel efficacious towards their school coursework.

Some students may have the ability and learning strategies to achieve academically in an educational setting yet they fail to invest themselves fully in the expectancy of learning (Lumsden, 1994). Schunk concludes that many students who do not exert their full potential in class may lack a sense of self-

efficacy for learning because even though they possess the ability to be successful, they feel that learning is unimportant and do not want to invest time in the educational process (1995). Students' sense of self-efficacy can be derived from vicarious experiences or from observation of others such as instructors, parents, peers, or leaders/role models (Glynn, Aultman, & Owens, 2005). Educators can promote self-efficacy and influence a struggling learner's sense of self-efficacy by structuring situations for students who will raise their beliefs in their capabilities. When educators provide opportunities for students to be perseverant in overcoming obstacles that are neither too difficult nor too easy, the students learn that when they face difficulty, sustained effort usually gains success (Tuckman, 1999). Mastery experiences have the greatest impact on students' sense of self-efficacy because successful experiences increase students' motivation and reinforce students to improve their academic achievement (Bandura, 1994, 2000; Glynn et al; 2005). "The more learners believe they will succeed on a task, the more likely they are to try" (Margolis & McCabe, 2006, p. 220). Students experience the essence of self-efficacy when they are motivated to engage in tasks, believe they can be successful in accomplishing tasks, and they possess the ability to judge the degree of their success on tasks (Margolis & McCabe 2006).

Self-efficacy has been associated with high achievement and is a strong predictor of academic performance (Altshuler & Schmautz, 2006; Harlen, 2003). It is a person's judgment of the extent to which they believe they are capable of succeeding (Harlen, 2003). Reduced academic self-concept and perception of

self-efficacy may cause students to become frustrated, lose interest in academics, and ultimately believe that they cannot successfully achieve in the educational system (Altshuler & Schmautz, 2006).

Attribution Theory

Bernard Weiner developed a framework for attribution theory that focuses on achievement and addresses how individuals interpret events and how these events relate to their thinking and behavior (1974). Weiner's attribution theory is widely applied in the educational field because of the strong relationship between self-concept and achievement that is associated with motivation (Kearsley, 1994).

Attribution theory helps to explain the difference between high and low achievers because of students' different beliefs and reactions to success and failure. Students with high self-esteem have high achievement and tend to attribute success to ability, which builds their pride and confidence. They view failure as a lack of effort or uncontrollable factor such as task difficulty that is not their fault, so failure does not affect their self-esteem. Conversely, low achieving students doubt their ability to be successful and they tend to view success as a factor that is beyond their control. So when low achievers are successful, it is often not rewarding because they feel it was luck or they were not responsible for the success; thus, it does not increase their confidence or pride.

Self-Determination Theory

For over three decades Edward Deci and Richard Ryan have researched human behaviors based upon choice of actions and the degree to which people

participate in specific situations. The authors' self-determination theory is based upon human motivation with a focus on personality development within social contexts. Ryan and Deci's research shows most people are active, curious, engaged and self-motivated suggesting that human nature consists of positive features. However, when the human spirit is diminished or crushed through experiences, individuals become apathetic, alienated, and unfortunately tend to reject growth (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory shares the concepts of basic needs theory found in Maslow's Hierarchical Model that states that the fulfillment of hierarchical needs is related to an organism's survival and wellbeing. Self-determination theory assumes that humans are active and have a built-in tendency to grow and develop psychologically. Humans strive to master challenges so that the inner self is satisfied; however, this typically happens only when psychological and safety needs have been met and all biological needs are functioning properly. Self-determination theory asserts that humans have intrinsic motivation, which is a tendency to learn and be creative because it is enjoyable, and self-regulation, which affirms how self-motivation is used towards external and social values (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the educational field, self-determination theory suggests that students are intrinsically motivated and engaged in learning when they are challenged and given immediate feedback, when they feel supported, and when they are allowed to explore, experiment, and devise their own solutions to problems (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Studies about self-determination theory have found when students believe they are performing tasks simply for external rewards they tend to think of themselves as less

competent learners, they experience greater anxiety, and they perform more poorly than if they were performing tasks to increase and monitor their learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Motivating students is a great concern for educators, administrators and parents in this era of high stakes testing. One of the main concerns in education is how stakeholders can assist students to become or stay motivated in school so they attain their education and become successful citizens in society. Motivational theories help educational researchers understand why students make certain choices such as task engagement, persistence, and performance in academics. These theories also help researchers identify cognitive behaviors relating to problem solving and decision-making (Meece et al., 2006). Motivational theories have been associated with academic achievement and have helped researchers analyze and focus on students' intentions or reasons for engaging in learning activities. These theories provide educators and researchers knowledge of the importance of understanding all students' needs so learning environments and activities are provided that promote student motivation (Meece et al., 2006). Fostering students' motivation to learn and engaging them in meaningful learning activities are crucial in promoting life-long learners who graduate from high school.

Literature Review

Dropout Factors

High school dropout rates are inordinately high in the United States; this profoundly impacts the nation, the individual states, and local communities.

When individuals drop out of high school, it creates a loss of productive workers, reduces earnings in the workforce, lowers generated revenues such as federal and state taxes, and creates higher costs associated with social services such as health care, incarceration, and government assistance (Bridgeland, Dilulio Jr., & Morison, 2006). The relatively high dropout figures rank the United States 17th in the world among developed countries for graduation completion rates (Bridgeland et al., 2006). They are a strong indicator that students are inadequately prepared for entry into the labor force, thus creating future shortages of properly skilled and educated workers (De Sousa & Gebremedhin, 2003). In 1989, President George H. W. Bush and the nation's governors created goals for education; one of these goals proposed the graduation rates of students should be at 90% by the year 2000 (Barton, 2005). In 2000, the graduation rates were still a long way from 90%, so President George W. Bush implemented a component of NCLB that allocates $1 billion to schools to ensure all children receive a highly qualified education from highly qualified teachers (Hansen, 2006). In 2002, Congress enacted the Dropout Prevention Act, which provides money to schools for dropout prevention and re-entry programs as well as grants rewarding schools that reduce their dropout rates (Hansen, 2006). Critics of these mandates suggest that since there are monetary rewards for improving graduation rates and test scores, an unintended effect of the accountability mandates might be to "push out" low achieving students (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Such students might elect alternative educational placements, such as the General Educational Development (GED) program, a

choice that many believe would increase the number of students who will be left behind (Barton, 2005). When students are referred to the GED program, they are not classified as dropouts so it helps the school when they are feeling the pressure of test-based accountability (Barton, 2005).

The industrial era established a vast work force made up of blue collar, working class migrants and immigrants who did not demand a formal education for individuals to earn a successful living (Library of Congress, 2002). In the current age of technology, the postindustrial economy is switching toward service careers and away from manufacturing, therefore decreasing the demand for unskilled labor (Barton, 2005; Lan & Lanthier, 2003). This shift requires future job seekers to possess technical and marketable skills and educational training that can only be received by enrolling in college or vocational training programs. Therefore, a high school diploma is a necessity for many jobs (Davis, 2006; Hansen, 2006; Vanderslice, 2004). Students who drop out of high school have little prospect of securing a good income (Vanderslice, 2004). They become lost in the world of employment or may be left out of the work force altogether (Barton, 2005; Lan & Lanthier, 2003).

James Truslow Adams discussed the American Dream in his book *The Epic of America,* which states the belief that anyone can work hard and achieve success (Library of Congress, 2002). In today's world teenagers are inundated with images of celebrities who have found their American dreams without obtaining a college education and in many instances without obtaining a high school education (Hansen, 2006). Changes in the labor force have increased the

importance of educational attainment in today's society making high school completion an expectation for young people (Kaufman, 2001). Today's high schools have a large effect on how well students make their transition to adulthood. When students drop out of school, they are prevented from gaining valuable educational information and personal assistance needed to develop future opportunities of success in the work force (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Unfortunately there is a significant transformation of dropouts being younger and less educated than in the past (Barton, 2005). In 2003, 1.1 million 16 to 19 year-olds and 2.4 million 20-25 year-olds did not have a high school diploma and were not enrolled in school (United States Bureau of Labor & Statistics, 2003). Only 40% of the 16 to 19 year olds were employed, with more than 40% not even in the labor force or looking for work (Barton, 2005).

Process of Dropping Out

Dropping out of school is a process that often begins well before a student arrives at the moment when they decide to leave school (Alexander et al; 2001; Barton, 2005; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Lee & Burkam 2003; Robertson, 2006). The majority of children begin school enthusiastic about learning, but enjoyment of school, academic self-image, and compliance with school rules and procedures tend to decline for some children as they advance in their school careers (Alexander et al., 2001). Dropping out begins as early as first grade (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Some students deviate from the social norms of school behavior, and then become academically disengaged (Alexander et al., 2001).

These behaviors are followed by ceasing to participate in school activities, alienation of self from the school, and finally disconnection from the school community altogether by dropping out (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). Students view dropping out as an escape from an environment that psychologically punishes them because it is a daily reminder of their weaknesses. Students slowly "fade out" of school until they ultimately decide that dropping out is the solution to other problems that have originated much earlier in their lives (Bachman, 1972 as cited in Alexander et al., 2001).

Lan and Lanthier investigated changes in personal attributes of high school dropouts based upon the National Education Longitudinal Survey of 1988 and identified a chain of negative events that happen to students who eventually drop out (2003). Of the nine different variables associated with dropping out, students' academic failure was identified as the most significant predictor of dropping out. The students in the cohort were interviewed in their 8th grade year and their academic performance was already more than a half standard deviation below the national average. Performance related to other variables was at or not much below the national average. As the cohort members progressed and were interviewed in their 10th grade year, results showed that the students' motivation in schoolwork, relationship with teachers, and perceptions of school and students had declined significantly. Their scores, previously near the national average in 8th grade, were significantly lower than the national average in 10th grade. Most of the cohort tended to have an external locus of control, believing that happenings in their lives were the result of factors they could not control.

Because the students thought they were treated unfairly and that the schools did not help meet their needs, they eventually alienated themselves from school activities and ultimately dropped out (Lan & Lanthier, 2003).

Consequences and Factors Associated with Dropping Out

Lack of a high school diploma puts degreeless individuals in disadvantaged positions when they are competing with more educated applicants in the labor force (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). Dropping out of high school is followed by a host of poor outcomes. Dropouts struggle economically because of insecure employment opportunities, which generate low lifetime earnings and many times result in unemployment (Vanttaja & Järvinen, 2006). The average full-time employed dropout between the ages of 25-34 struggles just to hover above the poverty level when supporting a family. His/her annual earnings are approximately $10,000 less than a high school graduate (Barton, 2005). Most dropouts are hired for low-paying jobs without benefits and they are unable to support a family independently (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Lee & Burkam, 2003). The economy must spend billions of dollars to provide the social funds that pay for government assistance programs (Barton, 2005). Female dropouts have children at younger ages and are more likely to become single parents than female graduates (Hansen, 2006). There is also an increased possibility that children of dropouts will follow the same cycle as their parents (Thornburgh, 2006). Dropping out is related to a high risk of possible involvement in criminal activities leading to high incarceration rates (Bowman, 2005; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Croninger & Lee, 2001; De Sousa & Gebremedhin, 2003; Hansen, 2006;

Lan & Lanthier, 2003). Dropouts are a drain on society and each individual costs the nation approximately $260,000 over his/her lifetime. Since most dropouts are unemployed, they do not contribute proceeds to local, state, or federal taxes causing revenues at multi levels to be lower (Rouse, 2005 as cited in AEE, 2007). When young people step outside of education without graduating they condemn themselves to an economically and socially marginalized future (Vanttaja & Järvinen, 2006).

Characteristics of Dropouts

Dropping out of high school is the ultimate form of educational withdrawal. Research over the past 25 years has shown risk factors that educators can be aware of to identify students who are likely to be at risk of dropping out (Croninger & Lee, 2001). The risk factors that many studies have identified as characteristics of dropout students can be related to academic risks or social risks (Zvoch, 2006). Academic risks refer to characteristics of students' performances in the school environment such as grades or marks on tasks, attendance, behavior or conduct, and educational expectations (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Academic factors can be identified, monitored, and modified by educators and administrators very early in a student's school career (Barton, 2005). Social risks refer to characteristics involving students' environmental factors such as family stability, communities in which they live, and personal qualities pertaining to the student (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). Young people who face economic and social hardships are very dependent upon schools for support and guidance (Croninger & Lee, 2003). The quality of students' relationship with teachers is an

important predictor of educational success and whether or not students will complete their schooling to graduate without interruption (Alexander et al., 2001; Croninger & Lee, 2003). When students exhibit academic or social risk factors, schools should engage in practices that create favorable conditions that will support these students. Schools can be the catalyst that initiates the process of students veering off or continuing on the path to graduation (Lee & Burkham, 2003).

Students who manifest academic risk factors view school as an irrelevant experience with no application to the real world (Smyth & Hattan, 2001). Several research studies have identified low reading and math achievement scores, high absences, discipline problems, low motivation to complete school tasks, low educational expectations, negative perceptions of school, and grade retention as risk factors that are associated with a student's likelihood of dropping out of high school (Barton, 2005; Croninger & Lee, 2003; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Lee & Burkham, 2003; Vanderslice, 2004; Van Dorn, Bowen, & Blau, 2006). Lan and Lanthier reported that low academic performance on course grades and standardized test scores from as early as first grade were significant predictors of high school dropout (2003). Some students dropout because of academic challenges, but most dropouts' responses concerning their reasons for leaving school related to negative perceptions (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Some responses included the feeling that educators at the schools were inadequate in providing support and interest in problems the students were experiencing (Lan & Lanthier, 2003).

Numerous studies have been completed that associate grade retention, regardless of when it occurred, as a significant predictor of dropping out (Alexander et al., 2001; Entwisle, Alexander, Olson, 2005; Temple, 2000; Vanderslice, 2004; Zvoch, 2006). Zvoch found odds of dropping out for an overage student, relative to grade level, were more than 35 times greater than for a student of average age for their grade level (2006). Alexander found that students were fives times more likely to drop out when they were off time relative to grade level as they made a transition from middle school to high school (2001). When students are retained they are off time on the path to graduation (Alexander et al., 2001). Being off time enhances the pressure during the vital transition from middle school to high school (Entwisle et al., 2005). When off time students reach 9th grade and do not perform well academically, they view the dependent student role as confining and uncomfortable (Alexander et al., 2001). Most off time students in 9th grade have had 11 years of schooling (Alexander et al., 2001). They feel they are ready to shed the student role and assume adult roles that seem more attractive than the student role (Entwisle et al., 2005). Research has shown that students who choose adult responsibilities over graduation are not fully prepared to accept the responsibilities that accompany adult roles. They may become single parents at a very young age, workers in low-paying jobs and periodically unemployed with no health care benefits, in need of government assistance, and incarcerated for participation in criminal activities (Alexander et al., 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Hansen, 2006; AEE, 2007; Russel, 2003).

Social risk factors such as ethnicity, gender, language spoken fluently in the home, family income, parental support and level of parents' educational attainment are correlated with academic achievement (Alexander et al., 2001; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Temple, 2000). Predetermined family factors have a significant effect on students' choices to complete school or dropout before graduation (Vanderslice, 2004). Even when students have access to caring and supportive educators and administrators who can influence students at risk of dropping out to complete their education, environmental factors may overwhelm students so they feel that the only choice they have is to leave school before graduating (Croninger & Lee, 2001). A disturbing proportion of students identified as having multiple social risk factors such as, living in a low-income family, speaking English as a second language, or lacking parental support for educational attainment, are likely to dropout of school for non-academic reasons (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Family socio-economic status (SES) level has a strong correlationship to the likelihood of dropping out (Golden, Kist, Trehan, & Padak, 2005; Van Dorn et al., 2006; Zvoch, 2006). Despite the fact that students from low SES families may perform well academically, have self-confidence, be engaged in school, and have parental support, they are still vulnerable to the risk of dropping out for non-academic reasons (Alexander et al., 2001). Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani found students' attitudes towards school had a significant impact on the likelihood of dropping out (2001). Children from low SES families who have parental support and positive attitudes towards school are 25 % less likely to dropout than students from low SES families who have negative attitudes

towards school and do not have parental support (Alexander et al., 2001). Students from all SES levels who receive high scores on achievement tests and perform well academically are associated with lower dropout rates than students with low scores on achievement tests and poor academic performance (Alexander et al., 2001). Some assume that ethnicity is related to the propensity to dropout. However, a number of studies have found that whites are not statistically more likely to graduate than blacks or Hispanics when variables such as SES are controlled (Alexander et al., 2001; Cairns et al., 1989; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Lee & Burkham, 2003; Mishel & Roy, 2006; Van Dorn et al., 2006).

Dropout Rate Data Collection

The oldest education data collected at the federal level is the proportion of the population that has successfully completed high school (Kaufman, 2001). The collection of data on dropout and completion rates is supported by limited resources, so it doesn't provide extensive information and the limited dropout data leave many questions unanswered (Bracey, 2006). There are two main ways that dropout rates are gathered: event rates, which describe a proportion of dropout students, and status rates, which provide cumulative records on the population of dropout students. To obtain these data, schools complete forms that include their figures for dropout and completion rates and send them to their district offices. The districts then report district figures to the states and states forward them to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), which reports them in the Common Core of Data (Bracey, 2006). Because of the

margin of error that is associated with each step of the reporting process, large apparent differences among the data make it statistically unreliable (Kaufman et al., 2001). There is not a standardized formula for calculating dropout and completion rates so different methods are used to calculate the rates and each states calculations are based on different populations (Kaufman, 2001). Not only do the rates differ significantly from one another, but also the estimates are usually inaccurate due to sampling error, which makes the rates very hard to compare from one state to another (Barton, 2005; Kaufman, 2001). Until a data system is created that is standardized so that all states will collect and report data consistently, completion rates will continue to be inflated to disguise dropout rates (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Accountability for NCLB includes completion rates as part of the accountability system, so many schools are reluctant to classify a student as dropout when they have many other categories available in which they can categorize a student who is no longer enrolled (Barton, 2005).

Dropout and completion rates are collected through 3 main sources, the Current Population Survey (CPS) collected by the Bureau of Census, the Common Core of Data compiled by the NCES, and data obtained from the longitudinal studies program of NCES and Bureau of Labor and Statistics that are completed about once every 10 years (Kaufman, 2001). The CPS shows a general decline in dropout status and event rates from the early 1970s until 1990; the rates have remained constant since that time (Kaufman, 2001). The completion rates mirrored the dropout rates, showing an increase until 1990 and then remaining steady at around 85 % (Kaufman, 2001). Critics of the CPS have

much to say about its inadequacies. Surveys have large sampling errors; the CPS is a household survey, not an individual survey, rendering it unrealistic and devoid of detail, and; it overstates graduation rates because it omits the prison populations, half of whose members lack high school degrees (Alexander et al., 2001; Barton, 2005; Hansen, 2006; Mishel & Roy, 2006; Russel, 2003). There have also been changes over the years to the questionnaire that is used to obtain the data, so the different designs make year-to-year comparisons difficult (Kaufman, 2001). What many statisticians neglect to note is that the CPS doesn't include data from military personnel, but includes immigrants who have arrived in the country after their school-age years; the latter populations, account for many of the dropout rates (Mishel & Roy, 2006). The Census Bureau has begun a new survey, the American Community Survey (ACS), which has better coverage than the CPS because it includes prison and military populations and also includes residency in prior years and citizenship status (Mishel & Roy, 2006; United States Census Bureau, 2007).

The Common Core of Data (CCD) represents each state's dropout counts but has the tendency to overstate the dropout rate because it includes immigrant students, it's calculation rate is based upon the number of diplomas awarded divided by the enrollment of 9^{th} graders three years earlier, and students receiving a GED are labeled as dropouts (Kaufman, 2001). This calculation yields low graduation rates because it is not based upon entering 9^{th} graders and the denominator of the formula is exaggerated (Mishel & Roy, 2006). As a whole, the United States has about 13 % more students enrolled in 9^{th} grade

than in 8th grade the previous year due to the bulge of students taking 5 or more years to complete high school (Barton, 2005; Mishel & Roy, 2006). The event rates are high because many schools have no-shows at the beginning of a school year for whom they cannot account nor track; these students are calculated as dropouts in the CCD (Kaufman, 2001).

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) began longitudinal surveys in 1966 and continued them in 1979 and 1997; the survey addresses a wide range of events including school and career transitions. The NLYS survey that began in 1997 reported on adults, including prisoners, age 20-22 that showed improvement for high school completion rates for every race and gender group since 1984, except for black males that showed steady rates (Mishel & Roy, 2006; Van Dorn et al., 2006). The 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS 88), conducted by NCES, questioned students in the 8th grade about school, work, and home; the survey was followed up in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000. In 1994, two years after on-time students in the 1990 survey should have graduated, 82 % of the study cohort had completed high school (Mishel & Roy, 2006). Educational Testing Services (ETS) reported an 18 % increase of young adults, mainly teenagers, obtaining a GED from 1990 – 2000; the degree is not considered a substitute for a regular diploma for those seeking success in later life (Barton, 2005; Kaufman, 2001).

Government mandates disclose the nation's concern for the dropout epidemic that is affecting approximately 3.8 million 16 – 24 year olds (Hansen, 2006). Yet many perceive that the emphasis of high school reform on testing

and accountability for improved student achievement does not meet the needs of all students (Bridgeland et al., 2005). Skills and education are becoming more important in the labor market; therefore, graduates with more education earn higher wages and create more competition in employment for dropouts (Mishel & Roy, 2006).

Retention, Social Promotion and High Stakes Testing

Retention

Since 1900 there have been numerous studies of grade retention with over 400 alone presented in professional publications between 1990 and 1999 (Jimerson, 1999, 2001; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002). Many of the studies prior to 1970 are limited by inadequate comparison groups, limited analytic focus, or limited time frame (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD], 2005). A few well-designed studies have found an academic benefit associated with retention of students but the results show that the gains were limited to performance for the year in which the retention occurred and had diminished altogether within three years (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). Most research shows that retention offers no academic advantage whatsoever (Vanderslice, 2004); in most cases it causes more harm than good (Alexander et al., 2001). One of the most devastating of the effects is the increased likelihood that students who are retained will dropout (Alexander et al., 2001; Entwisle et al., 2005; Temple, Reynolds, & Meidel, 2000; Reynolds, Temple, & Ou, 2004; Vanderslice, 2004; Zvoch, 2006). No matter which grade level the retention occurs, it drastically increases the likelihood that a child will

drop out of school (Alexander et al., 2001; National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 1998). Data indicate that retained children are among the lowest achieving students in their grades four to five years after retention and that they continuously slip farther and farther behind (Alexander et al., 2001).

Two significant studies in the 1970s identified dropout predictors, with grade retention being the most powerful predictor. Results concluded that dropouts were more likely to have been retained during 1st, 2nd or 3rd grade than high school graduates (Lloyd, 1978; Stroup & Robins, 1972). Five studies during the 1980s found grade retention increased the risk of dropping out, was a strong predictor of dropping out, and demonstrated a clear relationship with high school dropout rates (Barro & Kolstad, 1987; Cairns et al., 1989; Fernandez, Paulsen, Hirano-Nakanishi, 1989; Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Tuck, 1989). During the 1990s, when school reform focused on the practice of retention, 10 studies examining dropout rates of high school students demonstrated that grade retention is associated with and a powerful predictor of the likelihood of dropping out (Alexander et al., 1997; Brooks-Ginn, Guo, & Furstenberg, 1993; Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997; Jimerson, 1999; Morris, Ehren, & Lenz, 1991; NCES, 1992; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Temple, Reynolds, & Meidel, 1998).

National retention data are not collected by the U.S. Department of Education so it is difficult to ascertain a national count of the number of students who are retained each year. The National Association of School Psychologists estimated in 1998 that about 15 % of students in the United States are retained

each year and this number has increased over the past 20 years by as much as 40 % (2003). That would indicate that anywhere from 30 % to 50 % of all students could be retained at least once before entering ninth grade (NASP, 1998). The Westchester Institute for Human Services Research indicates that 15 % to 19 % of U.S. students, approximately 2.5 million, are retained each year and in many large urban districts, close to 50 % of students who enter kindergarten are likely to be retained at least once (1998).

Results of many studies suggest that grade retention, when used as an intervention to address students' academic problems, is ineffective and predictive of dropout rates (Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002). However, there is a great divide between empirical evidence and general practices in public education because grade retention is widely used as a preferred alternative regardless of the negative effects (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). When a child is retained without additional support and assistance he/she is merely being placed in the same atmosphere that generated low achievement, poor adjustment, and academic failure (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Jimerson, Pletcher & Graydon, 2006). Unfortunately, there is conflict between policy makers and researchers on the practice of retention. Politicians have mandated policies to implement standardized testing with accountability for promotional purposes, which opposes evidence gathered from research suggesting that retention is not effective (Frey, 2005; Gleason, Kwok, & Hughes, 2007; Silberglitt, Jimerson, Burns, & Appleton, 2006).

Retention does not motivate students to learn more or become high achievers (Amrein & Berliner, 2003). Requiring students to repeat a grade is counterproductive and results in little or no improvement in achievement (Goldberg, 2004; Marchant, 2004). Holding students back has devastating consequences, which are associated with an increased likelihood of dropping out (Goldberg, 2004; Marchant, 2004).

Social Promotion

The negative effects of retention should not become an argument for social promotion (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Social promotion has been described as the "bimodal choice" when retention is not an option (Frey, 2005). The U.S. Department of Education confirms that social promotion can have some of the same negative effects (e.g. increased drop out rates, lower self-esteem, or creating a gap in achievement) as retention (Alexander et al., 2003). "When students are promoted and they are not adequately prepared for the next grade level, it breeds frustration and low self-esteem on the part of those unable to do the work. Over time the low performing students fall further and further behind and they will become increasingly inattentive and disruptive. When this happens learning cannot take place under any conditions" (Bergman & Willever, 1999, ¶ 9).

Opponents of social promotion claim that schools use the practice of social promotion to hide school failure, and that the practice shows that the schools are not being required to address the academic needs of all their students (Frey, 2005). When social promotion is practiced, students are misled

to believe that hard work, effort, and achievement do not mean anything (Alexander et al., 2003). Students become frustrated when they are placed in grades where they cannot do the work. Teachers are forced to deal with unprepared students and must struggle to plan for them as well as the prepared students (Allen, 2002). Parents are led to believe that their children are receiving an adequate education and that they are equipped for college or the workforce (Alexander et al., 2001). A particularly negative impact of social promotion is the production of graduates who lack the necessary skills for employment in a competitive society (Riley, Smith, & Peterson, 1999). Businesses and colleges spend millions of dollars on training courses and remedial classes to help students learn the skills they did not develop in school (Vanttaja & Järvinen, 2006).

Promotion, ideally, should certify that a student has mastered the rigorous skills and content of the required curriculum (Allen, 2002). When students are promoted or receive high school diplomas, the public and future employers are under the impression those students mastered the skills, knowledge essential to work, and preparation for successful participation in society (Thompson, 1999). If schools continue to send forth ill prepared adults without the proper skills, then the public's and employers' faith in the public school system will falter because there will be no value for the high school diploma (Thomas, 2000). Social promotion creates conditions of a growing population of undereducated adults; this results in lower economic productivity of workers, increased need for social services, higher rates of crime, and other undesirable behaviors (Bowman, 2005;

Bridgeland et al., 2006; Croninger & Lee, 2001; De Sousa & Gebremedhin, 2003; Hansen, 2006; Lan & Lanthier, 2003;). Moving students ahead who are ill prepared for what awaits them is not good educational practice (Alexander et al., 2001).

Research has shown that almost every decade can be described as a "retention decade" or a "social promotion" decade, depending upon which president was in office and what his belief was about the educational system (Grissom & Shepard, 1989). When students are retained or socially promoted, there is typically an absence of specific remedial strategies to identify or focus on the student's areas of weakness (Allen, 2004). Extra resources are needed for teachers to call upon when they first notice students are experiencing problems (Denton, 2001). Grade retention and social promotion are both undesirable choices, but schools can reduce the need for either one of these options by using alternative approaches (Bowman, 2005; Jimerson et al., 2006). Social promotion and retention are not going to solve the problems that schools have in meeting the needs of students who they fail to serve (Deschenes, Cuban & Tyack, 2001).

High Stakes Testing and Dropout Rates

Since the middle of the 20th century, educational policy has focused primarily on two reform structures. From 1960 to 1980 an emphasis was placed on access and equity for all, but after several decades the nation's scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed stagnant or falling scores (Smith, 2005). Following continuous low scores on international comparative tests ranking the United

States very low among major developed countries, *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983 (Smith, 2005). The document condemned the 'rising tide of mediocrity,' that was eroding the American public school system (Smith, 2005). The Commission responsible for the report recommended that more instructional time and assignments be given to the 'lazy' students and more subject matter should be added to improve the watered down curriculum that teachers were following. Traditionally the federal government had avoided direct influence in educational initiatives, but after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, educational decision-making began to shift from local level to state and federal levels (Hursh, 2005).

The current educational reform began in the early 1980s and focused on high expectations and standards (Smith, 2005). In 1996, when President Clinton gave his *Goals 2000* speech, he announced that it was time to end social promotion and demanded that educators stop promoting students who did not master grade-level material to the next grade level (Frey, 2005). He also urged that educators require students to meet rigorous academic standards at key transition points so students earn their way to the next grade level, not just be present and accumulate time in school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003). Goals 2000 was based on the premise that higher standards and higher expectations from students and teachers would produce better academic performance from the students (Riley, Smith, & Peterson,1999). Its main goal was to provide federal grant money to states that created plans outlining their strategies for enhancement of teaching and learning that would ensure students

were mastering basic and advanced skills from the core curriculum (O'Neil, 2003). However, Goals 2000 did not contain specific guidance on how to implement the strategies, nor did it issue penalties to schools for low performance on standardized test scores (O'Neil, 2003).

In 2001 President George W. Bush's contribution to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, widely known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), presented a plan to reform education through, among other requirements, mandated assessment of content standards in language arts, math, and science. NCLB requires states to annually assess students in reading and math grades in each of grades 3-8 and once during grades 10-12; science once during grades 3-5, once during grade 6-9, and once during grades 10-12; and allow a sample of students in 4^{th} and 8^{th} grade to participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) each year (Cortiella, 2005; Smith, 2005). Each state is allowed to design its own assessments, but each assessment must produce student results that are comparable from year to year (NCLB).

Disaggregated assessment data is reported to parents and the public in subgroups of race, gender, English language proficiency, disability, and socio-economic status (Carlson, 2004; Goldberg, 2004). States then analyze and monitor testing data each year to ensure Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) was met. To demonstrate proficient AYP, achievement gaps in the all the disaggregated groups must close or narrow by a prescribed amount, and 95% of all students must be assessed each year. Cohort gain does not suffice as the AYP metric (Smith, 2005). Schools are evaluated and deemed successful

based upon how much the aggregated and disaggregated scores exceed a threshold, which slowly increases over time (Hursh, 2005). A school can still pass, even if its scores fall, as long as the scores exceed the threshold (Hursh, 2005). Likewise, a passing school can fail even if improvement was made on test scores if the scores remain below the threshold (Hursh, 2005).

The requirements of NCLB that set it apart from all other federally mandated educational reform acts are the penalties for schools not meeting the threshold requirements. The most significant penalty is the decreasing of federal funding for schools with low test scores (Hursh, 2005). Federal funds in most states only contribute 7% towards a state's total educational budget; however, these states are not the ones that contain schools continuously performing below their expected thresholds (Smith, 2005). Approximately 90% of America's 15,000 school districts receive Title I funding under the Elementary and Secondary Act because their student populations include children from disadvantaged areas (Ravitch in Smith, 2005). The states where many of the disadvantaged school districts are located rely much more heavily upon federal funding for the state's educational budget (Smith, 2005). For example, federal funds provided to Mississippi account for 14-16% of the total educational budget (Mississippi Department of Education, 2007). States that serve disadvantaged students are mandated to provide interventions for improvement on test scores by providing tutoring for students, bringing private agencies into schools for consulting, providing additional professional development for administrators and teachers and, if needed, providing transportation for students to go to other

schools or agencies where they can receive an adequate education (Hursh, 2005). The incongruity of the penalties that require disadvantaged districts to provide costly interventions without receiving funds to pay for the interventions undermine all efforts of educational equity that NCLB was designed to diminish (Hursh, 2005).

NCLB builds on standards, testing and accountability with aims to improve education, especially for students who are disadvantaged or at-risk of failure (Hursh, 2005). The concept of accountability linked with standardized testing is not new in educational reform. NCLB is a combination of earlier legislation, including statewide accountability procedures and testing systems. The scope and potential impact of the sanctions may result in large numbers of schools being labeled as failing even though they are demonstrating improvement in test scores while schools labeled as passing have declining test scores (Smith, 2005). In essence, mandates of NCLB require schools to rely upon assessment practices that are inherently and increasingly discriminatory (Altshuler & Schmautz, 2006). There is growing research and data that show the current emphasis on high stakes testing in the NCLB era has exacerbated the pre-existing dropout crisis and may provide incentives for students of minority groups or low socioeconomic status to drop out rather than complete the testing requirements for high school graduation (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006).

NCLB does not require administration of high school exit exams, however, some states and districts are requiring passing scores to graduate, or in some instances requiring additional tests amid the state mandated tests (Guzenhauser,

2006; O'Neill, 2003). The 10 states with the lowest graduation completion rates for students in grades 9-12 administer high stakes tests (Amrein & Berliner, 2003). Eighty-eight percent of the states that administer exit exams have dropout rates that are 4-6% higher than schools that do not attach stakes to their testing (Amrein & Berliner, 2003). In 2002 The American Council on Education reported a decrease in the average age of students taking the GED exam in 63% of states that implement high stakes tests (Amrein & Berliner, 2003). High stakes testing is deemed responsible for an increase in dropout rates of over 300% for the past five years in Boston (Marchant, 2004). Studies have been conducted that associate unintended negative outcomes for students, teachers, curriculum, and schools when high stakes testing is used as a means to improve student achievement (Laitsch, 2006; Marchant, 2004; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2005).

The legislative mandates that have arisen in the past 25 years have been attempts to correct the educational crisis of mediocre student achievement that has been reported since the early 1980s (McCaslin, 2006). Each mandate offers its solutions to help education raise its expectations of students and increase students' abilities so that they can participate in an increasingly demanding and technologically complex world (Stone & Lane, 2003). However, the suggestions in all of the mandates included two specific interventions for struggling students, retention and social promotion (Stone & Lane, 2003). The reform efforts in education appear to operate on the assumption that students must acculturate to the current form of schooling instead of catering the schooling to the culture of the students (Altshuler & Schmautz, 2006; Howard, 2005).

Impacts of High Stakes Testing

High stakes testing supporters argue that teaching from a standardized curriculum and measuring what students have learned in a standardized method ensures that an equal education is being provided for all students (Howard, 2005). By attaching accountability to the standardized testing, supporters presume that a standardized curriculum of skills and knowledge are appropriate for every student, with little thought for the wide range of backgrounds, interests, abilities or cultures that make each student individual (Flinders, 2005). Testing with accountability contradicts years of research on best educational practices that affirm students construct knowledge and understanding through social and cultural contexts (Jones, 2004).

Assessment was originally designed as a tool to help teachers determine if students were learning what teachers were teaching (Harlen, 2003; Willams, 2005). Taking standardized achievement tests does little to improve the knowledge or skills of students and is merely a demonstration of narrow and superficial knowledge that students forget quickly after they have received a passing score on the test (Goldberg, 2005; Marchant, 2004). Without feedback on students' responses, the results are of limited utility in helping teachers gain knowledge on how to provide individualized instruction to strengthen student weaknesses and meaningless to students except for the association of meeting a cutoff score to avoid negative consequences (Goldberg, 2005; Marchant, 2004). With elevated interest on standardized testing, the individual student has now

become a normalized subject with a set of attributes assessed by its deviation from the norm (Foucault as listed in Gunzenhauser, 2006).

Research on high stakes testing yields two findings; teachers tend to narrow the scope of the curriculum and they engage in fewer innovative teaching strategies in order to spend more time on direct instruction (Marchant, 2004). Despite what educators believe or have learned from their professional training, they comply with the demands of federal and state mandates by gearing their curriculum to focus only on material that will be on the tests (Guzenhauser, 2006). Class time is built around practice tests, usually referred to as drill and kill, which seem to become a long list of things to master (Flinders, 2005; Harlen, 2003). Heavy reliance on test preparation materials with bubble-in worksheets that reflect standardized tests supplants meaningful and creative curricula that focus on arts, inquiry learning, non-tested subjects, and issues that are vital for human interaction (Allen, 2004; Craig, 2004; Gunzenhauser, 2006; Howard, 2005). Because educators are under so much pressure to raise test scores and their classrooms have become test-oriented, they often neglect complex subject matter and enriched curricula that help students become lifelong, self-directed learners (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Harlen, 2003; Hursh, 2005). In 2006, The Center on Education Policy reported that 71% of elementary schools had reduced instructional time in other subject areas so that more emphasis could be given to reading and math (Liston, Whitcomb, & Borco, 2007). In 1997, based upon teacher interviews and classroom reports, teachers in the states of Kentucky and North Carolina reported that new instructional strategies were

utilized but the strategies had no depth or complexity that changed the instruction meaningfully (Stone & Lane, 2003). By narrowing and simplifying the curriculum so it matches the standardized tests, educators have less time to create constructive lessons utilizing hands-on materials which help students develop in-depth knowledge (Brimijoin, 2005). The current testing era also eliminates democratic habits of heart and mind that are necessary to actively engage students and hold them responsible for learning how to become active members in a democratic society (Howard, 2005). Thus educators and schools are narrowing their range of learning for which they hold students accountable, which in fact means expecting less rigor and instruction that is counterproductive to student learning (Craig, 2004; Gunzenhauser, 2006).

Recent trends in education that emphasize high stakes testing focus on the comparison and ranking of students, teachers, and schools rather than the quality of teaching and education that is occurring within the schools (Williams, 2005). Teacher quality is being narrowly defined based upon student achievement scores; the more the students achieve, the better the teacher quality (Liston et al., 2007). Important decisions about districts, schools, and staff in the schools are being made based upon raw aggregated test scores ignoring the differences that exist among students (Marchant, 2004). However, empirical evidence has not demonstrated any enhancement in student achievement based upon high stakes testing (Stone & Lane, 2003). Since testing accountability has been mandated, NAEP scores have not shown any significant improvement and 67% of the states utilizing high stakes testing

programs reported decreases in ACT performance (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Liston et al., 2007). The same states that reported decreases in achievement also reported lower participation from students in Accelerated Programs (AP), lower student participation in ACT and SAT testing programs, and decrease in overall academic achievement of college-bound students (Amrein & Berliner, 2003). Nichols, Glass, & Berliner (2005) conducted a study to measure the impact of high stakes testing pressure on student achievement and found that the pressure had no influence on student academic performance. Schools should be held internally accountable for providing students with an equitable education, but this must be accomplished by using much more than standardized test scores (Jones, 2004).

Some capable students fall short in their education because the standards that are tested do not match their culture or communities and their learning styles are overlooked for teaching strategies that focus on raising test scores (Allen, 2004). These capable students become known as low achievers who minimize their efforts and begin to respond by guessing or randomly choosing answers on testing format material because they are not conducive to the test-oriented classroom (Harlen, 2003). When students are denied the opportunities to take control of their own learning they become bored, lethargic and eventually loose their natural love of learning (Amrein & Berliner, 2003). Students who are in danger of performing poorly on high stakes tests are encouraged to transfer to alternative programs such as GED or are held back to receive more instruction before taking the high stakes tests (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). Recent research

has shown that retention and focus on better test scores, rather than focus on educational opportunities, increases the number of students who leave school early without a high school diploma (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Flinders, 2005; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006).

Assessment with accountability has greatly intensified under NCLB with the assumption that student learning will improve due to rewards and sanctions based upon test scores (Flinders, 2005; Gunzenhauser, 2006). Educational reform mandates are designed with the assumption that all students meet on equal footing when they attend schools that teach and measure achievements based on a one-size-fits-all standardized method (Howard, 2005). Most of the reform efforts made in the past 25 years have tried to fit the student to the existing schooling system rather than adjust the schooling system that needs to be reformed for the student (Howard, 2005). The general expectation for the diverse student population to acculturate to school norms that have been in existence since the early 20th century will increase educational inequality and continue to send ill-prepared students into our global, technical, problem-solving world (Altshuler & Schmautz 2006; Howard, 2005; Hursh, 2005).

Standardized testing can be helpful as one measure of student success but it should not be the only basis of decision-making for students' educational future (Gunzenhauser, 2006). In the current high stakes testing era, standardized tests "have been given an elevated role that they cannot sustain" (Hancock, 2005, p. 23). Today's schools should not restrict their instruction to low level skills that can be measured easily and quickly on a bubble-in, multiple

choice test (Craig, 2004). A better means of evaluating schools is needed to provide an equal education for the wide array of students who make the nation diverse with culture (Gunzenhauser, 2006; Jones, 2004). Schools should be organized in ways that support student improvement with a worthwhile, powerful curriculum that can provide all students a quality education (Goldberg, 2005; Howard, 2005).

Policies Recommended in Lieu of Retention, Social Promotion and High Stakes Testing

High standards and alternative forms of accountability combined with multiple measures of assessment are appropriate motivators for reform that will improve student learning (Gunzenhauser, 2006; Harlen, 2003; Howard, 2005). A range of assessment strategies that focus on personal development with self-evaluation methods and summative assessment with feedback to improve student learning and achievement would reduce the role of external accountability from state and federal mandates (Harlen, 2003). Students should be offered a curriculum with a large range of subjects including moral, social, cultural, and spiritual along with core academic subjects (Harlen, 2003). Schools should be structured as learning communities with input from members of the larger community, educators, parents, and students who establish the purpose, value of education, and the goals and mission for their educational institutions (Altshuler & Schmautz, 2006; Gunzenhauser, 2006). Educators should be professionally trained to base their teaching practices on students' needs and to make accurate decisions to improve student learning that support students'

abilities, interests, prior experiences and cultural backgrounds (Brimijoin, 2005; Jones, 2004). Serious efforts should be made by school administrators and educators to have high expectations for all students while providing nurturing, motivated and committed leadership based upon human judgment and focused on the needs of all learners (Jones, 2004).

Children learn differently and are at different developmental stages when they enter school yet they are forced into a common mold (Hill, 2005; Linn, 2001). "Although the goal of having the same high standards for all children is appealing, it is not clear that a single set of standards is appropriate for all students as they progress through high school" (Linn 2001 p. 33). Charles Darwin published findings in 1859 stating individual differences were fundamentally important to the future of the human species (Gallagher, 2000). The educational system needs to make a shift that engages learners embedded as members of diverse learning communities that are based on research of human development, socio-cultural theory, and constructivist learning (Gallagher, 2000). Educational practices such as smaller class sizes, better-trained teachers, attention to learning styles and pre-school programs have shown evidence of improvement in achievement (Howard, 2005; Kralovec & Buell, 2005). Comprehensive high schools that foster the talents of each student should design differentiated tracks that offer a range of opportunities including different time periods and different approaches to instruction tailored to individual needs and interests (Linn, 2003).

Having standards does not mean that expectations should be lowered or students should only aspire to pass standardized tests that marginalize the educational system (Williams, 2005). The essence of learning and teacher quality cannot be measured and judged by standardized assessment with accountability sanctions that punish and ridicule (Craig, 2004; Williams, 2005). The state and federal governments should research conditions, strategies and teaching methods that progress learning and promote educational success for all students and then design educational reforms to meet those criteria (Carlson, 2004).

Summary

It is important for educational researchers to understand why and how students best engage in academics so that outcomes associated with dropout can be prevented at early stages in students' lives. Past reform efforts focused on grade advancement practices usually decided upon at the end of a student's unsuccessful school year. Several strategies have been researched but currently there have been no solutions to fit the needs of all learners in America's educational system. Effective educational strategies are needed to provide all students the adequate education they deserve in a way that meets all students' goals and aspirations.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify relationship among retention, social promotion and dropout rates in Mississippi public schools. Permission was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Southern Mississippi to obtain the student level data (Appendix A).

Research Design

Student level data were obtained from the Mississippi Student Information System (MSIS) by the research and statistics division at the Mississippi Department of Education. The variables contained student numbers to identify each student, school district the student was enrolled in, school the student was enrolled in, gender, ethnicity, special education classification for each school year from 2002 -2005, free or reduced lunch for each school year from 2002-2005, attendance for each school year 2002-2005, promotion to next grade for each school year 2002-2005, test level for reading, language, and math for each school year 2002-2005, test score for reading, language, and math for each school year 2002-2005, enrollment status for 2006 – 2007 school year and enrollment status for 2007-2008 school year.

Participants

The study participants consisted of students who were enrolled in Mississippi Public schools and classified as 9th graders for the 2006-2007 school year. Student level data were gathered about students who had at least four

continuous years of data in MSIS and had opted for a regular or occupational high school diploma.

Procedures

This study included bivariate analysis and correlationships between independent variables of retention and social promotion and the dependent variable of dropout rates by analyzing student level data obtained from MSIS. Frequencies and descriptives were run to analyze the data and ensure that they were clean. The promotion variables for each school year obtained from MSIS were recoded from letter values of 'Y' for promoted and 'N' for retained in grade into numerical values of '0' for retained students and '1' for students who were promoted to the next grade. A crosstabulation was calculated using the recoded promotion variable for each school year from 2002 to 2005 and enrollment status for 2006-2007 to identify retained students and students who had not been retained that dropped out during the 2006-2007 school year. Another crosstabulation was calculated using the recoded promotion variable for each school year from 2002 to 2005 and enrollment status for 2007-2008 to identify retained students and students who had not been retained that dropped out during the 2007-2008 school year.

The MCT proficiency level standards (Appendix B) were obtained from the Mississippi Department of Education website and were used to identify each test level's scale score cut point for low achievement in reading, language and math. Each scale score for reading, language and math was recoded into a reading

social promotion variable, a language social promotion variable and a math social promotion variable using the top score in the minimal range in table 1.

Table 1

MCT Proficiency Level Standards

Test Level	Minimum Reading Score	Minimum Language Score	Minimum Math Score
12	397	392	350
13	424	427	402
14	441	453	457
15	464	469	487
16	481	474	517
17	500	487	546
18	521	495	556

This syntax was repeated for each school year from 2002 through 2005. If a scale score was equal to or below the top score in the minimal range in any of the subject areas then it was given a value of '0' meaning it was below the minimum standards for passing the test. If the score was equal to or higher than the top score in the minimal range it was given a value of '1' for above minimum standards. Next, a variable for social promotion total was produced by calculating the sum of reading social promotion, language social promotion and math social promotion. The social promotion total was computed for each school year and students with a sum of one or lower during any single school year indicated scale scores equal to or below the cut point score in two or more of the

subjects tested during that school year. If a student had a total of one or lower in social total and they were promoted to the next grade level for that school year he/she was identified as socially promoted.

Last, school year promotion and social promotion total variables were used to create four specific categories to classify students as proficient or above mastery promoted, proficient or above mastery retained, below mastery promoted, and below mastery retained. If the school year promotion data for each year indicated the student had been promoted and the social promotion total indicated the student had been socially promoted then he/she was assigned a value of '1'. This identified students who were below minimal standards in two or more testing areas but were not retained. If the student promotion data for each year indicated the student had been promoted but the social promotion total indicated the student was not socially promoted then he/she was assigned a value of '0'. This identified students who were below minimal standards in one testing area but were not retained.

Data Analysis

Bivariate analysis of the student level data was conducted using the SPSS. The chi square value was analyzed to explain correlations between the dependent variable of dropout and the independent variables of retention and social promotion. The .05 level of significance was used for all tests.

Summary

To identify a relationship among retention, social promotion and dropout rates in Mississippi public schools, bivariate analyses were completed using the

promotion variable for each school year 2002-2005 to represent retention, social promotion total for each school year 2002-2005 to represent social promotion and student enrollment for 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 to represent dropout rates. Descriptive statistics were run for each of the variables to define the characteristics of the participants in the study and to ensure the data were clean. Chi square tests of independence were calculated for each promotion variable from 2002-2005 and student enrollment 2006-2007 to obtain statistical data for retained students who dropped out of school in the 2006-2007 school year. The process was repeated for each promotion variable from 2002-2005 and student enrollment 2007-2008 to obtain statistical data for retained students who dropped out of school in the 2007-2008 school year. Chi square tests of independence were calculated using social promotion total for each school year and student enrollment 2006-2007 to obtain statistical data about socially promoted students who dropped out of school in the 2006-2007 school year. The process was repeated for each social promotion total variable from 2002-2005 and student enrollment 2007-2008 to obtain statistical data for socially promoted students who dropped out of school in the 2007-2008 school year. Finally chi square tests of independence were calculated using the low achievement variable for each school and student enrollment 2006-2007 to obtain statistical data on all students who achieved below minimal standards on any part of the MCT who dropped out during the 2006-2007 school year. This process was repeated using the low achievement variable for each school and student enrollment 2007-2008 to

obtain statistical data on all students who achieved below minimal standards on any part of the MCT who dropped out during the 2007-2008 school year.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a statistically significant relationship among retention, social promotion, and dropout rates in Mississippi within the context of high stakes testing. The results of this study show that there was not a statistically significant relationship among retention, social promotion and dropout rates in Mississippi within the context of high stakes testing.

Descriptive Statistics

The study included 29,500 students enrolled as ninth graders in Mississippi public schools who had four consecutive years of student data in MSIS. Of this population of students, 15, 251 (51.7%) were female and 14,249 (48.3%) were male. Ethnicity broke down as follows, 167 (.6%) Asian, 15, 172 (51.4%) Black, 192 (.7%) Hispanic, 29 (.1%) Native American, and 13,940 (47.3%) White. In the 2002-2003 school year, 96% of the students were regular education students, 3.9% were special education students, 54.7% received free lunch, 8.2% paid reduced prices for lunch, 95.5% were promoted to the next grade level and 4.4% were retained. In the 2003-2004 school year 96.3% of the students were regular education students, 3.7% were special education students, 55.7% received free lunch, 93.8% were promoted to the next grade level and 6.2% were retained. In the 2004-2005 school year 96.4% of the students were regular education students, 3.5% were special education students, 55% received

free lunch, 93.7% were promoted to the next grade level and 6.2% were retained. In the 2005-2006 school year 96.4% of the students were regular education students, 3.6% were special education students, 60.3% received free lunch, 97.8% were promoted to the next grade level and 2.2% were retained.

Statistical Results

A bivariate analyses using contingency tables was conducted to find a relationship between students who were not enrolled in school during the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 school years and gender, ethnicity, and free lunch status. In the 2006-2007 school year 1393 (4.7%) of the 29,500 students had dropped out of school, 731 (4.8%) were female, 662 (4.6%) were male, 7 (4.2%) were Asian, 697 (4.6%) were black, 13 (6.8%) were Hispanic, 676 (4.8%) were white, and 769 (4.8%) received free lunch. In the 2007-2008 school year 3682 (12.5%) of the 29,500 students had dropped out of school, 1887 (12.4%) were female, 1795 (12.6%) were male, 22 (13.2%) were Asian, 1912 (12.6%) were black, 26 (13.5%) were Hispanic, 2 (6.9%) were Native American, 1720 (12.3%) were white, and 2045 (12.7%) received free lunch.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between 2002 promoted and dropout for 2007 school year. The relationship between these variables was not significant, X^2 (1, N = 29500) = .687, p = .407 (see Table 2). Students who had been retained in the 2002 school year (4.2%) were slightly less likely to drop out of school than students who had not been retained (4.7%) in the 2002 school year. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between 2002

promoted and dropout for 2008 school year. The relationship between these variables was not significant, X^2 (1, N = 29500) = .011, p = .915 (see table 2). Students who had been retained in the 2002 school year (12.6%) were equally likely to drop out of school than students who had not been retained (12.5%) in the 2002 school year.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between 2003 promoted and dropout for 2007 school year. The relationship between these variables was not significant, X^2 (1, N = 29500) = 2.856, p = .091 (see Table 2). Students who had been retained in the 2003 school year (3.9%) were less likely to drop out of school than students who had not been retained (4.8%) in the 2003 school year. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between 2003 promoted and dropout for 2008 school year. The relationship between these variables was not significant, X^2 (1, N = 29500) = .002, p = .961 (see table 2). Students who had been retained in the 2003 school year (12.4%) were equally likely to drop out of school than students who had not been retained (12.5%) in the 2003 school year.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between 2004 promoted and dropout for 2007 school year. The relationship between these variables was not significant, X^2 (1, N = 29500) = 2.703, p = .100 (see Table 2). Students who had been retained in the 2004 school year (3.9%) were less likely to drop out of school than students who had not been retained (4.8%) in the 2004 school year. A chi-square test of

independence was performed to examine the relationship between 2004 promoted and dropout for 2008 school year. The relationship between these variables was significant, X^2 (1, N = 29500) = 4.956, p = .026 (see table 2). Students who had been retained in the 2004 school year (10.8%) were much less likely to drop out of school than students who had not been retained (12.6%) in the 2004 school year.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between 2005 promoted and dropout for 2007 school year. The relationship between these variables was not significant, X^2 (1, N = 29500) = .362, p = .547 (see Table 2). Students who had been retained in the 2005 school year (4.2%) were less likely to drop out of school than students who had not been retained (4.7%) in the 2005 school year. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between 2005 promoted and dropout for 2008 school year. The relationship between these variables was not significant, X^2 (1, N = 29500) = .001, p = .981 (see Table 3). Students who had been retained in the 2005 school year (12.5%) were equally likely to drop out of school than students who had not been retained (12.5%) in the 2005 school year.

In 2007 a total of 1393 students in this study dropped out and in 2008 the total increased to 3680. Retained students represented a small percentage of the students who dropped out. In 2007, 4% were retained in 2002, 5.1% retained in 2003 and 2004, and 1.9% retained in 2005. In 2008, 4.4% were retained in 2002, 6.1% retained in 2003, 5.4% retained in 2004, 2.2% retained in 2005.

Table 2

Relationship between Retention and Dropout Rates in 2007 School Year

School Year & Retention	Dropped out in 2007		Enrolled in 2007	
2002	number	percent	number	percent
yes	55	4.2%	1241	95.8%
no	1337	4.7%	26850	95.3%
2003				
yes	71	3.9%	1745	96.1%
no	1322	4.8%	26345	95.2%
2004				
yes	72	3.9%	1759	96.1%
no	1320	4.8%	28090	95.2%
2005				
yes	27	4.2%	612	95.8%
no	1366	4.7%	27477	95.3%

Table 3

Relationship between Retention and Dropout Rates in 2008 School Year

School Year & Retention	Dropped Out in 2008		Enrolled in 2008	
2002	number	percent	number	percent
yes	163	12.6%	1133	87.4%
no	3517	12.5%	24670	87.5%
2003				
yes	226	12.4%	1590	87.6%
no	3454	12.5%	24213	87.5%
2004				
yes	198	10.8%	1633	89.2%
no	3481	12.6%	24170	87.4%
2005				
yes	80	12.5%	559	87.5%
no	3602	12.5%	25241	87.5%

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between total social promotion and dropout rates for 2007 school year. The relationship between these variables was not significant, X^2 (4, N = 29500) = 6.73, p = .151 (see Table 4). Socially promoted students (12.4%) were less likely to drop out of school than students who had not been socially promoted (87.7%). A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between total social promotion and dropout for 2008

school year. The relationship between these variables was not significant, X^2 (4, N = 29500) = 2.88, p = .578 (see Table 5). Socially promoted students (14.2%) were less likely to drop out of school than students who had not been socially promoted (85.8%).

Table 4

Relationship between Social Promotion and Dropout Rates in 2007 School Year

Times Socially Promoted	Dropped Out in 2007		Enrolled in 2007	
	number	percent	number	percent
0	1221	87.7%	23998	85.5%
1	101	7.3%	2292	8.2%
2	47	3.4%	1118	4.0%
3	17	1.2%	529	1.9%
4	7	.5%	177	.6%
Total	1393	4.7%	28107	95.3%

Table 5

Relationship between Social Promotion and Dropout Rates in 2008 School Year

Times Socially Promoted	Dropped out in 2008		Enrolled in 2008	
	number	percent	number	percent
0	3160	85.8%	22059	85.4%
1	284	7.7%	2109	8.2%
2	153	4.2%	1012	3.9%

Table 5 continued

3	60	1.6%	486	1.9%
4	25	.7%	152	.6%
Total	3682	12.5%	25818	87.5%

A chi square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between 2002 total social promotion and 2002 school year promotion. The relationship between these variables was significant, X^2 (1, N = 29500) = 21,736.27, p < .001 (see Table 6). The analysis revealed 2006 (6.8%) of the students scored below minimal standards on two or more sections of the MCT; 501 (1.7%) of those students were retained while 1505 (5.1%) were socially promoted. A chi square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between 2003 total social promotion and 2003 school year promotion. The relationship between these variables was significant, X^2 (1, N = 29500) = 19,344.76, p < .001 (see Table 6). The analysis revealed 1720 (5.8%) of the students scored below minimal standards on two or more sections of the MCT; 569 (1.9%) of those students were retained while 1151 (3.9%) were socially promoted. A chi square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between 2004 total social promotion and 2004 school year promotion. The relationship between these variables was significant, X^2 (1, N = 29500) = 21,851.97, p < .001 (see Table 6). The analysis revealed 2542 (8.6%) of the students scored below minimal standards on two or more sections of the MCT; 616 (2.1%) of those students were retained while 1926 (6.5%) were

socially promoted. A chi square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between 2005 total social promotion and 2005 school year promotion. The relationship between these variables was significant, X^2 (1, N = 29500) = 27,202.30, $p < .001$ (see Table 6). The analysis revealed 2678 (9%) of the students scored below minimal standards on two or more sections of the MCT; 191 (.6%) of those students were retained while 2487 (8.4%) were socially promoted.

Table 6

Relationship between Social Promotion and Low Achievement

School Year & Socially Promoted	Above Minimal Standards		At or Below Minimal Standards	
2002	number	percent	number	percent
no	27494	93.2%	501	1.7%
yes	0	0%	1505	5.1%
2003				
no	27780	94.2%	569	1.9%
yes	0	0%	1151	3.9%
2004				
no	26958	91.4%	616	2.1%
yes	0	0%	1926	6.5%
2005				
no	26822	90.9%	191	.6%
yes	0	0%	2487	8.4%

Ancillary Findings

Among the interesting findings were the results of the analysis between 2005 social promotion and school year 2005 low achievers. A higher amount of students scored at or below minimal standards on the MCT in the 2005 – 2006 school year than in any other school year analyzed. There was also a very low amount of students retained for that school year. This was the school year that Hurricane Katrina impacted the Mississippi Gulf Coast and many districts were out of school for several weeks due to the destruction and flooding of schools.

Summary

The results of this study did not find a significant relationship among retention, social promotion and dropout rates in Mississippi public schools. The results of the study revealed that most students in the study that dropped out had not been retained or socially promoted. Of the 1393 students in the study population that dropped out during the 2007 school year, 16.1% of the students had been retained and 12.4% of the students had been socially promoted. The largest percentage (71.5%) of the students who dropped out during the 2007 school year had not been retained or socially promoted. Of the 3680 students in the study population that dropped out during the 2008 school year, 18.1% of the students had been retained and 14.2% of the students had been socially promoted. The largest percentage (67.7%) of the students who dropped out during the 2008 school year had not been retained or socially promoted.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

High school dropout rates have stimulated considerable interest and become a major concern for administrators; the passage of NCLB and the requirement that states report high school completion rates as part of Adequate Yearly Progress have intensified this concern. The Mississippi Department of Education has initiated dropout prevention programs that include various advertisements in multiple media formats encouraging students to get "On the Bus" for graduation. Summits involving educators, students and community leaders are being held throughout the state to address the dropout rates to provide insight as to the reasons students are dropping out of school, and to discern what these individuals believe can be done to prevent students from dropping out. Pilot programs are being implemented in schools that will redesign education to prepare graduates for participation in the 21st century workforce. Mississippi is making extensive efforts to move forward by setting high expectations for graduates in hopes of reducing dropout rates. But time and time again when the results are in, Mississippi is still ranked at the bottom of the nation on this indicator.

On March 23, 2009, The Mississippi Department of Education reported that the graduating class of 2008 produced approximately 600 more graduates than the graduating class of 2007. However, the class of 2008 also produced 356 more dropouts than the class of 2007 causing the dropout rate to remain

stagnant at 16% (Brown, 2009). In January of 2009, Education Week released its yearly Chance-for-Success Index that assigns each of the Nation's states an overall grade for graduation rates. Mississippi earned a grade of D-plus and was reported as a repeatedly low-ranking state (Kromm, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to identify relationships among retention, social promotion and dropout rates in Mississippi public schools. The results of the analysis of statistics for the 29,500 students who were enrolled in the 9th grade during the 2005-2006 school year do not show a significant relationship among retention, social promotion and dropout rates in Mississippi within the context of high stakes testing. The results of this study provide administrators and educators in Mississippi public schools data that can be generalized to all public schools in the state. The goal of this study was to present findings that will help educators and administrators implement strategies for their local district dropout prevention plans to improve the dropout rates within their districts. In light of the absence of significant findings, conclusions regarding implications for policy and practice are, of necessity, tentative. The following sections address such issues, beginning with a discussion of the results.

Conclusions and Discussion

As was indicated previously, this study found no significant relationships among retention, social promotion, and dropout rates in Mississippi within the context of high stakes testing. Each analysis of the relationship between retention and dropout rates during the 2007 school year revealed that a higher percentage of students who dropped out of school had not been retained. One

analysis between retention and dropout rates during the 2008 school year revealed that a higher percentage of students who dropped out were retained, but the rate was only a tenth of a percent higher than that for the students who had not been retained. Another analysis between retention and dropout rates during the 2008 school year revealed that retained students and students who had not been retained dropped out of school at an equal rate. The other three analyses between retention and dropout rates during the 2008 school year revealed that a higher percentage of students who dropped out of school had not been retained. The analysis between social promotion and dropout rates revealed that socially promoted students represented a small percentage of the total students who dropped out with 12.4% dropping out in 2007 and 14.2% dropping out in 2008.

These results contradict the findings of The U.S. Department of Education and many other studies associating retention and social promotion with the propensity to drop out. During the 1990s, 10 studies examining dropout rates of high school students confirmed that grade retention is associated with and a powerful predictor of the likelihood of dropping out (Alexander et al., 2001; Alexander et al., 2003; Entwisle et al., 2005; Goldberg, 2005; Marchant, 2004; Reynolds, Temple, & Ou, 2004; Temple, Reynolds, & Meidel, 2000; Vanderslice, 2004; Zvoch, 2006). The U.S. Department of Education found that social promotion can have some of the same negative effects (e.g. increased drop out rates, lower self-esteem, or creating a gap in achievement) as retention (Alexander et al., 2003).

One possible explanation for the unexpected results could be the focus and attention bestowed upon low achieving students considered at risk of dropping out. The Mississippi Department of Education created the Teacher Support Team (TST) as an instructional model for teachers to follow to determine if students are making adequate progress. By using this model, teachers promptly identify students who are struggling and interventions for the at-risk students are quickly put into place to improve student achievement before the students fall behind. However, to implement this instructional model properly, teachers must complete paperwork and planning on behalf of the students; added to these responsibilities are regularly required lesson plans and paperwork. Since this effort is being required of educators who typically struggle with work overload and insufficient time for planning, less time is spent planning enrichment activities that apply the basic skills students must master in connection with real life contexts. When students do not see the value of the work they are assigned and do not relate it to their personal lives, they view the work as irrelevant and uninteresting (Driscol, 2006; Vanderslice, 2004). When interest wanes, students' grades and attendance often decline which ultimately leads to dropout (Vanderslice, 2004).

A primary goal of education is to prepare students academically and socially so they can successfully transition from school to society. Society generally concludes that citizens are successful when they are active, productive and possess skills that generate positive contributions to their own well-being and that of the community. The demands placed upon the 21st century workforce

are evolving due to technological advances that require citizens to posses high-level academic skills in conjunction with the ability to think creatively and solve problems. The business world demands that team members be able to think abstractly and use hypothetical deductive reasoning to formulate hypotheses, which keeps the global economy moving forward instead of wedged in the past (Driscol, 2006). Despite the ever-changing expectations for members of the 21st century workforce, the overall concept of public schooling has changed little since the early 1900s. Policymakers have repeatedly created laws that require public schools to improve student achievement and raise graduation rates. However, judgment of improvement is based upon programs and activities that are routine from the past and will continue to generate the same results as they have in the past (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). The overall effectiveness of schools will not improve until the public school curriculum is guided by the expectations of the workforce and teaching methods focus on actively engaging students in real world learning experiments (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Driscol, 2006).

Limitations

The research population in this study was limited to students who were enrolled as 9th graders in a public school in Mississippi during the 2005-2006 school year. The study began with over 80,000 students but over 50,000 students were eliminated from this study because of transition to and from other states. The collected data for MSIS that was used in this study began with the 2002-2003 school year, so the earliest information on these students dated back

to their 5th grade year. Students in the research population for this study may have been retained in a grade or socially promoted prior to their 5th grade year.

Recommendations for Policy

Rate Validity and Student Tracking

One of the major concerns with dropout rates is the variability of data caused by the fact that there are multiple ways to calculate such rates. A consistent, well-designed national formula to calculate dropout rates is needed. If a system is created using a uniform dropout rate calculation formula, more reliable data will be available to give valid and realistic rates that present a more accurate representation of the dropout crisis in the nation. The system would also provide a way for more comprehensive longitudinal studies to be implemented without high costs of gathering data that is inconsistent from state to state and provided in different formats.

A barrier to the implementation of such a formula is evident in the difficulties associated with tracking students across state lines. Over 50,000 students were eliminated from this study because of transition to and from other states. There is a need for a national student tracking system using a unique national student identification number that can transfer from state to state with the student, much like individuals' social security numbers.

Incentives for School Completion

The present research did not disclose relationships among the variables of retention, social promotion, and dropout rates. However, the data did reveal disturbingly high rates of attrition in the student population that was studied. It is

important, therefore, for policymakers to intensify efforts to reduce the number of dropouts.

In 2006 Indiana passed a law to prevent students from dropping out by suspending driver's license privileges and revoking work permits for students who dropped out of school (Thornburgh, 2006). These students have to report to a judge and reach an arrangement in which the student is re-enrolled in school, or attending some form of schooling in a community class setting before privileges are reinstated. Mississippi does not offer as many public transportation options as states with higher populations so many citizens living and working in the state must rely upon a license to commute to school and work. A law similar to this would likely help reduce the dropout rate in Mississippi since many students view having a license as a step into adulthood, and even a necessity.

David Hansen has proposed The High School Attainment Credit (HSAC) in lieu of the child tax credit (Hansen, 2006). The credit would pay a one-time lump sum to parents of students who graduate regardless of their income level. Hansen believes the strongest impact of this credit would be among lower income families where dropout rates have been the highest. The child tax credit is counted against a family's tax liability, but this is of little value to low-income families who are in most instances already exempt from paying federal taxes. Currently parents receive the child tax credit just for having the child, even if the child is not enrolled in school. By implementing Hansen's HSAC, parents would receive a payment only if their child graduated from high school. The HSAC

would focus specifically on fixing the nation's dropout rates and hopefully give parents the incentive to become more involved in their children's education.

Due to the accountability associated with standardized testing required in NCLB, educators and counselors may have a disincentive to pull away from serving the needs of all students. Counselors in public schools spend most of their time on testing issues and supporting the instructional accountability system, with only one-fifth of their time dedicated to counseling students (Barton, 2005). Educators believe that their quality of instruction has been compromised due to all the time spent preparing the students for standardized tests. Research has shown that teachers often narrow the scope of their curriculum to only cover the topics that are on the test, instead of using innovative teaching strategies that go above the basic knowledge skills covered in the multiple-choice format presented on standardized tests (Marchant, 2004). Standardized testing was originally designed to provide educators with information on each student's individualized educational progress and alert them to areas of strengths and weaknesses. Some argue that policy-makers have taken a useful teaching tool and made it a measuring stick to determine the success of students, their teachers, schools, districts and states (Marchant, 2004). In doing this, teachers and administrators believe their efforts to help students are not as fruitful due to the rigid guidelines put in place by the bureaucratic system (Smyth & Hatten, 2001). Policy-makers should be aware of school contexts and consider the accountability policies' effects on student dropout rates before they are implemented as law. There is growing research and data that show that the

current emphasis on high stakes testing in the NCLB era may provide incentives for students to drop out rather than complete the testing requirements for high school graduation (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). Policy-makers need to revise accountability standards that measure achievement for public schools and require multiple methods of student assessments focused on critical thinking, problem solving and deeper understanding as an alternative to standardized testing and rigid grading formats. However, as such policies are considered, it will be important to keep in mind that as students are held to related standards, neither social promotion nor retention have significant promise as policy solutions for struggling students. Neither serves as an intervention per se unless significant supports for the struggling student attend the promotion or retention decision.

Instructional Design and Student Support Systems

The secondary public school system has implemented a uniform curriculum that follows a general education model and guides students to transition on to further education (Barton, 2005; Thornburgh, 2006). Guidance services from the past and the few that are still in effect have traditionally focused on admission and funding for college with little or no help for students who have no interest in attending post-secondary educational institutions (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The highest percentage of students who dropped out in Mississippi (47%) dropped out because of lack of interest in school (Mississippi Department of Education, 2009). Four out of five students who dropped out said there were not

enough experiences or opportunities for "real world" learning, so they did not see the connection between school and getting a job in the workforce (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The secondary public school curriculum needs to be revised to include more options for students to gain real life experiences and school-to-work instruction instead of a general academic track for everyone. There should also be multiple ways for students to complete high school with assorted diplomas indicating specialized skills obtained during high school much like various degrees are offered and obtained at one college or university.

Many research studies show that a large number of students drop out during or immediately following their 9th grade year due to a stressful transition to high school and lack of obtaining credits to graduate (Alexander et al., 2001; Alexander et al., 2003; Entwisle et al., 2005; Lan & Lanthier, 2003). Research has suggested that small class sizes and communal learning environments have a positive effect on student drop out rates because students are more involved with teachers and peers; thus the student has a personal attachment to school (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Vanderslice, 2004; Zvoch, 2006). A current Mississippi practice of implementing communal learning is the freshman academy concept in which 9th graders are isolated from 10th – 12th grade students, sometimes in their own facility. Research supports positive outcomes and significant improvement in the achievement of students who attend freshman academies (Zvoch, 2006). It is recommended that schools throughout Mississippi that are experiencing high drop out rates implement the

freshman academy concept to help 9th graders experience a smooth transition into the high school setting.

Recommendations for Future Research

The researcher recommends that this study be extended to include students who have continuous data in MSIS dating from the beginning of their school careers. If the researcher had access to student information encompassing all academic grades the results of this study may have been consistent with other studies. The study should also be replicated with student populations from other states to expand the results and provide information to policymakers that may aid in addressing the national drop out crisis. It is also recommended that research be conducted to compare dropout rates among high schools in Mississippi that participate in the pilot programs for the 21st century work force curriculum and high schools in Mississippi that only offer the traditional curriculum. Research should be conducted to compare drop out rates between Mississippi high schools that implement the freshman academy concept and Mississippi high schools that do not separate 9th grade students from 10th – 12th grade students.

Summary

The goal of this research was to examine student data to determine whether relationships existed among the variables of retention, social promotion, and dropout rates in Mississippi within the context of high stakes testing mandates. The results can be used to help educators and administrators improve graduation completion rates by providing data that can be generalized to

students who attend public high schools in Mississippi. The results did not disclose a significant relationship among social promotion, retention and dropout rates in Mississippi public schools. The results revealed that a majority of students in the population study that dropped out of school had not been retained or socially promoted. When the analysis was conducted between dropout rates and low achievement, the results indicated that only 9% of the students who dropped out scored below mastery in two or more subjects tested on the MCT and only .6% of those students were retained. Because the results have indicated that Mississippi's dropout rates are not significantly related to retention or social promotion, educators and administrators can research other characteristics and academic risks related to dropout to help promote educational success for students attending Mississippi public high schools. Effective instructional and support strategies based upon research provide students the adequate education they deserve and prepares them for the 21st century work force in a way that will more readily meet students' goals and aspirations.

APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

Institutional Review Board

118 College Drive #5147
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
Tel: 601.266.6820
Fax: 601.266.5509
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HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION REVIEW COMMITTEE
NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Human Subjects Protection Review Committee in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months. Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: **27120602**
PROJECT TITLE: **Retention, Social Promotion, and Dropout in Mississippi Public Schools**
PROPOSED PROJECT DATES: **10/23/07 to 03/01/08**
PROJECT TYPE: **Dissertation or Thesis**
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS: **Jennifer J. Woodruff**
COLLEGE/DIVISION: **College of Education & Psychology**
DEPARTMENT: **Educational Leadership & Research**
FUNDING AGENCY: **N/A**
HSPRC COMMITTEE ACTION: **Exempt Approval**
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: **01/09/08 to 01/08/09**

Lawrence A. Hosman

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
HSPRC Chair

1/15/08
Date

Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT)
Proficiency Level Standards

Test Level	READING				LANGUAGE				MATHEMATICS			
	Minimal	Basic	Proficient	Advanced	Minimal	Basic	Proficient	Advanced	Minimal	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
12	397 and below (10%)	398-420 (9.8%)	421-488 (58.8%)	489 and above (21.3%)	392 and below (11.1%)	393-430 (23.7%)	431-471 (34.2%)	472 and above (31%)	350 and below (3.8%)	351-386 (15.4%)	387-467 (60.5%)	468 and above (20.3%)
13	424 and below (10.5%)	425-451 (13.3%)	452-518 (57.3%)	519 and above (18.9%)	427 and below (10.3%)	428-463 (24.2%)	464-515 (46.5%)	516 and above (19%)	402 and below (5.1%)	403-439 (15.3%)	440-513 (60.7%)	514 and above (18.9%)
14	441 and below (10.2%)	442-461 (7%)	462-539 (64.2%)	540 and above (18.6%)	453 and below (14.6%)	454-490 (26.7%)	491-541 (41.1%)	542 and above (17.6%)	457 and below (17.2%)	458-487 (21.3%)	488-534 (38.5%)	535 and above (23%)
15	464 and below (10.2%)	465-482 (11%)	483-550 (53.4%)	551 and above (25.4%)	469 and below (12.1%)	470-510 (28.1%)	511-575 (48.7%)	576 and above (11.1%)	487 and below (22.8%)	488-519 (22.4%)	520-567 (38.4%)	568 and above (16.4%)
16	481 and below (17.1%)	482-507 (16.8%)	508-578 (54.2%)	579 and above (11.9%)	474 and below (12.9%)	475-524 (36.7%)	525-584 (41.3%)	585 and above (9.1%)	517 and below (32.8%)	518-542 (16.8%)	543-578 (26.9%)	579 and above (23.5%)
17	500 and below (21.8%)	501-532 (23%)	533-583 (41.1%)	584 and above (14.1%)	487 and below (13.1%)	488-542 (40.2%)	543-602 (39.2%)	603 and above (7.5%)	546 and below (42.2%)	547-567 (18.7%)	568-597 (22.4%)	598 and above (16.7%)
18	521 and below (25.8%)	522-551 (24.5%)	552-607 (40.1%)	608 and above (9.6%)	495 and below (13.8%)	496-555 (46.4%)	556-609 (31.9%)	610 and above (7.9%)	556 and below (38.3%)	557-583 (20.7%)	584-619 (27.7%)	620 and above (13.3%)

- Level 12 = Grade 2, Level 13 = Grade 3, etc.
- The 3 digit numbers in each column indicate the scale score range for each proficiency level.
- The percentages in each column indicate the percentage of students in each proficiency level according to a Spring 2001 research sample. Actual percentages that appear in the 2001 MCT State Summary Reports will vary.
- **Benchmark Scale Score Final Cut Point: GRADE 3 Reading 411, Language 414, Mathematics 387**
  GRADE 7 Reading 486, Language 473, Mathematics 534

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