

Chapter 16

An Information System for Coping with Student Dropout

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ABSTRACT

Student dropout prevention is one of the most important challenges of the education system. This study examines the effectiveness of a Local Authority Information Center (LAIC), developed in Israel to cope with that problem. The research population included 418 regular attendance officers (RAOs), educators who deal with students who drop out and those who are at risk of dropping out. The RAOs were divided into an experimental group, who performed their work using the information system, and a control group who used manual means. The research findings show that the information system improved the comprehensive nature of the information and its relevance for students at risk of dropping out, and resulted in an increase in the number of students treated by the RAOs. This improvement was maintained over a period of three years. The LAIC is likely to offer an effective and professional approach to reducing the problem of student dropout.

INTRODUCTION

Student Dropout From School

The phenomenon of students dropping out of school is common in many countries. An average of 12% of students dropped out of school in Europe in 2008, while in the 33 member countries of the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation

and Development) it averaged 14% (OECD education database, 2009). The US Department of Education (2010) reported a rate of 8% in 2008, while in Israel it was lower, standing at about 6%, notably in junior high schools and high schools (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2010). The dimensions of the phenomenon present a daunting social problem and a national challenge.

Diligence in studying and acquiring education are perceived in Israeli society as key values influencing the social development of the popula-

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tion, its character and its future. Dropping out is the main cause that feeds social disparity and the students' feeling of alienation towards school and the environment, and damages their development and future (Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998). Students who are exposed to neglect, to abuse or to a dangerous environment are at risk, and also in danger of dropping out from school (Dolev & Ben-Rabi, 2002; Zionest & Tamir, 2002). Some 18% of students in Israel are at risk and their percentage is constantly increasing (Ben Aryeh & Zionest, 2001).

Apart from overt dropping out that refers to formally leaving school, the literature recognizes disengagement from school, typical of students at risk. The dimensions of this latter phenomenon are far greater than of the overt phenomenon, wherein students are in an educational framework from the administrative perspective, but do not attain minimal learning achievements, are frequently absent, suffer from a feeling of failure, and feel alienated from school that they do not perceive as a lever for real success (Cohen-Navot, Ellenbogen, & Reinfeld, 2001). The dropout's feeling of rejection is liable to transform him/her from a person who contributes to society to one who works against society (Neumann, 1991; Rumberger, 1987). Therefore, according to Neumann (1991), a society, that is interested in the safety of its citizens and is committed to protecting them from crime and juvenile delinquency, must deal with the problem of dropouts and position it as one of its main educational tasks.

Prevatt and Kelly (2003) reviewed many articles published between 1982-2002 on the problem of regular attendance, failure at school and dropping out. Their main recommendations for coping with the problem pertain to diverse aspects such as, social support, advancing social and personal skills, monitoring and the early location of students at risk, mentoring, increasing parental involvement, greater involvement of the teachers, and support to advance the students' academic skills. Azzam (2007) in his study of the factors

for dropping out amongst students also proposes several complementary strategies: reducing the size of the classes, recruiting teachers with high qualifications, paying personal attention to the students, increasing support of teachers, improving the connection with the parents and 'big brother' mentoring by someone whom the student trusts.

Regular Attendance Officers

The central division that deals with the problem of dropping out in Israel is that of regular attendance officers (RAOs) - educators whose role is to assure regular attendance of students at school and to prevent dropping out from the education system. The roles of the RAO include:

- a. Identifying and locating students at risk of dropping out, monitoring and creating contact with them, with ongoing reporting to the Ministry of Education.
- b. Prevention and treatment that include enforcing the Compulsory Education Law on parents and the school; attending the school staff meetings and professional committee meetings that deal with coordinating and guiding students and tracking their placement; maintaining contact with all the factors who treat the student to determine methods of intervention; placing students who lack placement in suitable educational frameworks; initiating and operating special intervention programs within school and after school hours; guiding students together with their families to help them become successful; and, advising educational teams regarding the methods of treating students at risk of dropping out.

Each RAO monitors and deals with many students during the year. Their number depends on the size of the local authority in which the RAO functions and the socio-economic status of the students living there.

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