WICHITA PUBLIC SCHOOLS' LEARNING CENTERS

Creating a new educational model to serve dropouts and at-risk students

AN EDUCATION CASE STUDY

Katherine Mackey
Research Fellow

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the fall of 1999, Wichita Public Schools launched a dropout-recovery and credit-recovery program, called the Learning Centers, in response to the district's low graduation rate. The program used a disruptive innovation—computer-based learning—to enable high school dropouts of all ages to work toward earning high school diplomas and current high school students to make up lost credits so they could graduate.

By 2010, the district was operating four dropout-recovery centers and seven credit-recovery centers. The program served 946 students in 3,904 half-credit courses and had a waiting list of more than 300 students during the 2008–09 school year.

Educating nonconsumers

The program serves two distinct groups of people who would otherwise be nonconsumers.[1] The first consists of adults and youth who dropped out of school for a variety of reasons and previously had no options to earn high school diplomas. The majority are between ages 18 and 21, but adults up to the age of 60 also enroll. The second consists of students still enrolled in high school who failed a course and previously had no convenient or timely way to retake it, which hurt their chances of graduating on time.

Hybrid learning

The program uses a hybrid model, which combines elements of virtual learning and a traditional classroom setting. Students complete computer-based courses at dropout-recovery and credit-recovery centers under the direction of certified teachers. The program does not follow a daily class schedule. Instead, students may go to the centers to work on their courses at any time during the hours of operations.

Computer-based courses are the primary source of the learning content, which is advantageous for several reasons as it:

- Permits students to enroll or finish the program at any time during the year and not follow a traditional school calendar;
- Offers students a wide range of courses and course levels without requiring a dedicated teacher for each level and subject;

[1] Nonconsumers are people who are not consuming the existing products or services in a market because of such barriers as cost, inconvenience, inaccessibility, or complexity.

- Allows students to learn at their own pace and preferred time;
- Enables the use of a mastery-based curriculum that ensures students are learning as they progress through a course;
- Provides rapid, unbiased feedback that allows teachers to intervene as soon as students begin struggling with a concept.

The computer-based curriculum frees teachers from lesson planning and lecturing so that they can spend the bulk of their time providing students with individualized help with coursework on a need-by-need basis. Teachers also are responsible for making sure students stay on task and for grading essays and written assignments.

Funding

In disruptive fashion, the program is significantly less expensive per student than traditional schools in the district. It receives only state per-pupil funding for dropout-recovery students, state at-risk funding for students who are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches, registration and tuition fees, and some outside grants. It does not receive state funds for credit-recovery students, nor does it receive district funds obtained from property taxes for any students. During the 2008–09 school year, the per-pupil program costs were roughly $7,307 less than the district's per-pupil expenditure for the 2007–08 school year, the latest year for which this data was available.[2]

Student performance

The district's graduation rate has risen by more than eight percentage points since the program first began in 1999. According to the district's numbers, an increase in the graduation rate of minorities has driven much of this increase.

The four dropout-recovery centers have collectively helped 974 students earn their high school diplomas since 1999. During the 2008–09 school year, the mean adjusted graduation rate[3] for the dropout-recovery centers was 81 percent. However, 38 percent of the students enrolled in dropout-recovery centers withdrew for a variety of reasons before earning high school diplomas that year.

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[2] According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the per-pupil expenditure for Wichita Public Schools was $11,186 for the 2007–08 school year.

[3] To determine the adjusted graduation rate, the district divides the number of probable graduates (students are counted as probable graduates if earning a half credit per month combined with entry credits would allow them to accumulate 22 credits by the end of the academic year) by the total number of students enrolled in the center.

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This case study explores how one Kansas school district established a dropout-recovery and credit-recovery program by using a disruptive innovation—computer-based learning—to serve these prior areas of nonconsumption. The study focuses on the history of the program and the steps taken to start it.

Family and friends cheered and hollered as the first-ever high school graduates of the year-old learning center in Wichita, Kan., walked across a stage to accept their diplomas. Clad in caps and gowns, they smiled amidst the pomp and circumstance typical of most high school graduations. But these were no ordinary graduates, and their "school" was not ordinary either.

The graduation ceremony took place on the lower level of a shopping mall in Wichita just outside the room where the 21 graduates—a group of former high school dropouts that included teenage mothers and former gang members—had earned their diplomas. Unlike the typical bare desks that line most classrooms, this room housed rows of computers, which were the gateway to English, social studies, science, and mathematics courses. The program, called the Learning Centers, allowed students to learn under the supervision of certified teachers while offering them flexibility to meet the demands of their work and family responsibilities.

In his speech to the graduates and their supporters, Wichita Public Schools Superintendent Winston Brooks described candidly his initial skepticism of the unconventional mission and approach of the Learning Centers. He spoke about his doubt that the program would be successful—and then, looking at the newly minted graduates, told them that they had proven that the program worked.

Educating nonconsumers

Wichita Public Schools[1] is a large urban district that serves a racially and socioeconomically diverse student population. Such districts often suffer from low graduation rates, and Wichita

[1] Wichita Public Schools, which covers more than 152 square miles and serves approximately 50,000 students, is one of the largest school districts in the Midwest. It educates approximately 11 percent of all public school students in Kansas (see Appendix A for Wichita, Kansas, and U.S. demographic breakdowns).

Wichita Public Schools established a dropout-recovery and credit-recovery program by using a disruptive innovation—computer-based learning—to serve these prior areas of nonconsumption.

Public Schools was no exception. In the summer of 1997, district officials met to discuss how Wichita Public Schools could improve its graduation rate. According to the district's numbers, only about three-fourths of that year's senior class had earned a diploma.[2] The graduation rate was even lower among minority students (e.g. blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans), who comprised over 40 percent of the district's total student enrollments.[3] Only about half of these students had graduated in 1997.

Among the assembled officials was Dr. Terry Behrendt, who had recently accepted a position as the Wichita Public Schools director of grants and development services. The other district leaders, including Superintendent Brooks, asked him to explore grant initiatives that would enable the district to improve its graduation rate.

Behrendt saw an opportunity to develop a program that would help two groups of students: the roughly 4,000 students who were at risk of dropping out of Wichita high schools during their 9th through 12th grade years, as well as the roughly 8,000 students who had dropped out of Wichita high schools over the past seven years. Behrendt brought a distinct background and perspective to this endeavor; he had worked for over 20 years in Wichita Public Schools as a teacher, assistant principal, and, later, as the coordinator of secondary science education. The dropout rates during those years had been high as well. To Behrendt's frustration, dozens of his own students had left school prematurely.

Behrendt knew that a student's decision to drop out of high school was, and still is, statistically speaking, a disastrous one, particularly in an economy in which workers who have at least a high school diploma tend to find jobs more easily and earn more than non-graduates. For example, the 1997 unemployment rate in the U.S. for men age 25 and older with a high school diploma but no college education was 4.3 percent; for those without a high school diploma, the unemployment rate was 8.1 percent.[4] Even when employed, the earning power of

[2] Wichita Public Schools calculated the graduation rate using the following formula: number of graduates / (number of graduates + year 4 dropouts + year 3 dropouts + year 2 dropouts + year 1 dropouts).

[3] Of the 50,042 students enrolled in Wichita Public Schools during the 2009–10 school year, 38 percent were white, 28 percent were Hispanic, 20 percent were black, seven percent were multi-racial, five percent were Asian, and two percent were Native American.

[4] "Table 614. Unemployed and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin," U.S. Census Bureau, http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2010/tables/10s0614.xls (accessed January 20, 2010).

high school dropouts was relatively low. In 1997, the median income for men age 25 and older with a high school diploma but no college education was $27,005; for those without a high school diploma, the median income was $20,213.[5] The lasting economic disadvantages of dropping out had convinced Behrendt that Wichita Public Schools should give those who had failed to complete high school a second chance to earn diplomas.

Although adults and youth could acquire a general educational development (GED) certificate[6] through the district, Behrendt did not believe that GED preparation programs adequately transferred the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in the workforce. Many employers regarded a GED as inferior to a high school diploma; some, such as the U.S. military, limited the percentage of GED candidates accepted.[7]

Behrendt also believed that recovering dropouts was only part of the solution. He wanted to prevent students from leaving high school in the first place by allowing them to retake courses they had failed or dropped. Wichita Public Schools was unable to provide many options outside of regular school hours for students to recover these missing course credits in 1997. The district did offer a six-week summer school program taught by teachers at the local high schools, but work schedules precluded many students from spending the mandatory six hours a day in class.

Behrendt thus saw an opportunity for the district to create a completely new program that would bring dropouts back into formal education settings and prevent more students from leaving. Behrendt's observation is a hallmark of a disruptive innovation. Almost all disruptions begin by serving so-called nonconsumers—people who are not consuming the existing products or services in a market because of such barriers as cost, inconvenience, inaccessibility, or complexity.

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[5] "Table P-20. Educational Attainment—Workers 25 Years Old and Over by Median Earnings and Sex: 1991 to 2008," U.S. Census Bureau, http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/incpertoc.html (accessed January 20, 2010).

[6] The GED exam consists of five different subject sections taken over seven and a half hours. These subject sections include: language arts writing, language arts reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. Scores range from a minimum of 200 to a maximum of 800 on each subject section. The minimum score required on each section is 410. The total minimum score required is 2050. Individuals may retake the entire test—or individual sections—until they earn a passing grade.

[7] The Air Force accepts less than one percent of GED candidates, and the Navy and Marines accept less than 10 percent in any enlistment year.

Hybrid learning

BENEFITS OF COMPUTER-BASED LEARNING:

- Self paced
- Flexible schedule
- Wide array of courses available
- Mastery-based curriculum
- Instant feedback for teachers and students

In the fall of 1997, Behrendt assembled a small team of district and community leaders to help him create a district-wide program that would do two things: allow high school dropouts of all ages to work toward earning diplomas and enable high school students who were not on track to graduate on time make up lost credits so they could earn diplomas. Behrendt's team consisted of several officials from Wichita Public Schools, including the director of truancy programs, the coordinator of the at-risk programs grants office, and the executive director of quality improvement services, who oversaw state and district assessments. Wichita Technical College administrators and staff from the local branch of the national not-for-profit Communities In Schools (CIS)[8] also joined the team to explore solutions for dropouts.

Behrendt first led the team in identifying some of the reasons why students were dropping out of Wichita high schools. The team surveyed students who had dropped out and concluded that the majority had the potential to complete high school, yet had lost the motivation to finish for a variety of reasons including frequent absences or suspensions; boredom with traditional learning; unplanned pregnancy; stressful work and family responsibilities; alienation; feeling unsafe in school; and/or a devaluation of education at home.

Team member Kim Davis, the district's coordinator of technical education, had an idea for addressing these circumstances. She had seen Wichita South High School implement computer-based learning in a career-training course that had improved students' basic math and reading skills. She suggested that a similar program under the direction of a certified teacher in a classroom setting would best address the needs of dropouts and credit-recovery students. Computer-based learning would give students the flexibility to enroll in and finish courses at their convenience. The self-pacing would benefit students along the entire learning spectrum, from those who learned quickly to those who struggled. The district could also use computer-based learning to offer a wide range of courses and course levels without requiring a dedicated teacher for each level and subject.

[8] Communities In Schools (CIS), founded in 1977, is one of the largest dropout prevention organizations in the United States. It connects needed community resources with schools to provide a range of services such as mentoring, tutoring, health care, summer and after-school programs, and family counseling.

The group felt that a strong teacher- and counselor-based support system would also be crucial because many dropouts and credit-recovery students did not receive a lot of education support outside of school. The computer-based curriculum would be the primary source of the learning content, which would give the teachers more freedom to provide students with feedback and individualized help with coursework as needed. The group believed that such a system would allow students to develop personal relationships with adults who cared about their success. Additionally, teachers and counselors could provide the structure and guidance many dropouts and credit-recovery students needed while they developed the maturity to work independently. "I have yet to meet a kid that did not want to succeed in their own way," Behrendt said. "Most of the time they just do not know how to succeed or what the next steps are."

"I have yet to meet a kid that did not want to succeed....Most of the time they just do not know how."

—Dr. Terry Behrendt, founder of Learning Centers program

Learning centers

When the program started in the late 1990s, few computer-based courses were available for high school students and none of them ran on the Internet. After reviewing several computer-based curricula, the group selected two different providers: one that Wichita South High School had used in its occupational career training course and another that CIS recommended. Both products ran on a local server but not on the Internet, which meant that students would need to complete their coursework on designated computers in a lab or classroom setting. The group decided to establish program sites, which they called learning centers, where students could work under the supervision of certified teachers. The group agreed to separate the dropouts from the potential dropouts to address the distinct needs and circumstances of each.[9]

Dropout-recovery centers

Adults and youth who had dropped out of traditional brick-and-mortar schools would likely be reluctant to return to a public school setting so the team decided to establish the dropout-recovery centers in buildings located away from school-owned property. By establishing dropout-recovery centers in nontraditional school

[9] Although credit-recovery centers were designed to address the distinct needs and circumstances of current high school students, the district does not restrict dropouts from enrolling in them. Between three and 20 dropouts typically choose to enroll in high school learning centers each year.

settings, the group hoped to create environments where adults and youth would feel at ease returning to school. The group also thought that pulling teachers out of the traditional classroom would inspire them to create new processes and take different approaches to facilitating learning.

Social workers and student support staff coordinate and arrange for mentoring, child care, housing, meal vouchers, and transportation for dropouts.

Each dropout-recovery center would consist of a large, open space divided into a variety of work areas that accommodated different learning needs. These work areas would include individual study stations equipped with computers as well as video and audio players with headsets; tables for group study and project work; a sitting area with couches and lounge chairs for comfortable reading, one-on-one interaction with teachers, student discussions, and peer counseling; a resource center with instructional materials and career information; and an office space equipped with a desk for the teacher. Each dropout-recovery center would have two full-time teachers—one who was licensed in English and social studies and another who was licensed in mathematics and science—who would grade students' essays and written assignments and assist with coursework as needed. The group also decided to staff each center with either a social worker or student support personnel, who would coordinate and arrange for support services (e.g. mentoring, child care, transportation, meal vouchers, and housing) to remove barriers.

Students in the dropout-recovery centers would be doing as much work and completing the same number of credits as students in comprehensive high schools, yet the group was concerned that a high school diploma from an alternative school might carry a similar stigma as that of a GED. To overcome this, the group decided to structure the program so that each dropout-recovery center would be a satellite location of a Wichita high school, as opposed to being a separate school. When students graduated, they would receive a Wichita High School Diploma from the high school affiliated with the center where they had been enrolled and, the team members believed, find better success in the workforce.

Student attendance would not be required at set hours each day as in traditional brick-and-mortar schools. Although students could set their own schedules and come to the centers at any time during the hours of operation,[10] they would be required to complete at least a half credit each month and attend the centers for at

[10] During the 2009–10 school year, dropout-recovery centers were open Monday through Thursday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and Friday from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m.

least 15 hours per week to remain enrolled.[11] This flexibility would allow students to work around their employment and family schedules. The constant turnover would allow the dropout-recovery centers to serve a greater number of students.

By 2008, many more computer-based high school courses were available that ran on the Internet; district leaders decided to adopt online courses for the program because they offered students some new advantages.[12] An online curriculum gave students greater flexibility to complete their coursework where and when it was convenient for them as opposed to being restricted to using the learning centers' computers, which were only available for students during limited hours. With the switch to online learning, many students chose to divide their study time between the dropout-recovery centers, where they had access to teachers and either social workers or student supports, and home.

Students receive Wichita High School Diplomas when they graduate from dropout-recovery centers.

Credit-recovery centers

The credit-recovery centers would use the same computer-based curriculum and offer similar flexibility as the dropout-recovery centers, but they would be located inside Wichita high schools. Each credit-recovery center would consist of a room lined with rows of computers and an office space equipped with a desk for the teacher. The centers would be open after regular school hours so current students would have an option outside of school to retake courses that they had failed. Each credit-recovery center would be staffed with one or two teachers who taught at the high schools where the centers were located and who would be willing to staff the centers after school for a few hours each week in exchange for hourly pay.

Funding

A call to the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) revealed that the program would be eligible to receive the Base State Aid Per Pupil (BSAPP), in the amount of approximately $4,500 per year for every full-time dropout-recovery student enrolled. The money would be based on the number of students enrolled the previous year, however, so it would not be available for the program until its

[11] On average, a half-credit course can take a student between 50 and 60 hours to complete. If a student works on a half-credit course consistently for three hours a day, or 15 hours a week, for example, he or she should be able to complete the course in one month.

[12] In 2008, the program began using online courses provided by Apex Learning, a privately-held provider of Internet-based curriculum for high school students.

second year of operations. Nevertheless, the program would be eligible to receive some state intervention funding starting in its first year of operations, in the amount of approximately $2,500 per year for every student enrolled who was eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches.

The program uses state funds received for dropouts to support the costs of the dropout-recovery *and* credit-recovery centers.

The state would determine full-time student enrollment based on two head counts taken in the fall. A student would need to be in attendance for a full seven hours on at least two designated days during a fixed period of time to be counted as a full-time student.[13] Because Behrendt and his team planned to allow students to work at their convenience rather than require attendance for a set number of daily hours, they were concerned that the dropout-recovery centers might not receive enough BSAPP money for the program to be self-sustaining.[14] To ensure this did not happen, the group required all dropout-recovery students enrolled in the program as of September to attend two seven-hour orientations on the days the headcount were taken.

From their conversation with the KSDE, Behrendt and his team also learned that they would not receive any BSAPP funds for credit-recovery students. Because credit-recovery students would be enrolled full time in Wichita high schools, which would already be receiving the full BSAPP amount for those students, the program would not be allowed to double dip into those funds. As a result, the group would need to be resourceful.

To ensure that the credit-recovery centers could be financially viable, the group decided to use the state funds to support the dropout-recovery *and* credit-recovery centers by joining the program into a single funding account that would hold all of the money; the program's leaders would then distribute the money budgeted to the program among the centers as needed.

In addition, Behrendt's team decided to charge high school students a fee of $75 per half-credit course (dropouts, in contrast, would pay a yearly registration fee of $5) to reduce some of the operating costs associated with the credit-recovery

[13] The program receives a fraction of the BSAPP amount for students who are in attendance for less than seven hours on at least two days when the headcount is taken. This number is calculated by taking the two days that the student attended the dropout-recovery center for the greatest amount of time (up to 360 minutes) during a fixed period of time and dividing the lesser of those two days by 360.

[14] In 2008–09, each dropout-recovery center needed at least 119 students enrolled at the time of the headcount for the program to receive enough BSAPP funding to break even.

centers for which they could not receive direct state aid. The group members were initially reluctant to require the students—many of whom were from low-income families—to pay to retake a course they had failed. They went ahead anyway as they reasoned that a fee might have the advantage of motivating credit-recovery students to complete their courses. They also decided to offer at least 100 scholarships each year to students who could not afford to pay the course fee; the group was adamant that no student should be unable to take a course for credit recovery because of financial reasons.

The program also received some funding from organizations not affiliated with the school district. CIS, which was critical in helping to develop the vision for the dropout-recovery centers, connected Behrendt and his team with the Simon Youth Foundation (SYF), a national not-for-profit organization that the Simon Property Group founded to help at-risk youth earn high school diplomas. The Simon Property Group is the nation's largest mall owner and operator. SYF agreed to provide the building space for a dropout-recovery center rent-free in a Simon mall in Wichita. Later, in 2004, SYF and the district established another dropout-recovery center in a second Simon mall. Again, SYF provided this space rent-free for the district.

The group calculated that it could pay for the entire Learning Centers program using only state funding, registration and tuition fees, and SYF grants. Unlike other schools in the district, the program would not require, nor would it receive, any portion of district funds obtained from property taxes. This meant that the program would be significantly less expensive to operate on a per-pupil basis than traditional schools in the district. For example, even if one considers all of the costs—operating and capital—of the dropout-recovery and credit-recovery centers in the 2008–09 school year (see Figure 1), the cost per dropout-recovery student was roughly $3,879—or approximately $7,307 less than the district's per-pupil expenditure for the 2007–08 school year, the latest year for which this data was available.[15] This number does not take into account that the program also

The per-pupil program costs are roughly $7,307 less than the district's per-pupil expenditure.

[15] According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the average per-pupil expenditure for Wichita Public Schools was $11,186 for the 2007–08 school year. See http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?Search=1&InstName=Wichita&State=20&DistrictType=1&DistrictType=2&DistrictType=3&DistrictType=4&DistrictType=5&DistrictType=6&DistrictType=7&NumOfStudentsRange=more&NumOfSchoolsRange=more&ID2=2012990&details=4 (accessed January 20, 2010).

Figure 1 *The Learning Centers' approximate costs for four dropout-recovery centers and seven credit-recovery centers (2008–09 school year)*

Item	Expense
Personnel: salaries and benefits	$1,452,672
Rental and leasing[1]	$ 240,578
Software	$ 85,000
Computers (50 desktops and 23 laptops)	$ 83,522
Supplies and materials	$ 28,920
Professional services	$ 21,000
Utilities	$ 7,200
Equipment	$ 5,000
Printers	$ 2,000
In-district travel	$ 1,900
TOTAL	$1,927,792

[1] Rental and leasing includes costs that do not affect the cash flow of the district because the items were donated by SYF.

Source: Wichita Public Schools

served 449 students in credit-recovery centers during the 2008–09 school year, however, which means that the program's true cost per student was even lower.

Because the program would not receive BSAPP dollars until its second year of operations, the group decided to request district funding to pay for the program's capital and first-year operating costs. In April 1999, the group presented its ideas for the Learning Centers program to Superintendent Brooks. Brooks and his administrative team liked the overall proposal, but opposed the idea of establishing dropout-recovery centers away from school property. They expressed concern that establishing the program off school property could result in liability issues, be too expensive, or potentially pose challenges for disciplining students. Behrendt and his group felt strongly, however, that locating dropout-recovery centers away from school property was integral to the success of the program. After much discussion, Brooks agreed to allow the program to proceed on a trial basis; however, he refused to commit any district funds for the establishment and first year of the program.

Shortly after meeting with Brooks, Behrendt began applying for grants to cover the approximately $600,000 in capital and first-year operating costs of the two dropout-recovery centers and three credit-recovery centers that they would be

opening. Within six months, the group had raised enough money from grants and donations to launch the Learning Centers program.[16]

Building the program

Dropout-recovery centers

In the spring of 1999, with the funding nearly in place, the group hired Dr. Rachel Norwood, who had worked as a teacher, counselor, and assistant principal in Wichita Public Schools and was an active member of the black community in Wichita, to serve as the coordinator of Urban League Learning Center (Urban League),[17] which would be the first dropout-recovery center to open. The center would be established in the Wichita Urban League Community Center,[18] which was located in an impoverished and predominately black neighborhood (see Figure 2 for a map of Wichita's dropout-recovery centers). Norwood took over the bulk of the responsibility for hiring and training teachers and recruiting students for Urban League. She hired two veteran teachers who were already working in Wichita Public Schools and who were knowledgeable in a variety of subjects. Norwood decided to keep Urban League's staff to a minimum for the first year as she did not know how many students would enroll or whether funding would allow for a second year, but she eventually added a counselor, a student support staffer, and a secretary, all of whom worked full time. The program's coordinators set up and staffed the subsequent dropout-recovery centers in a gradual fashion, similar to that of Urban League.

Student recruitment began during the summer of 1999. Kansas state law had long required children under 18 years old to attend school, and it did not cap the age at which someone could receive a high school diploma. This meant that Norwood could enroll any individual older than 18 who had not graduated. She enlisted high school counselors and leaders from local churches to help with recruiting. With the group's help, she set up kiosks in local shopping malls with information about the

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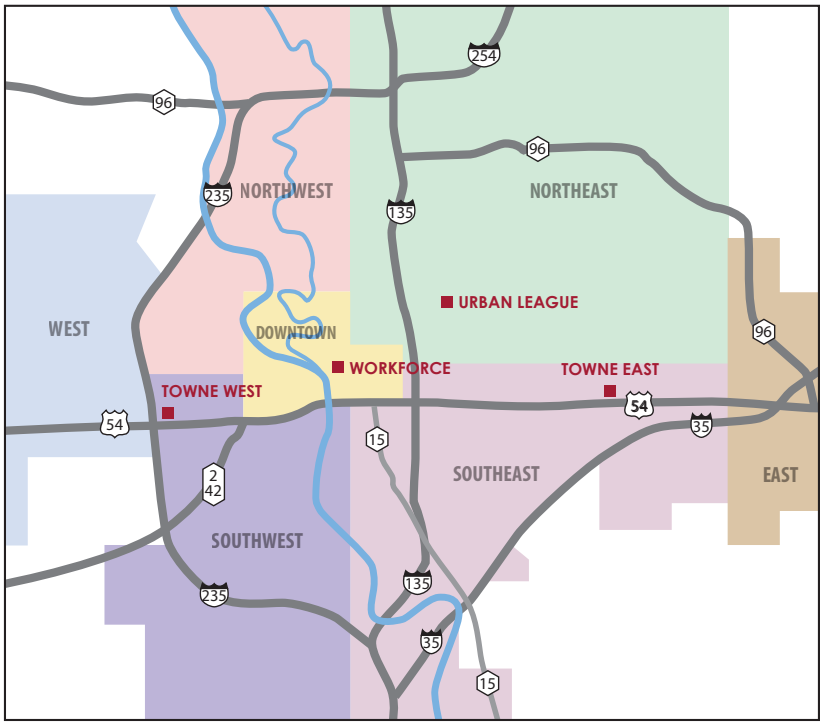
[16] Among other sources of funds, the program received an $189,115 grant from the KSDE, $100,000 from the City of Wichita, $95,211 in state intervention funding, and $100,000 that CIS had raised from philanthropies.

[17] In 2009, the district moved Urban League to the Dunbar school and changed the center's name to Dunbar Learning Center.

[18] The Wichita Urban Community Center provides career and education assistance for low-income minorities, particularly blacks. The local branch of the national not-for-profit Urban League operates it.

Figure 2 *Map of Wichita's dropout-recovery centers*

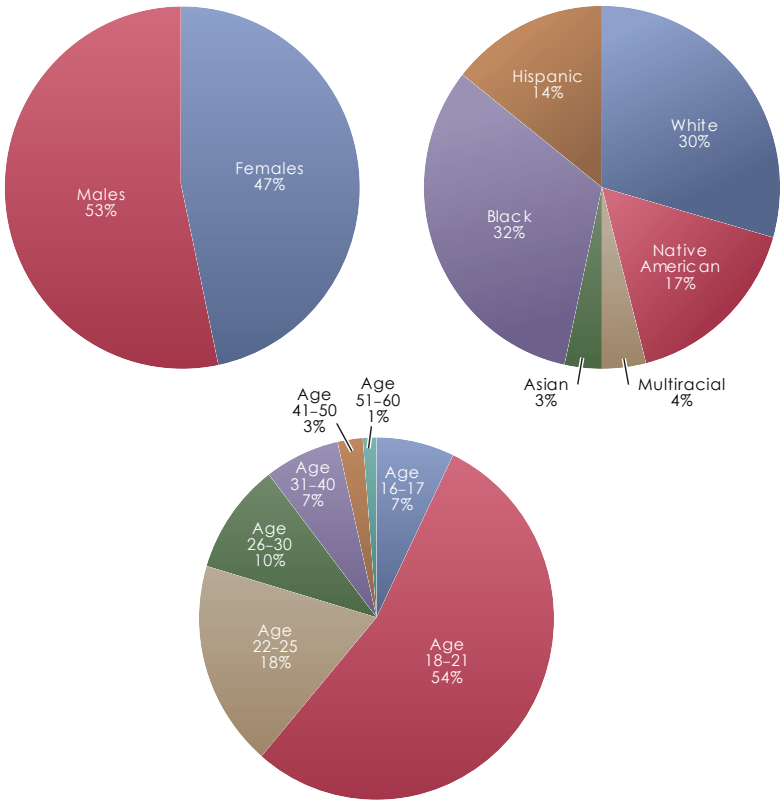


program and advertised it on marquees outside the malls. Adults and youth from a variety of circumstances and walks of life enrolled. The majority were between ages 18 and 21, but adults up to the age of 60 also signed up (see Figure 3 for the demographic breakdown of students enrolled in dropout-recovery centers during the 2008–09 school year).

In the fall of 1999, Urban League opened with 94 students. The following spring, the group hired Kim Davis, the district's coordinator of technical education, to serve as the coordinator of Towne East Education Resource Center (Towne East),[19] which would be located in a Simon mall on Wichita's East Side. The center would be established in partnership with SYF. After six months of marketing the program and enrolling students, Towne East launched in the fall of 2000 with 134 students.

[19] Although this case refers to all program sites as learning centers, program sites established in partnership with SYF are technically called education resource centers.

Figure 3 *Demographics of students enrolled in dropout-recovery centers (2008–09 school year)*

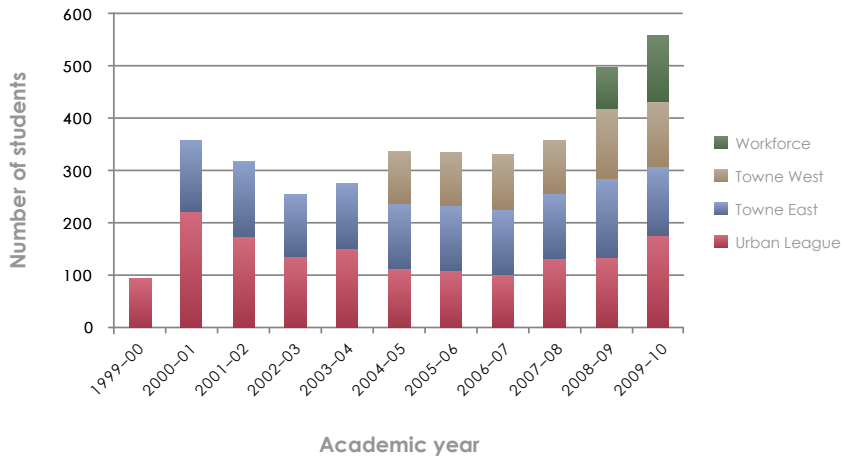


Source: Wichita Public Schools

By 2001, the district declared the program a success. Not only was the program producing graduates each year, but it could pay for itself. The following year, Urban League and Towne East enrolled more students than each could effectively serve; Towne East had a waiting list of more than 200.[20] As a result, officials decided to establish additional dropout-recovery centers to meet the growing demand. Impatient to expand the program, district leaders elected to put up the capital and first-year operating costs for subsequent dropout-recovery centers rather than wait for grant approvals. In the fall of 2004, the district opened another dropout-recovery center in partnership with SYF, called Towne West Education Resource

[20] Wichita Public Schools has set the following enrollment caps for the dropout-recovery centers based on both physical space and the number of staff at each location: Urban League is capped at 200, Towne East at 175, Towne West at 175, and Workforce at 150.

Figure 4 *Students enrolled during fall headcount (1999–2010)*



Source: Wichita Public Schools

Center (Towne West), in a Simon mall on Wichita's West Side. Four years later, in the fall of 2008, it established a fourth dropout-recovery center, called Workforce Learning Center (Workforce), in the Workforce Alliance Center[21] in downtown Wichita. The number of students enrolled in the program continued to increase over time (see Figure 4). During the 2008–09 school year, dropout-recovery centers served 497 students and had a waiting list of more than 300. Dropout-recovery students completed 1,342 enrollments[22] and were in the process of completing another 977 enrollments by the end of the 2008–09 school year.

Credit-recovery centers

In 1999, Wichita Public Schools opened credit-recovery centers at three high schools; a year later it opened credit-recovery centers at four more high schools at the request of students who had heard about the program from their peers in the district and demanded the option at their high schools. During the 2008–09 school

[21] The Workforce Alliance Center offers community resources such as employment assistance and training services for adults and youth.

[22] An enrollment is defined as any instance of a student taking a half-credit course; one student, therefore, can be responsible for several enrollments.

year, credit-recovery centers helped 449 students complete 931 enrollments and progress in 654 enrollments.[23]

Retaining students

One of the greatest challenges for the Learning Centers is student retention—particularly in the case of dropout-recovery centers given that they explicitly serve students who have already left the education system at least once. To overcome this challenge and help students complete their courses, the district has implemented systems that provide students and teachers with rapid feedback to minimize student frustration, allow students to feel success more frequently to bolster motivation, and increase the personal connection between students and supportive adults—namely their teachers as well as counselors and others.

Using computer-based learning as the primary source of the course content frees teachers from lesson planning and lecturing so that they can spend the bulk of their time encouraging students and providing them with individualized help on a need-by-need basis. The program uses a computer-based curriculum that weaves interactive questions and quizzes into the lessons. When a student completes a computer-scored assessment, the computer-based curriculum reports the result instantly to the teacher and the student. This rapid feedback allows teachers to intervene early and provide one-on-one assistance as soon as students begin struggling with the material. This helps minimize student frustration by immediately rewarding them when they are successful. As such, students have opportunities to experience success more frequently in computer-based courses than in traditional classes where they must wait for teachers to correct their work, which, depending on the teacher, could take days or even weeks. Teachers also walk around the room at least every half hour to answer student questions and make sure students are staying on task. For the students, such frequent and targeted interaction with their teachers helps them stay motivated and focused.

The program also has several restrictions in place to help students succeed academically. First, it prohibits students from taking more than two courses at any one time. This further minimizes student frustration and improves focus because

TEACHER'S ROLE:

- Provide individualized help with coursework
- Make sure students are staying on task
- Grade written work
- Monitor student progress

[23] Data is not available for the number of students enrolled in credit-recovery centers prior to the 2008–09 school year.

students are not overwhelmed with balancing too many courses at one time. Second, the program uses the computer-based curriculum to implement a mastery-based system that does not allow a student to move on to the next lesson or unit until earning a score of 80 percent or higher on a computer-scored assessment.[24] This ensures that students are learning as they progress through a course and guarantees that they are better prepared to handle more challenging material that builds on earlier concepts and lessons.

Additionally, the program has built-in support services to help students graduate. In dropout-recovery centers, counselors meet individually with students at least once a month to discuss their progress and attendance. If a student has failed to complete the program's minimal requirements, then the counselor and the student discuss why the student has fallen behind and how to fix the problem. Monthly check-ins can also include extra tutoring or additional support services from a social worker or student support staffer.

Student performance

Since the program's founding in 1999, the four dropout-recovery centers have collectively helped 974 students that the traditional schools had failed earn their high school diplomas—or roughly 26 percent of the students they have so far served or are still in the process of serving.

The district's graduation rate was still below the state average in 2006, but according to numbers from the EPE Research Center,[25] it had risen by more than eight percentage points since the Learning Centers program first began in 1999 (see Figure 5).[26] This increase led an EPE Research Center analysis to identify

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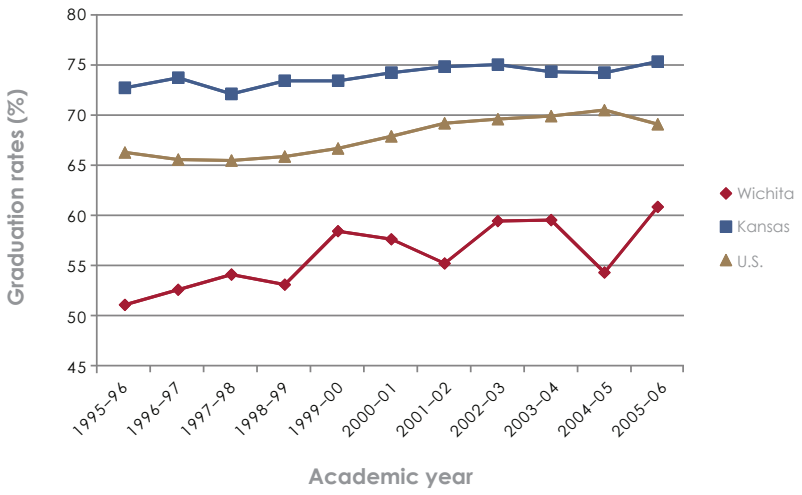
[24] Students may retake the computer-scored assessments—which are randomized to present a different version on each attempt—up to three times before the assessment locks and teacher intervention is required.

[25] The EPE Research Center is a division of Editorial Projects in Education, the not-for-profit organization that publishes *Education Week.* With a staff of full-time researchers, the Research Center conducts annual policy surveys, collects data, and performs analyses that appear in the *Quality Counts, Technology Counts,* and *Diplomas Count* annual issues of *Education Week.*

[26] The most recent graduation rate available from the EPE Research Center at the writing of this case study was from 2006. The district's numbers show a further increase in the Wichita Public Schools graduation rate between 2006 and 2009 (see Appendix B for a comparison of district, state, and national graduation rates calculated by the EPE Research Center, NCES, and Wichita Public Schools).

Figure 5 *Graduation rates (1996–2006)*



Source: EPE Research Center

Wichita Public Schools as one of 27 school districts from across the country to surpass expected graduation-rate improvements between 1996 and 2006 by 10 percentage points or more.[27] According to the district's numbers, an increase in the graduation rate of minorities had driven much of this as graduation rates for blacks had risen by 17.4 percentage points and Hispanics by 22.3 percentage points between 1999 and 2006 (see Figure 6).

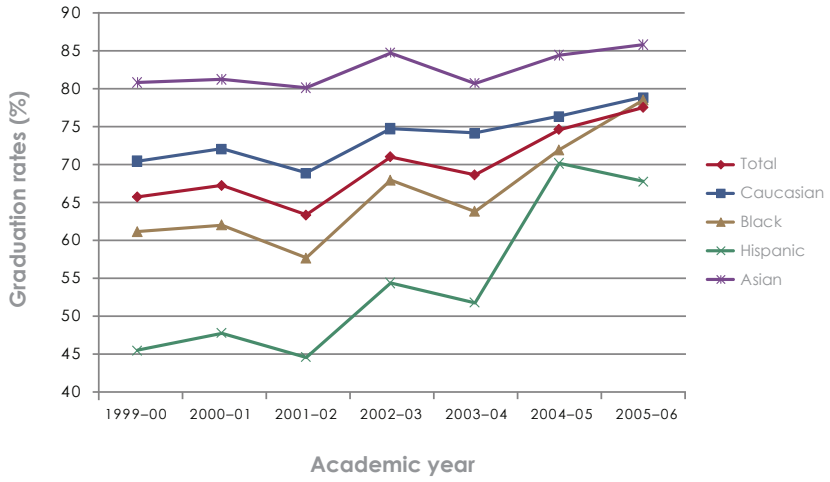
One reason for this increase was undoubtedly because of the credit-recovery portion of the program, which allowed students who might have dropped out or failed to graduate on time because they were missing credits to recover these courses and graduate. Determining the full extent of the credit-recovery option on the district's graduation rate is difficult, however, because limited data exists to measure its impact.

Another reason why the district's graduation rate had risen was because of the additional graduates from the dropout-recovery centers (see Figure 7).[28] In Wichita

[27] Christopher B. Swanson, "Gauging Graduation, Pinpointing Progress," *Diplomas Count 2009,* June 11, 2009, p. 24, 30–31, http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/06/11/34progress.h28.html (accessed January 20, 2010).

[28] In 2007–08, the number of graduates decreased when the program began using Apex Learning's online courses, which were more challenging for the students than the previous computer-based courses the program had used.

Figure 6 *Graduation rates by race (1996–2006)*



Source: Wichita Public Schools

Public Schools, students who graduate from dropout-recovery centers are included in the district's graduation rate. Wichita Public Schools calculates its graduation rate using the following formula:

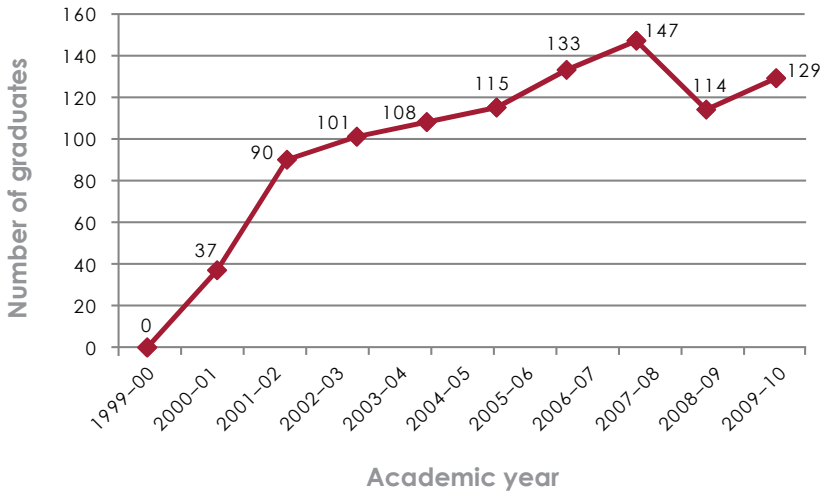
$$\frac{\textit{Number of graduates}}{\textit{(Number of graduates + year 4 dropouts + year 3 dropouts + year 2 dropouts + year 1 dropouts)}}$$

Overall, graduates from dropout-recovery centers have been responsible for only a small increase in the district's graduation rate—roughly a percentage point in any given year. During this period, Wichita Public Schools also implemented changes to improve instructional delivery and support for students, which affected the district's graduation rate as well.

The mean adjusted graduation rate[29] for the dropout-recovery centers was 81 percent in the 2008–09 school year. This number takes into account the number

[29] To determine the adjusted graduation rate, the district divides the number of probable graduates (students are counted as probable graduates if earning a half credit per month combined with entry credits would allow them to accumulate 22 credits by the end of the academic year) by the total number of students enrolled in the center. When these numbers were calculated for the 2008–09 school year, Towne East had a graduation rate of 46 percent, Towne West of 46 percent, Workforce of 75 percent, and Urban League of 158 percent (a graduation rate of over 100 percent is possible if a center has some students earning more than a half credit per month, or five full credits a school year).

Figure 7 *Graduates from dropout-recovery centers (2000–2009)*

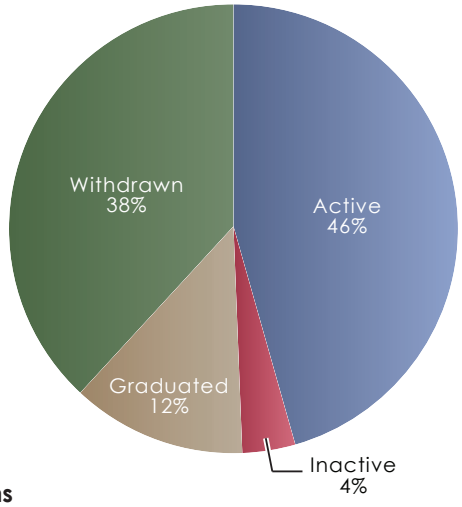


Source: Wichita Public Schools

of students enrolled who would be expected to accumulate enough credits by the end of the year to graduate—in essence, the program's true seniors—and calculates how many of that group graduate. Although the dropout-recovery centers help a large number of students that the traditional schools had failed earn their high school diplomas, there is also a significant number of students enrolled in dropout-recovery centers that do not graduate. In the 2008–09 school year, 38 percent of the students enrolled in dropout-recovery centers withdrew before earning high school diplomas (see Figure 8). Students withdraw for a variety of reasons after spending varying lengths of time in the program. Some students lack the motivation or self-discipline to finish a course. Several teachers also report that students who enter the program with fewer than 15 course credits (Wichita Public Schools requires students to complete 22 course credits to graduate) tend to become burned out and withdraw without earning a high school diploma. Still others elect to use the skills they have developed to take the GED exam instead.

A key to evaluating the effectiveness of the dropout-recovery centers would be to conduct a longitudinal study that tracked all of the students in the dropout-recovery centers to understand if and how their job prospects and earnings changed over time as a result of attending this program and depending on whether they earned a high school diploma or a GED compared to similar groups of students without access to this type of program.

Figure 8 *Status of students who had enrolled in dropout-recovery centers (2008–09 school year)*



Definitions

Active—A student who is actively progressing toward meeting the Wichita Public Schools graduation requirements.
Inactive—A student who is currently on leave with the intention of returning.
Graduated—A student who has successfully met all of the Wichita Public Schools graduation requirements.
Withdrawn—A student who has exited without meeting the Wichita Public Schools graduation requirements.

Source: Wichita Public Schools

Widening the scope

In 2008, the program received a new source of students when the Kansas State Legislature revised Kansas's compulsory school attendance requirement and began allowing students to drop out of school at the age of 16.[30] With this revision, dropout-recovery centers began admitting 16- and 17-year-olds directly out of high school.

Some in the district saw this as good news. For students who were not succeeding in traditional brick-and-mortar schools and were at risk of dropping out, allowing them to enroll in dropout-recovery centers earlier and try learning in an educational environment designed specifically for their needs and circumstances could prevent them from temporarily or permanently exiting the education system. Additionally, the revised statute gave individual high schools a potential

[30] For the full text of Kansas Statutes Annotated (KSA) 72-1111, see http://kansasstatutes.lesterama.org/Chapter_72/Article_11/72-1111.html (accessed January 20, 2010).

incentive to send students to dropout-recovery centers if they were not succeeding in the traditional environment. In Wichita Public Schools, when students enrolled in dropout-recovery centers directly out of high school, their comprehensive high schools counted them as transfers. If those students later withdrew from a dropout-recovery center, however, then the program's dropout numbers were randomized out to the district so the dropout was not included in the comprehensive high school's graduation numbers. This meant that individual Wichita high schools could potentially increase their graduation rates by transferring students who would have otherwise dropped out to dropout-recovery centers.

Others were less excited about the change. They believed that one of the reasons why the dropout-recovery centers had worked so well was because the students who had enrolled were highly motivated to earn high school diplomas. They ascribed this motivation to the fact that these students had been in the workforce for a few years before enrolling in the program and had witnessed how crucial it was to have a diploma. Advocates of computer-based learning hope that over time, Wichita Public Schools' Learning Centers program will continue to evolve in a student-centric direction that motivates an increasing number of dropouts of all ages and current high school students to earn high school diplomas.

Appendix A *Wichita, Kansas, and U.S. demographic breakdowns*

	Wichita	Kansas	U.S.
Total population	344,284	2,688,418	281,421,906
Percent of population that is black, Hispanic, or Native American	22.2%	13.6%	25.7%
Percent of households with children that are single mother	7.5%	6.0%	7.2%
Percent of population that is high school graduate or higher	83.8%	86.0%	80.4%
Percent of population with bachelor's degree or higher	25.3%	25.8%	24.4%
Percent of population unemployed	3.6%	2.8%	3.7%
Mean household earnings	$49,736	$51,037	$56,604
Percent of households with public assistance income	3.1%	2.4%	3.4%
Percent of families below poverty level	8.4%	6.7%	9.2%
Percent of students with free or reduced-price school lunch eligibility	50.4%	32.2%	42.5%
Median home value	$78,900	$83,500	$119,600

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2000)

Appendix B *Graduation rates (1994–2009)*

	EPE Research Center			NCES			Wichita Public Schools	
	Wichita	Kansas	U.S.	Wichita	Kansas	U.S.	Wichita	Kansas
1995-96	51.3 %	72.8 %	66.4 %	60.1 %	77.1 %	71.0 %	N/A	N/A
1996-97	52.8 %	73.8 %	65.7 %	57.5 %	76.9 %	71.3 %	75.4 %	84.1 %
1997-98	54.3 %	72.2 %	65.6 %	59.4 %	76.0 %	71.3 %	75.1 %	84.1 %
1998-99	53.3 %	73.5 %	66.0 %	57.1 %	76.7 %	71.1 %	68.3 %	83.4 %
1999-00	58.6 %	73.5 %	66.8 %	59.4 %	77.1 %	71.7 %	65.8 %	83.7 %
2000-01	57.8 %	74.3 %	68.0 %	60.3 %	76.5 %	71.7 %	67.3 %	85.2 %
2001-02	55.4 %	74.9 %	69.3 %	59.8 %	77.1 %	72.6 %	63.4 %	85.7 %
2002-03	59.6 %	75.1 %	69.7 %	60.7 %	76.9 %	73.9 %	71.1 %	88.2 %
2003-04	59.6 %	74.4 %	70.0 %	61.0 %	77.9 %	74.3 %	68.7 %	88.9 %
2004-05	54.5 %	74.3 %	70.6 %	63.1 %	79.2 %	74.7 %	74.7 %	90.5 %
2005-06	61.0 %	75.4 %	69.2 %	66.1 %	77.5 %	73.4 %	77.6 %	90.7 %
2006-07	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	76.4 %	89.7 %
2007-08	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	79.3 %	90.1 %
2008-09	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	81.8 %	98.2 %

Equations for graduation rates[1]

EPE Research Center:

Cumulative promotions index = (10th graders, fall 2006 / 9th graders, fall 2005) x (11th graders, fall 2006 / 10th graders, fall 2005) x (12th graders, fall 2006 / 11th graders, fall 2005) x (diploma recipients, spring 2006 / 12th graders, fall 2005)

NCES:

Average freshmen graduation rate 2006 = Total diplomas 2006 / Average freshmen 2003

Average freshmen 2003 = (Prorated grade 10 2004 + Prorated grade 9 2003 + Prorated grade 8 2002) / 3

Prorated grade 10 2004 = Grade 10 2004 / (Total membership 2004 – Ungraded students 2004) x Total membership 2004

Wichita Public Schools:

Graduation rate = Number of graduates / (Number of graduates + Year 4 dropouts + Year 3 dropouts + Year 2 dropouts + Year 1 dropouts)

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[1] Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," National Center for Education Statistics, 1991–2006; "Kansas State Graduation Brief 2009: A special supplement to Education Week," *Diplomas Count 2009 Broader Horizons: The Challenge of College Readiness for All Students,* 2009; USD 259 Cohort Data by Type and Gender, 1997–2009, http://www3.ksde.org/cgi-bin/dist_rpt_yrs?org_no=D0259; Yearly Totals State Cohort Data by Year, Type and Gender All Schools, 1997–2009, http://www3.ksde.org/k12/state_reports.html.

About the author

KATHERINE MACKEY is a research fellow at Innosight Institute. Prior to joining Innosight Institute, she was an eleventh-grade English teacher at Highland High School, a public high school in Utah. Mackey holds a BA in English and French from Wellesley College and a MA in Education from Harvard University.

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