

Opinion:

Dropout report skews reality

New system's creative accounting would make Bernie Madoff blush.

Alan Bonsteel, M.D.

President, Parents For Educational Choice

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The tidal wave of teenagers dropping out of California public schools is by far the greatest crisis facing our Golden State. Already, the prisons we've had to build to house all those dropouts cost more than the UC and California State University systems combined. And that's only the beginning of our pain. A child who drops out today will be a tragedy for half a century.

We got into this mess in large part because the California Department of Education lied to us for so long. As recently as 1998, its claim that the state dropout rate was 3.2 percent was reported throughout the news media without question. We lost more than a decade during which we could have implemented proven strategies to keep kids in school.

Ten years after the whistle was blown, the CDE has rolled out its "computerized" dropout counting system. It deceives rather than informs and gets a D-minus grade.

First, it is computerized in name only. The two-thirds of the kids who stay in the system and finally graduate are accurately computer-tracked. But the one third who drop out are subject to a level of creative accounting that would make Bernie Madoff blush. Kids who get thrown in the slammer, for example, aren't considered dropouts as long as their prison offers classes.

Second, although the CDE tracked middle school dropouts last year, it didn't tell us. It came as no surprise to dropout researchers that 15 percent of all California dropouts occur in seventh and eighth grades. It would have been nice, though, if the CDE had shared with the public the data our tax dollars had paid for.

Third, the CDE numbers for district dropouts do not include students who made a pit stop, however briefly, in the county "continuation" schools. This not only dramatically understates district dropouts, but it makes the district dropout numbers not at all comparable to the state dropout figures. Thus, just as in Garrison Keilor's *Prairie Home Companion*, where all the children are above average, almost all of the state's districts get to claim "better than average" dropout numbers, and the full weight of the crisis tends to be viewed as someone else's problem.

Fourth, once kids arrive at those misnamed county "continuation" schools, 85 percent of them drop out. These county schools are the biggest dropout factories in the state, but they have successfully evaded publicity in the CDE press release and accountability to the public thus far.

Finally, there is an eighth-grade algebra error in the CDE calculations. A dropout rate is properly calculated by dividing dropouts by enrollment. The CDE divides dropouts by the sum of enrollment, plus students who have left the state, plus students who have transferred to private schools. This not only has the effect of understating the total dropout rate by about 2 percent but also provides an incentive to mislabel dropouts as kids who have left the state.

The net result is that while it is clear that California is losing one in three of its kids to dropping out, the CDE is claiming that only one in five drop out.

We now know with certainty how to stem the tide of dropouts. Several carefully controlled, meticulously designed academic studies have shown that when families are given an array of attractive options from which to choose, their kids stay in school and walk across the stage on graduation day to claim that cherished diploma. In California, that publicly funded school choice has thus far meant charter schools – our public schools of choice – which have left our traditional public schools in the dust in graduation rates.

The days of factory-style, one-size-fits-all compulsory municipal schools must come to an end.

What we need, instead, are schools of choice where the students are bonded by a shared purpose, whether it be a passion for the arts, a shared ethnic heritage, or a fascination with science and math.

There is creativity, energy and vitality in schools of choice. There is a commitment that comes from having freely chosen. The right to choose carries with it a dignity, a shared purpose.

Schools of choice will bring us together and keep our kids in school.