

# High School Dropouts

*Report on Greenwood County  
and South Carolina*



For the  
Greenwood Economic Alliance

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*Project Briefing*

## Introduction

South Carolina faces a particularly troublesome dilemma with the rate of high school dropouts in the state. The implications of this trend not only influence the immediate career of a students' public school experience, but reach far into the future with implications for public welfare. The Bureau of Labor Statistics<sup>1</sup> has shown that high school dropouts earn an average \$21,400 annually compared to their high school graduate counterparts who earn \$28,800. The average annual income for an adult with a bachelor's degree jumps to \$46,300. Over the course of a thirty year working career, a college graduate with a bachelor's degree will earn \$747,000 more than a high school dropout.

Although dropout statistics, and the methods with which they are calculated, vary widely throughout the United States, the South Carolina Department of Education<sup>2</sup> (SDE) defines a dropout as: a student who leaves school for any reason, other than death, before graduation or completion of a program of studies and without transferring to another school or institution.

With very few exceptions, states provide highly ambiguous data pertaining to dropout and completion rates. According to the Education Trust<sup>3</sup> most states report very high rates of high school completion, but those rates proved to be significantly worse when compared to multiple independent analysis. Many states, South Carolina included, fail to accurately track a cohort through their entire high school career from 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Many of the models that states employ in calculating dropout rates fail to adequately account for the number of students who repeat a grade, complete a general education degree (GED), or drop out during a year other than the 12<sup>th</sup> grade<sup>4</sup>.

Swanson<sup>5</sup>, who is widely recognized as an expert on high school graduation rates, approximates the probability that a student entering the 9<sup>th</sup> grade will complete high school in four years with a regular diploma using the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI). He reported South Carolina's CPI at 51% (lowest in the United States) compared to the state reported graduation rate of 78%.

The SDE currently uses a twelve month dropout collection cycle that begins the first day of school and ends the day before the first day of school the following academic year. The department reports the proportion of overall students who have dropped out which is termed an event rate.



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In 2004, South Carolina awarded 32,310 diplomas. That same cohort in 2001, when they entered the ninth grade, numbered 64,735. Without any consideration for fluctuations in annual attendance between the ninth and twelfth grade, the resulting is a 49% completion rate for that particular group, which closely coincides with the findings of Haney, Madaus, and Abrams<sup>6</sup> who found that South Carolina was the lowest in the United States the same year with a 51% completion rate. These comparisons indicate little change in the high school completion rate in South Carolina between 2003 and 2004.

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## Greenwood County

Currently in Greenwood County there are four high schools-Emerald, Greenwood-in district 50, Ware Shoals-in district 51, and Ninety Six-in district 52. Table 1 illustrates the number of 2004 diplomas awarded compared to the 2001 9<sup>th</sup> grade enrollment of the same cohort.

Table 1  
Greenwood Enrollment, Graduation Rate, and CPI Indexes

District	2001 9 <sup>th</sup> Grade Enrollment*	2004 High School Diplomas*	Graduation Rate*	CPI
Greenwood 50	849	489	80.4	57.59
Greenwood 51	108	52	59.1	48.14
Greenwood 52	142	76	77.6	53.52

\*South Carolina Department of Education

The graduation rate indicates the proportion of diplomas awarded compared to the average daily membership of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In contrast, the CPI indicates the statistical probability of a student entering the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and completing high school in four years with a regular diploma. The method used to calculate the CPI compares the annual change in enrollment of a particular cohort from grade 9 through their attainment of a diploma. The resulting ratios of change year-over-year are multiplied to arrive at an estimated CPI. This method, or similar one, has been accepted as generally more indicative of overall completion as it tracks the cohort through their high school career.

The Urban Institute<sup>4</sup> reported South Carolina's overall CPI to be 51%. With the exception of Greenwood 51 (48 %), Greenwood County exceeded the state CPI. The SDE reported an average graduation rate of 74.81% for the state overall with 80.4% in Greenwood 50, 59.1% in Greenwood 51, and 77.6% in Greenwood 52.



**Dropout Levels and Academic Achievement**

High school dropout rates are known to impact the future of students, but what are the implications for the achievement or expected levels of achievement in the schools?

Recent federal legislation in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has placed increased accountability on schools to provide adequate public education and address dropout rates. According to The Education Trust<sup>3</sup>, states have been given so much discretion that they have made the provisions for meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) in graduation rates almost meaningless. New Mexico and South Carolina have said that no progress is required, “as long as the graduation rate doesn’t decline, is sufficient.” Both New Mexico and South Carolina state departments of education have claimed AYP for graduation rates.

The Legislative Incentive for Future Excellence (LIFE) Scholarship is a value - based scholarship awarded to South Carolina high school seniors. It is intended to increase access to higher education, improve employability of South Carolina students, provide an incentive for students to be better prepared for college, and motivate students to graduate from college<sup>2</sup>.

To be eligible for a LIFE Scholarship, a student must have graduated from high school or a home school program, or graduated from a preparatory high school outside South Carolina while a legal dependent. Students must also meet two of the following three requirements: graduated with a minimum of a 3.0 cumulative grade average on a 4.0 scale; scored at least 1100 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or 24 on the ACT; graduated in the top 30% of the graduating class.

Table 2 indicates the dropout and LIFE Scholarship percentages for both South Carolina and Greenwood districts.

Table2  
State and Greenwood Dropout Rates and LIFE Scholarship Percentages.

District/State Total	2003 Dropout Percentage	2004 Dropout Percentage	2003 Percent LIFE Scholarship	2004 Percent LIFE Scholarship
Greenwood 50	2.7	3.2	17	18.6
Greenwood 51	6	7	7.1	3.6
Greenwood 52	2.9	.6	23.4	10.4
South Carolina	3.32	3.17	12.45	12.5

\*South Carolina Department of Education



### Analysis of Data

In order to examine the potential effect of dropout rates on student achievement, a correlation between dropout percentage and those seniors who qualify for a LIFE Scholarship was indicated. Although caution is advised that correlation does not bespeak causation, such an examination may reveal statistical relationships between the variables.

Although a correlation coefficient does not indicate causation, it does show relatedness of different variables. The resulting statistical indicator is  $r$ . If  $r$  is close to 0, it indicates there is no relationship between the variables. If  $r$  is a positive integer, it means that as one variable gets larger the other gets larger. If  $r$  is negative it means that as one gets larger (dropout percentage), the other gets smaller (LIFE Scholarship percentage). The occurrence of a negative correlation is often referred to as an inverse correlation.

The results of the analysis, which examined the correlation between dropout rates and LIFE Scholarship rates in 2003, revealed no statistically significant relationship between the two variables ( $r = -.899$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The results of the analysis, which also examined the correlation between dropout rates and LIFE Scholarship rates in 2004, revealed no statistically significant relationship between the two ( $r = -.546$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

These findings, though not statistically significant, are indicative that as the percentage of school dropout increases, the percentage of those who qualify for LIFE Scholarships will decrease given the inverse correlation.



### Implications and Recommendations

Given the results of an analysis of data for the Greenwood districts, there are indications that an increase in the high school dropout rate may threaten student access to higher education, fail to improve employability of South Carolina students, or provide an incentive for students to be better prepared for college, and discourage students to graduate from college (as this is the stated purpose of the LIFE Scholarship). Further implications suggest that the Greenwood districts put in place measures to curb the rate of school dropouts in their schools. Additionally, an expanded, more in-depth analysis of school dropouts may be necessary to identify longitudinal dropout trends in the Greenwood area. Furthermore, student-level tracking is indicated as to maximize data accuracy when students are known to be transient between schools, districts, and high school equivalent programs.

A review of the related literature has identified numerous measures to address the dropout rates in schools. Educational Testing Service<sup>7</sup> has shown that high schools need rigorous curricula with highly qualified teachers administered by school leaders capable of attracting and retaining successful faculty.

Etheridge<sup>8</sup> concluded in a district-wide case study of Berkeley County, South Carolina that flexibility for school planning and program implementation significantly enhanced opportunities to improve student achievement when planning, with school – based funding became part of the district philosophy.

The National Dropout Prevention Center<sup>9</sup> identified 15 effective strategies that have been successful at reducing school dropout rates-among them are:

- Systemic Renewal—A process of evaluating goals and objectives of the entire educational organization.
- School and Community Collaboration—A supportive social infrastructure made up of both community and school personnel.
- Safe Learning Environments—Violence prevention and conflict resolution is taught and practiced.
- Early Interventions—Early family engagement in learning in the home.
- Early Childhood Education—Birth to age five.
- Early Literacy—Reading and writing proficiency taught in the early years.
- Mentoring and Tutoring—One-to-one assistance provided in school.
- Service-Learning—Merging academics at school with community service activities.
- Alternative Schooling—Providing potential dropouts with graduation options.



- After School Opportunities—Constructive and engaging fulfillment of “gap time.”

Additional research<sup>10</sup> has determined that certain characteristics may put some students at greater risk for dropping out. Hispanic and Native American students have a lower graduation rate than other ethnic groups.

Although males and females do differ significantly in their dropout rates, girls are more likely to dropout due to pregnancy and marriage, while boys do so more for employment and behavioral problems.

There are known to be other social signs of dropout propensity<sup>10</sup>. Among the social factors that seem to be related to dropout behavior are:

- Peer Relationships—Social isolation and little or no involvement in school activities (either during or after school).
- Family Dynamics—Including lower household income, parental and sibling attitudes toward school, families from diverse cultures/languages, and school personnel misinterpreting diverse family cultures and practices.
- Psychological Attachment—Failure to stress an attachment to school and ownership in learning.

Perhaps the single strongest predictor of dropout behavior is academic performance. Regardless of ability- poor grades, low test scores, and grade retention is highly correlated with dropout behavior. Retained students are shown to be three times more likely to quit school than their non-retained peers.





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