

## **Factors contributing to secondary school dropouts in an urban school district**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contribute to the dropout epidemic in secondary schools in the largest urban school district in the State of Mississippi, where annually a high percentage of students, particularly African Americans, fail to graduate with their Grade 9 cohorts. This study used a descriptive and causal-comparative research design to identify the contributing factors to secondary school dropouts among 80 students enrolled in the Career Academic Placement (CAP) program in the Jackson Public School District. Findings indicated that the number one factor that led students to drop out of school was feeling that they were behind, or failing course work. This affected about 55% of the students, causing them to leave school early.

Keywords: high school dropouts, dropouts and retention rates, dropout-prevention programs, dropouts in urban schools

## INTRODUCTON

Many studies have concluded that young people who drop out of regular school face a great deal of economic challenges and burdens because of their inability to find adequate avenues for employment. According to Koedel (2008), the high school dropout problem had become such a damaging public concern that some urban schools were being tagged with the nickname-dropout factories because they were graduating fewer than 50% of their students. For many years, nationwide, approximately one third of American high school students have not been graduating from high school. For example, Mishel and Roy (2006) indicated that twenty-five percent (25%) of dropouts were white students, and 50% were African American students. Laird, Cataldi, Kewal-Ramani, and Chapman (2008) presented estimates of dropout and completion rates for 2006. The data showed trends in dropout and completion rates over the last three decades (1972-2006), including characteristics of dropouts and non-dropouts during these years. The data indicated that the average freshman graduation rate (AFGR), which provides an estimate of the percentage of public high school students graduating with a regular diploma four years after starting ninth grade, was 74.7% for the class of 2005 (Laird et al., 2008). According to this report, students living in low-income families were approximately four times more likely to dropout of high school between 2005 and 2006 than students living in high-income families.

For African American students, the dropout rate has been a tragic cycle that has not improved over the last few decades and has continued to increase, almost unnoticed by the general public, in part because of the inconsistent manner in which the data relating to dropouts have been gathered and reported (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006). As Swanson (2003) concluded some time ago, states like Mississippi use a flawed reporting system developed by the NCES to overestimate graduation rates and underestimate dropout rates. As a result, the public does not always get an accurate accounting of the dropout situation.

Although innumerable statistics and research have been compiled and conducted on dropouts in the Jackson (Mississippi) Public School District (JPSD), there is little information from the dropouts themselves on why they dropped out from the regular secondary school environment. An understanding of the problem of dropouts in the JPSD should facilitate the development and implementation of policy changes that could lay the foundation for changing the pattern of the high dropout rates of all students, but especially of young African American students.

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contribute to the dropout epidemic in secondary schools in the JSPD where annually a high percentage of students, particularly African Americans, fail to graduate with their ninth-grade cohorts from public high schools. The dropout rate in Mississippi is about 38% compared to 30% nationwide, which translates to about 12,000 students each year (Scallan, 2008).

The study was specifically designed to answer the following research question: What factors influenced the students in the Career Academic Placement (CAP) program in JPSD to drop out of regular school as measured by the JPSD Questionnaire?

## THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contribute to the dropout epidemic in secondary schools in the JPSD where annually a high percentage of students, particularly African Americans, fail to graduate with their ninth-grade cohorts. For African

American students, the dropout rate has been a tragic cycle that has not improved over the last few decades and has continued to increase, almost unnoticed by the general public, in part because of the inconsistent manner in which the data relating to dropouts have been gathered and reported (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006). However, to prevent students from dropping out of school, educators believe that it is necessary to first know why they drop out.

This study used a descriptive and causal-comparative research design to identify the contributing factors to secondary school dropouts among 80 students enrolled in the Career Academic Placement (CAP) program in the JPSD. CAP is an educational program designed for students ages 17-21 sponsored by the JPSD. The program was developed as an alternative approach to a high school diploma and as an avenue for those students who need an alternative process to complete their high school education. Students receive training in this program that leads to the GED certificate, which makes them eligible for employment or continuing education opportunities.

The JPSD Questionnaire was utilized for the study. The JPSD questionnaire used in this study was developed by the researcher to examine the factors that contribute to the dropout epidemic in secondary schools in the JPSD. Data were analyzed to answer the research question posed in the study. Differences in the students' responses were examined using a Mann-Whitney  $U$  and Kruskal-Wallis analysis of variance (ANOVA).

The participants for this study were a group of 80 students from the JPSD who were enrolled in the CAP program for the 2009-2010 school year. All students attending CAP were students eligible to be enrolled in the regular classes in the JPSD, but these students had experienced difficulties with the regular classroom setting. Permission to survey the students was obtained from the Jackson Public School District.

## **JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY**

Public schools have been under intense public scrutiny in recent years. Commencing with *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983) and continuing through decades of governmental and corporate reports, public schools have been blamed for the declines in U.S. competitiveness in the global market and the perceived decline in values that the United States has experienced at home. According to Swanson (2003), the spiraling dropout rate is one of the reasons cited for the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, as the United States Congress took steps to highlight the severity of the dropout problem by imposing priorities and standards on school districts. Hence, NCLB mandated that the nation's public school systems achieve levels of educational proficiency for all students. Moreover, NCLB required that schools establish a performance-based accountability system that reports on progress toward the goal of a 12-year target of universal student proficiency (Losen, 2004).

The numbers relating to dropouts in the southern states are associated with an increasing human, economic, and social cost to the region. These high dropout numbers translate into a failing economy and a curtailment of opportunities for youth. Stephan (2004) concluded that keeping youth in school represents a strong educational policy, a sound economy, and public safety. Earning a high school diploma is a significant, measurable outcome as well as a strong predictor of the future social and economic success of students. It is estimated that dropouts have cost the state of Mississippi a substantial amount in terms of

higher crime and incarceration rates, increased welfare, and more dependence on public welfare (Wright, 2008).

Researchers from the National Women's Law Center (NWLC) have also shared the belief that the tremendous increase in dropouts over the years carries with it economic burdens for some communities and many families (NWLC, 2008a). An inordinate number of girls have been dropping out of high school. After dropping out, these females are subjected to particular economic risk compared to their male counterparts (NWLC, 2008a). Female dropouts earn significantly lower wages than male dropouts; they are at greater risk of unemployment; and they are more likely to rely on public support programs. When assessed in relation to the federal poverty line (FPL), women without high school diplomas earn an average salary about 7% below the FPL for a family of three (\$15,520 vs. \$16,600), while women with high school diplomas earn an average salary about 32% above the FPL (\$21,936 vs. \$16,600). According to Day and Newburger (2002), Mississippi loses more than \$1.2 billion annually because of dropouts' inability to contribute to the economy. As such, if all of Mississippi's employed dropouts completed high school and earned the same annual median income as high school graduates, they would increase their income by \$1.8 billion annually (NWLC, 2008b).

According to Koedel (2008), economists and policy makers maintain that completion of high school is the absolute minimal educational level necessary to prepare students for the vast majority of jobs in the modern economy. It has been estimated that an extra year of schooling corresponds to a 12% to 16% increase in wages, and high school graduates earn approximately 75% more annually than high school dropouts do. Additionally, more high school graduates would reduce the prison population (Lochner & Moretti, 2004). According to Koedel (2008), high school dropouts, especially African American males, are more likely to be arrested and convicted. Koedel also reported that as students' dropout and enrollment numbers decrease, there is also a reduction in funds that the Jackson Public School District receives from the state of Mississippi and also from the federal government. Therefore, increasing the number of high school graduates would help to reduce the prison population and save taxpayers \$67 million annually (NWLC, 2008b). It is evident that graduates earn higher wages and have more spending power. Raising the number of students who graduate, therefore, increases overall earning potential, which, in turn, results in increased purchasing power and higher tax receipts.

Maintaining high school enrollment is a key factor in developing a workforce that is highly competitive. High school dropouts nationwide are about three times as likely as high school graduates to become homeless and poverty stricken (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2001). This had been the trend for the last few decades, and there has been little change. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the trend for the 1999-2000 school year showed a .08% dropout rate in the first six grades, but in Grades 7-12 the rate increased drastically. The rate went from 1.01% in Grade 12, with a high of 4.93% in Grade 10 for that year. According to the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE, 2001), in the fall of 1994-1995 school year there were 42,182 students enrolled in Mississippi in Grade 7. Five years later, the class of 2000 enrolled only 26,354-62% of the class-statewide.

The trend in the JPSD mirrored that of the state data with 38% of the students who enrolled in Grade 7 missing from their graduating class in JPSD. That percentage seemed to be similar to the rate for the five classes preceding 2000. The class of 1995 enrolled 62% of its entering seventh-graders; the class of 1996 enrolled 63%; the class of 1997 enrolled 63%; the class of 1998 enrolled 63%; and the class of 1999 enrolled 62%. Overall, between the 1998-

1999 school year and the fall enrollment of the 1999-2000 school year, there were 19,421 fewer students enrolled (MDE, 2001). Taken together, according to the Center for Market Labor Studies, 2003, the negative impact of not graduating from school may be more severe for minority groups.

Although innumerable statistics and research have been compiled and conducted on dropouts in the JPSD, there is little information from the dropouts themselves on why they dropped out from the regular secondary school environment. An understanding of the problem of dropouts in the JPSD should facilitate the development and implementation of policy changes that could lay the foundation for changing the pattern of the high dropout rates of all students but especially of young African American students. This will be the first step for educators, policy makers, and leaders to take toward decreasing the high school dropout rate in the JPSD (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

This study provides information that will allow educators, policy makers, and local leaders to better understand the problem of dropouts in the JPSD as they strive to develop solutions to this growing problem and dropout prevention programs.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

At a time when the state of Mississippi is experiencing budgetary shortfalls, especially, regarding fully funding education programs, officials can benefit from the knowledge gained regarding ways of curtailing unnecessary expenditures in other areas of the economy. As Lochner and Moretti (2004) reported, programs specifically developed to improve high school graduation rates have the potential to lower the probability of additional expenditures for jail space, especially for the African American population, making available additional economic resources that could be channeled into different community sectors, including education (Stephan, 2004). Even though state dropout rates are computed for Mississippi, little emphasis has been placed on gathering information at the district level where disparities could occur due to factors such as different levels of poverty, racial segregation, resource allocation, teacher quality, and disciplinary policies (Losen, 2004). According to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (2003), the problems are serious enough, should be viewed with laser-like focus and should be a priority for federal, state, and local educational agencies.

The exact calculation of dropout/enrollment rates has varied, ranging from the use of enrollment data, dropout data, and, in some cases, census data to classify the number of dropouts. However, increasing high school graduation rates have been a problem for states and many school districts for decades, indicating a continuing, substantial racial gap in high school graduation rates (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Mishel & Roy, 2006).

The problem of high school dropouts has emerged as a major community crisis in modern times (Koedel, 2008). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 1990 defined a dropout as a student, who was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year, was not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year, and has not graduated from high school or completed a state-or district-approved educational program (Laird, Cataldi, Kewal-Ramani, & Chapman, 2008). For many years, nationwide, approximately one third of American high school students have not been graduating from high school. Twenty-five percent (25%) of dropouts are white students, and 50% are African American students (Mishel & Roy, 2006). According to Koedel (2008), the high school dropout

problem has become such a damaging public concern that some urban schools are being tagged with the nickname-dropout factories because they are graduating fewer than 50 % of their students.

Maintaining high school enrollment is a key factor in developing a workforce that is highly competitive. High school dropouts nationwide are about three times as likely as high school graduates to become homeless and poverty stricken (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2001). Mississippi has the largest number of teens who are in neither school nor working (Wright, 2008). Mississippi dropouts have a 70% higher unemployment rate than individuals possessing high school diplomas. In response to this, programs such as *On the Bus* (Koedel, 2008), a statewide initiative to prevent students from dropping out, as well as other local programs, have been developed to create dropout prevention interaction with students, their schools, and their communities.

The high school dropout rate in Mississippi is a problem for more than just educators. It affects all factions of the community, businesses, and government (Scallan, 2008). Mississippi leads the nation in the rate of students who drop out of high school. Because of this, the MDE has created new initiatives to forge collaborations between pertinent organizations and individuals to help keep students in school until graduation (Lofton, 2008). Education is viewed as an investment into a better society, higher paying jobs, better health, and greater productivity, which often result in better participation in the democratic process. Some students, who drop out of regular school, continue with a less formal education approach and are able to receive academic recognition. Others, however, are unable to gain the necessary credentials to advance academically, socially, and financially.

### **Economic Impact of Dropping Out**

It is an established fact that young people who drop out of regular school today face a great deal of economic challenges and burdens because of their inability to find adequate avenues for employment. This is a major turnaround compared to 30 years ago when most dropouts were able to work in jobs that enabled them to make enough money to support their families. According to Postsecondary Education Opportunity (2006), over the last 30 years, the average income of families with a high school dropout as head of the household was reduced by more than one third.

The problems of dropout seem to affect as many female students as male students. A study by the NCES (2002) reported that males and females do not significantly differ in dropout rates. However, they seem to drop out for different reasons. Girls are more likely to drop out of regular school due to pregnancy and marriage; boys are more likely to drop out to seek employment. Additionally, boys are twice as likely to drop out as girls due to behavioral difficulties (NCES, 2002).

Moretti (2005) indicated that the high dropout rate can translate into serious social and economic hardships for individuals, families, and communities as a whole. Students who drop out are more likely to end up with a greater degree of unemployment, they are more likely to rely on government assistance, they are more prevalent among the crime statistics, and they are more likely to become wards of the Departments of Correction. For those dropouts who are fortunate enough to find jobs, the majority of them cannot afford adequate health insurance and pension plans. As a result, they are unable to afford necessary health care and cannot afford to live healthy lives like their more gainfully employed counterparts. In addition, they are unable to

make financial contributions or pay taxes, which create additional burdens on the revenue system of many local governments. They also seldom participate in other civic duties such as voting and other related activities (Moretti, 2005).

Several researchers have reported that dropouts generally pay about \$60,000 less in taxes over their lifetimes (Muenning, 2005; Rouse, 2005; Waldfogel, Garfinkel, & Kelly, 2005). An increased graduation rate with its accompanying dropout reduction would result in an increase in a skilled, employable, and engaged population and subsequently increased tax revenues, which would provide additional resources for other social and economic advances (Junn, 2005; Moretti, 2005; Muennig, 2005; Rouse, 2005; Waldfogel et al., 2005).

### **Predictors of High School Dropouts**

McGaha-Garnett (2007), in a study of teenage high school dropouts, found there were significant predictors of dropping out of high school for adolescent mothers. These dropout students had a higher likelihood of having fewer protective factors and more risk factors than currently enrolled students. Some of the predictors include peer academic aspirations and school climate. Results from the McGaha-Garnett (2007) study indicated that dropouts scored significantly lower on peer academic aspiration profiles. Dropouts also perceived their school climate as negative or hostile, which further increased the likelihood of dropping out. The dropout students also reported that they had less family involvement and therefore there was less trust between dropouts and their parents. Moreover, adolescent mothers who dropped out of school demonstrated even fewer positive supportive avenues. The results of the McGaha-Garnett (2007) study indicated that dropouts are less socially competent with healthy relationships, have fewer problem-solving skills, and display an increased dependence on others.

Some additional risk factors for dropping out of high school are poor academic performance, repeat of one or more grades, low socioeconomic backgrounds, pregnancy, and frequent absences/truancy (Lamm et al., 2005; Rumberger, 2001). The different personal and family experiences and varying levels of academic characteristics and skills are cited as major influences. These personal and family characteristics affect the level of commitment and engagement in completing their education. When students are able to share ideas with peers and teachers and when they feel a sense of connection between their academic pursuits and their academic institutions, the chances for academic and social success are increased, and opportunities for dropping out are reduced. Negative experiences almost always fuel the desire to disconnect and drop out. Students who are faced with more than one of the risk factors for dropping out have a higher likelihood of not completing their high school education (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001).

Educational researchers are particularly interested in examining the factors relating to dropouts. For example, Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) conducted a study analyzing the influence of active learning through class discussion, examinations, group involvement, social activities and institutional involvement, and the decision to drop out. The authors found that all of these factors contributed to student satisfaction with school. Prior research suggested that students who are involved in active learning perceive themselves as gaining increased knowledge and better understanding. Thus, they are motivated to continue their education.

## **Academic Factors Contributing to Dropouts**

Jerald (2006) concluded that adverse educational experiences have also been implicated as a possible source of students' discontent with the educational process. Students who struggle academically are more likely to drop out. When a student is not performing successfully as evidenced by low grades, low test scores, failing grades, and experiencing retention in grades below his or her age level, the chances of that student graduating on time begin to diminish and can result in his or her decision to dropout. Prior to dropping out, these students begin to disengage themselves from school by routine absenteeism, truancy, disciplinary problems, and reduced participation in classroom processes. Jerald (2006) also found that as relationships with teachers and peers begin to deteriorate, some students choose to remove themselves from the classroom setting.

Although much is known about students' problems in some areas that result in their decision to drop out of regular school, many of those risk factors are not believed to be accurate predictors of all students who will drop out of regular school in all situations (Jerald, 2006). The risk factors can be used as warning signs by school administrators, parents, and other interested groups, but these warning signs should not be used as dropout predictors. Some school districts use these risk factors as warning signs and indicators of the need for preventive or remedial services to address the personal and educational shortfalls that dropouts are displaying (Jerald, 2006).

Poor academic performance is the single strongest predictor of students dropping out of school (NCES, 2002). Poor grades and poor test scores, regardless of ability, may increase student frustration and reduce motivation to stay in school. Additionally, grade retention is highly related to dropping out of school. Some research indicates that retained students are three times more likely to drop out than non-retained students (NCES, 2002).

## **School Influence on Dropouts' Decision Making**

According to Roderick (2006), students are impacted positively when they attend a school with a supportive environment. High schools that employ teachers who are highly supportive of students contribute to the reduction in the prevalence of dropouts at their sites (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Academic challenge also plays an important role in influencing students' decisions of whether or not to stay in school. According to Roderick (2006) higher academic rigor does not necessarily equate with higher dropout rates.

Lee and Bukam (2003) reported that some high schools that offered a focused, rigorous academic curriculum have significantly higher graduation rates. Some other researchers have argued that curricula should be engaging and relevant to students' interests or career plans. Plank, DeLuca, & Estacion (2005) found that career and technical education (CTE) can boost graduation rates for some students, especially in combination with rigorous academic courses. Snyder (2003) reported the consensus among researchers was that high school curricula should be both challenging and engaging, and schools must be prepared to provide students with the academic support they need to master challenging material.



## **Developmental Patterns Related to Students' Loss of Control**

Lan and Lanthier (2003) examined the developmental patterns of high school Students, tracing the students' involvement from Grade 8 to their senior year. The authors examined personal factors, such as academic performance, motivation, student effort and participation, relationship with significant others, self-esteem, and locus of control. The authors found that by Grade 10 many students became less involved academically, a situation that placed them in a downward spiral toward dropout status. Students who felt they had little support in the academic environment were the ones more likely to decide on dropping out. Lan and Lanthier's (2003) recommendation was that teachers and school faculty should be vigilant regarding the functioning of their students and maintain a friendly and supportive environment that responds to the needs of students. This can provide encouragement to the large number of students who lose control and self-esteem as they lose the desire to solve problems and continue their education.

As Dynarski and Gleason (1998) found, it is very difficult for school districts to accurately predict who will become a dropout. In some cases, a student's attendance or lack of attendance is regarded as a strong predictor, but low performance is measured differently across school districts. Therefore, the impact of grades on the students' stability may not necessarily be easily determined. Most districts boast about providing enrichment activities to inspire and mold successful students. An examination of some intervention programs suggests that these low-intensity programs that provide occasional tutoring, counseling, or activities to boost self-esteem do not contribute much to keep students in school. Researchers believed that high-intensity interventions can significantly reduce dropout rates. Schools that are able to inspire large groups of students to achieve are schools that have supportive environments and provide academic challenges to the entire student body.

Several researchers (Croninger & Lee, 2001; DeLuca & Rosenbaum, 2001; Lee & Bukam, 2003) have reported that students who attend high schools with enrollments lower than 1,500 have better interpersonal relationships with other students and adults. In the smaller schools, the teachers are more supportive of students, they are more focused, and they incorporate an academically rigorous curriculum. As a result, students are more inspired to stay in school and tend to dropout at lower rates. Rumberger (2001) examined the individual and institutional outlook on high school dropouts and formed similar conclusions. Rumberger found that positive student school engagement is significantly associated with the decision by students to dropout of high school. It is evident that students who completed their high school education had sound academic and social engagement. Students who get along well with their peers and teachers may be less influenced to leave school early. Others who have problematic backgrounds, high-risk environments, and non-supportive family members may have limited educational aspirations.

Happel (2006) reported a national survey of young dropouts was conducted by Civic Enterprises, surveying 470 dropouts throughout the country. About 50% of the students stated they left school because they felt the classes were boring and had no relevance to their lives or long-term goals. Several students reported that their schools did not motivate them to work hard. More than half of the students who dropped out had two years or less to complete their high school education. Approximately 62% of those who dropped out reported that they had grades of -C or higher at the time they decided to dropout; 70% were confident that they could have met their high school graduation requirements if they had stayed in school.

## **Instrumentation**

The JPSD Questionnaire was used to conduct this study. The researcher adapted questions from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88; 1988) sponsored by the NCES to develop the questionnaire (NCES, 2002). The NELS:88 study examined data on students' school experiences and personal background information and contained sections that are appropriate for measuring students' perceptions on the factors that contribute to dropping out of high school. The NELS:88 was developed for students identified as being at risk for dropout by characteristics such as socioeconomic status and type of school attended. The language was modified to ensure relevance to today's youth. Other items were adapted by simplifying the language to facilitate comprehension and account for regional considerations.

The JPSD Questionnaire consisted of five parts comprising a total of 38 general questions examining information regarding students' reasons for leaving school, school experiences, academic performance, career goals and plans, employment, attitudes, self-concept, and home life. Part I of the questionnaire was designed to collect demographic data and background information, and Part II was designed to collect data on dropout characteristics, including reasons given for dropping out and academic, social, personal, and economic factors that contribute to dropouts.

## **Findings**

What factors influenced the students in the CAP program in JPSD to drop out of regular school. This question was answered using frequencies and percentages indicating the choices selected by the students regarding the reasons they dropped out of school. Twenty percent (20%) of the students felt that they were pushed to dropout because they felt that the punishment/discipline methods used at their school was not fair. The lack of assistance by teachers in classes in which they were struggling influenced 37.5% of the students to leave school early. Lack of success in the subject area tests influenced 52.5% of the students to leave school early while being bullied influenced 7.5% of the students to leave school early. Falling behind or failing course work influenced 55% of the students to leave school early. Having a baby influenced 15% of the students to leave school early and the need to stay at home to care for a baby or a family member influenced 15% of the students to leave school early. Being incarcerated or in jail influenced 17.5% of the students to leave school early and having family problems influenced 27.5% of the students to leave school early. Addiction or use of drugs influenced 7.5% of the students to leave school early and addiction or use of alcohol also influenced 7.5% of the students to leave school early.

Participants in this study also reported that a boyfriend or girlfriend influenced 7.5% of them to leave school early. However, being held in the same grade influenced 50% of the students to leave school early. A parents' decision to divorce influenced 15% of the students to leave school early. Living with one parent (single-parent home) influenced 20% of the students to leave school early. The need to get a job to aid in household income influenced 20% of the students to leave school early and working long hours influenced 15% of the students to leave school early.

Approximately 92.5% of the students indicated their intention to get a high school diploma or GED, while 32.5% of the students did not attend school on a daily basis before they dropped out. About 47.5% of the students indicated that they succeeded in mathematics in the

last full year of high school and 62.5% of the students indicated that they succeeded in language arts in the last full year of high school. Lastly, 57.5% of the students reported that they succeeded in science in the last full year of high school, and 65% of the students indicated that they succeeded in social studies in the last full year of high school.

There were also other reasons the students provided that were possible motivators that led them to dropout of school. Community crime problems influenced 12.5% of the students to leave school early, while 30% of the students indicated that participating in sports while in school would have kept them from dropping out. Another 32.5% of the students indicated that participating in music or dance programs (band, choir, cheerleaders, dance team, etc.) while in school would have kept them from dropping out. Approximately 82.5% of the students indicated they were planning on going to college and going on to a career path or job was the plan.

Based on the analyses of data, several school factors influenced the students' decision to drop out of school. The most compelling school factors that influenced the students' decision to drop out of school were the students' feeling that they were left behind or failing course work (55% of respondents) and a lack of success in the subject area test (52.5% of respondents). Noteworthy, more than 92% of the respondents reported that feeling of being unsafe at school was not a reason that influenced their decision to drop out of school.

The top personal factors that influenced the students to leave school early were being held in the same grade (50%) and family problems (27.5%). Being incarcerated or in jail influenced 17.5% of the students to leave school early, 15% reported that having a baby, the need to stay at home to care for a baby or a family member, their parents' decision to divorce, and living with one parent (single-parent home) influenced them to leave school early. Another 15% cited working long hours as an influence to leave school early.

With regard to academic factors, more than 47.5% of the students indicated that they succeeded in mathematics, 62.5% succeeded in language, 57.5% succeeded in science, and 65% succeeded in social studies in their last full year of high school, while 32.5% of the students did not attend school on a daily basis before they dropped out of school. Most noteworthy was the fact that 92% of the students indicated that they had intention to get a high school diploma or GED.

With respect to other related factors, 30% of the students indicated that participating in sports while in school would have kept them from dropping out, while 32% cited participating in music or dance programs (band, choir, cheerleaders, dance team, etc.). However, 22.5% indicated that their community did not have quality sports and faith-based programs for youth, and 12.5% indicated that community crime problems influenced them to leave school early. One positive aspect was that about 82.5% of the students indicated they were planning on going to college, and going on to a career path or job.

## **Conclusions**

As Koedel (2008) stressed, the problem of dropouts is a major community crisis in Jackson, Mississippi, as it is in other parts of the United States. Koedel (2008) reported that two out of every five Mississippi high school students drop out of regular school before their graduation day, with some urban schools graduating fewer than 50% of their students. As such, Mississippi leads the nation in the rate of students who drop out of high school. The high school dropout rate in Mississippi is a problem for more than just educators. It affects all factions of the

community, businesses, and government (Scallan, 2008). For African American students, the dropout rate has been a tragic cycle that has not improved over the last few decades and has continued to increase, almost unnoticed by the general public, in part because of the inconsistent manner in which the data relating to dropouts has been gathered and reported (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contribute to the dropout problem in secondary schools in the Jackson (Mississippi) Public School District where annually a high percentage of students, particularly African students, fail to graduate from high school.

Approximately 92.5% of the students in this study indicated their intention to get a high school diploma. In addition, 82.5% of the students indicated they were planning on going to college, and 82.5% of the students indicated they were planning on going to a career path/job. However, as relationships with teachers and peers begin to deteriorate, some students choose to remove themselves from the classroom setting (Jerald, 2006).

Several options were offered by the students in the JPSD CAP program that could possibly have had a higher likelihood of them remaining enrolled in the regular school program. Even though the academic challenge is believed to play the greatest role in influencing the students' decisions to stay in school or not, some students in the CAP program indicated that participating in sports while in school would have kept them from dropping out. However, some others believe that participating in music or dance programs while in school would have kept them from dropping out. Therefore, it is recommended that further research be done on a larger scale examining the dropout rates statewide and the contributing factors of dropouts.

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