

Low-income students six times more likely to drop out of high school

By Khara Sikhan
10 April 2013

Every year, 1.3 million students drop out of high school in the United States. More than half are students of color, and most are low-income. Low-income students fail to graduate at five times the rate of middle-income families and six times that of higher-income youth, according to a recent study by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

What is the cause of these high discrepancies? Politicians and media pundits often point to choices students make, noting that because low-income students often achieve less academically, they focus on entering the job market earlier. However, there are objective causes for low-income students to perform poorly and also for them to attempt to join the job force.

Children in low-income households in the US see a long lasting negative effect on their lives, because of the gutting of social services and the long hours parents must spend working. At the same time that millions of families have seen their living standards erode, children are experiencing worsening conditions in their schools.

With the escalating attacks on the public school system, hundreds of thousands of teachers have been laid off, thousands of schools closed, and millions of students pushed into overcapacity classrooms and overbearing requirements. These circumstances bear down hardest on teenagers in the poorest families, and many are compelled to join the workforce to supplement the household budgets.

Low-wage parents are subjected to non-standard work hours, inflexible work times, and few employer-based benefits, such as the ability to attend to emergencies or doctor's appointments, or paid vacation. One in five of these low-wage jobs are cashiers, cooks, home health aides, and janitors, which are physically taxing but are necessary jobs for the

running of society. Parents working in such jobs have little control over their schedules, and so the time they can spend with their children is often sacrificed. The study recognizes that low-wage workers have little energy or money to devote to their families or themselves, leading to health problems, depression, exhaustion, and an overall decline in the well-being of their home lives. This has a profound impact on the childhoods of low-income youth.

Many low-wage earning parents climb a job ladder. However, managerial positions are especially difficult for parents because managers must be able to work long and varying hours on demand. Parental involvement is known to be a key factor in student success, and some parents feel compelled to turn down promotions to keep parenting time.

The trade-off is clear: support children a bit more financially but be absent, or be involved and struggle financially. This split leads many young students to feel responsibility to participate in income-earning. According to a 2012 study by the Center for Social Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston, this process is one by which working class students are pushed to be "adultified, having to grow up fast to help take care of their families."

Yet after high school, fewer than 50 percent of low-income young people remain consistently connected to school or the labor market between ages 18 and 24, versus 67 and 75 percent of middle-high income families, respectively, the study found. Youth who do not complete high school earn an average of \$25,000 per year during their working lives. However, these figures do not affect a student as heavily as hungry siblings or exhausted parents do. With these responsibilities and home environments, the school structure itself also bears down on them, shifting the

choice away from continuing education further.

With the structure of strictly controlled lectures and teachers pushed to assign large amounts of homework, there is no way these working class students, who have so many responsibilities and obligations already, could possibly keep up. This is especially problematic in mathematics, where concepts are built upon one another over days, weeks, through the years and subjects. Math is the skill required to manage money and budgets when youth make the transition into adulthood and parenthood, and non-understanding causes serious stunting for youth pushed into adult life.

On the choice of working, students face the same rigid controls their parents in low-wage jobs do. Employers are seeing lightening legal obligations for a student's education, combined with the main drive to exploit a section of society that traditionally accepts low wages. The long work hours keep students from being able to engage properly with the large amount of homework. The choice becomes even heavier upon them: "Quit the job to focus on school? Or quit school to keep the job?"

The effects of dropping out of school have serious consequences for society at large. Youth that do not learn the necessary skills and information cannot participate in society properly as adults. Administrations of schools in low-wage areas are complicit in ignoring student needs for the sake of cramming for higher grades on standardized tests; students are now the main tool to receive funding, instead of the recipients of stably funded education.

The adolescent categories are a designation made by educators and psychologists in the twentieth century on the basis of an understanding that those years were formative. The body reaches physical maturity, but the brain is not yet fully developed. Teenagers are not adults and must not be considered as such by society. This recognition accompanied the abolition of child labor, and the huge emphasis on high school and the importance of graduation. Teen pregnancy, illiteracy, childhood malnutrition, and delinquency were seen as symptoms of social backwardness and crisis.

The ruling class is attacking all social welfare programs, and youth are the first victims. The rich point to generational poverty as a cause of the crisis, but that is only a consequence. The ruling class is carrying out policies that force youth "adultification"

by actively repealing the working class gains of the twentieth century for both education and labor laws.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>