

# To address generational poverty, dropout prevention programs must serve those most in need

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*The Mississippi Delta is a region in the United States that has been strongly impacted by poverty; childhood poverty in particular is especially high. Related to childhood poverty are dropout rates that are a function of both individual and environmental factors. **T Price Dooley** examined the effectiveness of school programs designed to keep children in school in seven school districts in the Mississippi Delta. He finds that while initially, the programs seemed to have an impact, with students who participated less likely to drop out than those who did not; the program's effectiveness disappeared when other factors were taken into consideration. He argues that in order for dropout prevention programs to be effective for at-risk youth, they should admit the students who are the most in danger of dropping out and have a mentoring component that is implemented early and often.*



The pervasiveness and complexity of the problem of poverty along the Mississippi River Delta region of the United States has been and continues to be a source of concern for policymakers. Some view this as a natural outcome of income inequality. However, the rural nature of the region, with minimal infrastructure and investment are also contributing issues to local poverty. This climate creates a generational aspect to poverty: If one is born poor in the region, then there is very high likelihood that they would remain poor and that their children would in turn be poor. Education has long been viewed as a means of disrupting this cyclic nature of poverty, and the poverty rate across youth of all backgrounds is [significantly lower](#) for those youth who have at least a high school diploma. Thus, a great deal of energy has been placed in creating programs to keep children in school from kindergarten through high school.

These dropout prevention programs are based around the notion that a child's behavior is learned largely by observation and modeling and the key to increasing retention in school is to increase that child's sense of efficacy. Youth with high levels of efficacy are more likely to set larger goals for themselves and develop strategies to acquire skills and knowledge and thus stay in school. Youth with low levels of efficacy are more likely to believe things are tougher than they really are. Youth will also experience higher levels of stress and depression which increase the likelihood that the child will drop out of school. Thus, key components of successful dropout prevention programs contain early intervention, instruction while counseling, tutoring, student engagement, and motivated learning.

The dropout prevention programs in the Mississippi Delta were made available to students starting in Grade 9 and continuing through the end of high school. The programs administered services that consisted of the development of study skills, homework skills, mentoring, tutoring, instruction on how to conduct themselves within a professional environment, along with counseling and support. Youth, via an application process, sought admission into a select number of program seats each year. Youth who participated in the program had at least one of the following characteristics: possessed a deficiency in basic literacy skills, dropped out of school, was homeless, a runaway, a foster child, currently pregnant or a parenting teen, or a criminal offender.



**Credit:** [Paul \(Flickr, CC-BY-SA- 2.0\)](#)

### **Dropout prevention programs in the Mississippi Delta are not really working**

My initial examination of the dropout prevention programs across the seven school districts in the Mississippi Delta suggested that they were successful in reducing dropout rates. Students who participated in the programs appeared to be more likely to stay in school across basic demographic categories of race, gender, and grade level. However, when adjusted for whether or not the child was age-appropriate for grade, the retention programs were found to not be effective in reducing dropout rate. Instead, African American students, older students, and students who were over-age for grade were more likely to leave school, regardless of whether they participated in the youth retention program. Even when adjusting for student performance, through the examination of combined grade-adjusted test scores for reading and math, program participation did not have any impact on whether or not a student would stay in-school. To put it simply, student who had higher test scores were less likely to drop out of school.

These results suggest there was an issue with the way that students were being admitted into the programs. One possibility was that those that administered the retention programs were selecting students who had higher performance scores. On the other hand, another possibility may have been that students who were more likely to stay in school opted to participate in the program.

These findings have a number of practical implications for entities that administer dropout prevention programs. First, mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that students most in need of retention services are in fact admitted into the programs of this type. Second, dropout prevention programs should be constructed to take into account the unique challenges that older students and African American students face in the Mississippi Delta.

*This article is based on the paper [‘Evaluating Social Cognitive Theory in Action’](#), in *Youth & Society*.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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