

The Silent Epidemic

Perspectives of High School Dropouts

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Executive Summary

The central message of this report is that while some students drop out because of significant academic challenges, most dropouts are students who could have, and believe they could have, succeeded in school. This survey of young people who left high school without graduating suggests that, despite career aspirations that require education beyond high school and a majority having grades of a C or better, circumstances in students' lives and an inadequate response to those circumstances from the schools led to dropping out. While reasons vary, the general categories remain the same, whether in inner city Los Angeles or suburban Nebraska.

Why Students Drop Out

There is no single reason why students drop out of high school. Respondents report different reasons: a lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; academic challenges; and the weight of real world events. But indications are strong that these barriers to graduation are not insurmountable.

- n **Nearly half (47 percent) said a major reason for dropping out was that classes were not interesting.** These young people reported being bored and disengaged from high school. Almost as many (42 percent) spent time with people who were not interested in school. These were among the top reasons selected by those with high GPAs and by those who said they were motivated to work hard.
- n **Nearly 7 in 10 respondents (69 percent) said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard, 80 percent did one hour or less of homework each day in high school, two-thirds would have worked harder if more was demanded of them (higher academic standards and more studying and homework), and 70 percent were confident they could have graduated if they had tried.** Even a majority of those with low GPAs thought they could have graduated.

- n **Many students gave personal reasons for leaving school. A third (32 percent) said they had to get a job and make money; 26 percent said they became a parent; and 22 percent said they had to care for a family member.** Many of these young people reported doing reasonably well in school and had a strong belief that they could have graduated if they had stayed in school. These students also were the most likely to say they would have worked harder if their schools had demanded more of them and provided the necessary support.

It is clear that some dropouts, but not the majority, leave school because of significant academic challenges.

- n **Thirty-five percent said that “failing in school” was a major factor for dropping out;** three out of ten said they could not keep up with schoolwork; and 43 percent said they missed too many days of school and could not catch up.
- n **Forty-five percent said they started high school poorly prepared by their earlier schooling.** Many of these students likely fell behind in elementary and middle school and could not make up the necessary ground. They reported that additional supports in high school that would have made a difference (such as tutoring or after school help) were not there.
- n **Thirty-two percent were required to repeat a grade before dropping out and twenty-nine percent expressed significant doubts that they could have met their high school's requirements for graduation even if they had put in the necessary effort.** The most academically challenged students were the most likely to report that their schools were not doing enough to help students when they had trouble learning and to express doubt about whether they would have worked harder if more had been expected of them.



As complex as these individual circumstances may be, for almost all young people, dropping out of high school is not a sudden act, but a gradual process of disengagement; attendance patterns are a clear early sign.

- n **Fifty-nine to 65 percent of respondents missed class often the year before dropping out.** Students described a pattern of refusing to wake up, skipping class, and taking three hour lunches; each absence made them less willing to go back. These students had long periods of absences and were sometimes referred to the truant officer, only to be brought back to the same environment that led them to become disengaged.
- n **Thirty-eight percent believed they had “too much freedom” and not enough rules.** As students grew older, they had more freedom and more options, which led some away from class or the school building. It was often too easy to skip class or engage in activities outside of school.

For those students who dropped out, the level of proactive parental involvement in their education was low.

- n **Fifty-nine percent of parents or guardians of respondents were involved in their child’s schooling,** with only one-fifth (21 percent) “very” involved. More than half of those parents or guardians who were involved at all were involved mainly for discipline reasons.
- n **Sixty-eight percent of respondents said their parents became more involved only when they were aware that their child was on the verge of dropping out.** The majority of parents were “not aware” or “just somewhat aware” of their child’s grades or that they were about to leave school.

In hindsight, young people who dropped out of school almost universally expressed great remorse for having left high school and expressed

strong interest in re-entering school with students their age.

- n **As adults, the overwhelming majority of poll participants (81 percent) said that graduating from high school was important to success in life.**
- n **Three-fourths (74 percent) said that if they were able to relive the experience, they would have stayed in school** and 76 percent said they would definitely or probably re-enroll in a high school for people their age if they could.
- n **Forty-seven percent would say that not having a diploma makes it hard to find a good job.** They wished they had listened to those who warned them of problems associated with dropping out, or that such voices had been more persistent.

What Might Help Students Stay in School

While there are no simple solutions to the dropout crisis, there are clearly “supports” that can be provided within the academic environment and at home that would improve students’ chances of staying in school. While most dropouts blame themselves for failing to graduate, there are things they say schools can do to help them finish.

- n **Improve teaching and curricula to make school more relevant and engaging and enhance the connection between school and work:** Four out of five (81 percent) said there should be more opportunities for real-world learning and some in the focus groups called for more experiential learning. They said students need to see the connection between school and getting a good job.
- n **Improve instruction, and access to supports, for struggling students:** Four out of five (81 percent) wanted better teachers and three-fourths wanted smaller classes with more



individualized instruction. More than half (55 percent) felt that more needed to be done to help students who had problems learning, and 70 percent believed more tutoring, summer school and extra time with teachers would have improved their chances of graduating.

n Build a school climate that fosters academics:

Seven in ten favored increasing supervision in school and more than three in five (62 percent) felt more classroom discipline was necessary. More than half (57 percent) felt their schools did not do enough to help students feel safe from violence. Seven in ten (71 percent) said their schools did not do enough to make school interesting.

n Ensure that students have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school:

While two-thirds (65 percent) said there was a staff member or teacher who cared about their success, only 56 percent said they could go to a staff person for school problems and just two-fifths (41 percent) had someone in school to talk to about personal problems. More than three out of five (62 percent) said their school needed to do more to help students with problems outside of class. Seven in ten favored more parental involvement.

n Improve the communication between parents and schools:

Seventy-one percent of young people surveyed felt that one of the keys to keeping students in school was to have better communication between the parents and the school, and increasing parental involvement in their child's education. Less than half said their school contacted their parents or themselves when they were absent (47 percent) or when they dropped out (48 percent).

Policy Pathways

The stories, insights and reflections from this student survey and the focus groups reveal the

importance of the student voice in the discussion about what must be done to improve high school graduation rates and to prepare struggling students for successful futures. The students have spoken. It is time for us to respond. To help these students succeed, we need:

In Schools and Communities

n Different schools for different students. Instead of the usual “one-size fits all” school, districts should develop options for students, including a curriculum that connects what they are learning in the classroom with real life experiences and with work, smaller learning communities with more individualized instruction, and alternative schools that offer specialized programs to students at-risk of dropping out. Teachers should have high expectations for their students and try different approaches to motivate them to learn.

n Parent engagement strategies and individualized graduation plans. Schools and teachers should strengthen their communication with parents and work with them to ensure students show up and complete their work and develop graduation plans that are shared with parents.

n Early warning systems. Schools need to develop district-wide (or even state-wide) early warning systems to help them identify students at risk of failing in school and to develop mechanisms that trigger, and ensure there is follow through on, the appropriate support for the students. One clear step relates to absenteeism. Every day, schools should have a reliable list of the students who failed to attend school and should notify parents or guardians immediately and take appropriate action to ensure students attend school and have the support they need to remain in school.

n Additional supports and adult advocates.

Schools need to provide a wide range of supplemental services or intensive assistance



strategies for struggling students in schools – literacy programs, attendance monitoring, school and peer counseling, mentoring, tutoring, double class periods, internships, service-learning, summer school programs, and more – and provide adult advocates in the school who can help students find the support they need. Schools also need to provide appropriate supports to students with special needs, such as pregnant women and students with disabilities, and enhance their coordination with community-based institutions and government agencies.

In States

- n **A re-examination of the compulsory school age requirements.** Students identified “too much freedom” as a key factor that enabled them to drop out of school, and attendance is a strong predictor of dropping out. States should consider raising the age at which students can legally leave school from 16 or 17 to 18. Together with well-trained staffs, more manageable caseloads, working partnerships with government agencies, and efforts to address the underlying conditions that caused students to leave school in the first place, we believe this action could have a significant effect on reducing dropout rates.
- n **More accurate data from states and school districts.** Schools and communities cannot adequately address the dropout problem without an accurate account of it. There are too many ways to calculate graduation and dropout rates that disguise the problem. The National Governors Association has made good progress in getting all 50 states to agree to a common definition for calculating graduation rates. More work needs to be done to build the data systems that will allow states to collect and publish information on graduation and dropout rates and to monitor progress state by state over time.

In the Nation

- n **More accurate national data from federal departments and agencies.** Just as all 50 states are working to obtain more accurate data to help schools and communities understand the extent of the dropout problem, the federal government should review the Current Population Survey and other data it collects to ensure that national data also paints an accurate picture of the problem.
- n **Better incentives under federal law.** Low-performing students need more support in school. Schools should have incentives under the No Child Left Behind law to raise both test scores and graduation rates and to ensure there is a balance between the two so that proper attention is given to low-performing students. If schools are only rewarded for raising test scores, the law could have the unintended effect of giving schools an incentive to “push out” low-performing students whose test scores would bring down school averages.
- n **Research on what works and dissemination of best practices.** While states and school districts have instituted many dropout prevention programs, there remains a need for federal evaluations of these programs and the sharing of the most innovative and successful programs that can be brought to scale.

Next Steps

- n **A national conversation and response.** Educators, policymakers and leaders from various sectors should make addressing the high school dropout epidemic a top national priority. All avenues to invest leaders in a better understanding of the problem and common solutions should be undertaken – including congressional hearings, White House conferences, summits of state and local officials, and public forums in schools and communities. In all cases, the voices of young people who dropped out of high school should be heard.



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