

## **Programs to Increase the Graduation Rate**

April Hawkins

### **Dropping Out**

One of the many educational issues plaguing America is students dropping out of high school. Across the country an alarming exodus is taking place, with 1.2 million students dropping out every year or about 7,000 a day (Tyre, 2010). In record numbers, students are entering society without their high school diploma and becoming a societal issue. High school “dropouts” fare substantially worse in society than their peers on a wide variety of long-term outcomes. This can have a lasting adverse effect (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013). On average, a dropout earns less money, is more likely to be married at a young age, and is unhappier than a school graduate. Thirty years ago, dropouts might have been able to get a blue-collar job that would pay the bills and help support a family. Each year, almost one-third of all public high school students and nearly one-half of all Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans – fail to graduate from public high school with their class (Bridgeland, Diluio, & Morison, 2006). The dropout epidemic in the United States disproportionately affects young people who are low-income, minority, and from single parent homes who attend large public high schools in the inner city (Bridgeland, Diluio, & Morison, 2006). Students should be empowered to stay in school and achieve in life. School should be a place that can provide meaningful programs that support student success and the ultimate goal of graduation. The true purpose of education is to bring profoundness to one's expression, broaden one's perspective and build in the individuals, a better approach of looking at life (Oakes, 2012).

A 2006 Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation survey of dropouts in 25 rural, suburban, and urban communities revealed that only 35 percent said they struggled academically and felt they could not pass the courses needed to graduate (Tyre, 2010). According to the interviews that were conducted as a result of the survey, students' best experiences in school were when teachers drew parallels between

the lesson being taught and subjects outside of school that the students longed to know about. The Gates Foundation survey further gathered that 43% of students said there was not a single adult at their school with whom they felt a connection. The phrase “dropout factory” indicates one of the 1,700 schools where students are leaving school in large numbers without their diploma. Christle and Nelson (2007) used both quantitative and qualitative analysis to determine school characteristics that were related to the dropout rate and to identify qualities of high schools with low dropout rates. They found that schools with high dropout rates had significantly higher suspension rates, a higher percentage of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and higher retention rates than schools with low dropout rates.

### **Early Warning Signs**

Importantly, a substantial body of research suggests that the desire to dropout is often not made suddenly as the result of potentially temporary factors, but rather is part of disengagement from school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). There are several indicators beginning in the elementary years that will assist with identifying students at-risk. They are:

- Elementary school kids that are 2 or more grade levels behind in reading
- A failing grade in Math or English
- Children who transfer several times before the end of middle school
- Students that have been held back
- Lack of parental involvement at an early age

Other signs of potential dropouts occur gradually as the educational platform becomes more difficult. The signs include disengagement from school. Students prefer not to participate in classroom or extra-curricular activities. Hanging out with friends becomes more attractive than getting an education. Attendance and truancy can become an issue as the student struggles to have the desire to be educated. Also, there is a sense of

isolation from teachers and administrators. Students who are on the verge of dropping out feel like they do not have anyone to talk and relate to.

The top reason that students who dropped out of high school identified was that school was not interesting and they were not motivated or inspired (Bridge & Diulio, 2006). Sometimes, it is the little things that keep students from getting to school which in turn will lead to the easy path of dropping out. Clean clothes, broken alarm clock, dental work, hygiene, hunger, and failure to get a good night's sleep are all contributing factors that can eventually lead to students dropping out. Sixty-six percent of the students surveyed by Civic Enterprises answered that "they would have worked harder if their high school demanded more". Students who are dropping out and missing class are doing so because the school work is irrelevant, not challenging, and not interesting. With more personalized learning that is tailored to each student and his or her individual needs as well as connections to an adult, students are more likely to stay in school and graduate.

Although dropouts offer reasons to explain why they leave school, these reasons do not necessarily identify specific factors that school officials and policymakers can address to find a solution.

### **Pathways to Success**

In President George H. W. Bush's proposal, known as America 2000, he proposed six performance goals. One of these goals stated that the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent by the year 2000 (Oliva & Gordon, 2013). Several Federal, State, and local initiatives were developed to assist with making the goals articulated in America 2000 a reality. Systems and structures were arranged by states and school districts as a means to address the needs of the diverse general population (Oliva & Gordon, 2013). In response to the crisis of students not obtaining a high school diploma, several programs were developed to assist at-risk students. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) conducted survey research on programs designed to reduce the chances of student's dropping out of school. Although the

research base on this question is not strong, they asserted that close mentoring and monitoring of students appear to be critical components of successful programs (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). It was also noted that other dropout prevention approaches associated with success are family outreach and attention to students' out of school problems as well as curricular reforms.

In Alabama, the state's new prevention programs focus on the foundations for effective dropout prevention strategies from the school and community perspective: system renewal, school community collaboration, and safe learning environments (Young, 2008). The curriculum coupled with the programs will support the needs of the individuals dropping out of school. The rigor of the curriculum determines how prepared students are, not only to pass the Alabama High School Graduation Examination, but also to succeed in general (Young, 2008).

The traditional curriculum has to be revised for students who are at-risk of dropping out. The curriculum should be suitable, acceptable and understandable for all children with diverse and potential problems. For the dropout population, the curriculum has to meet their immediate needs (e.g., overage, pregnant, teen mom). When classroom instruction is more relevant and engaging, students have higher academic success (Young, 2008).

There are multiple pathways for success as it relates to students' earning their high school diploma. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) grouped dropout prevention interventions into two categories. The first is interventions that set dropout prevention as the primary goal and that target specific students or groups of students. The second is interventions that have a broader target audience than "at-risk" students, but that nevertheless aim to lower the dropout rate.

In 2008, the America Promise Alliance launched a nationwide campaign to end the dropout crisis (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). There are programs to help support students who are included in the following statistics: thirty-two percent of students left school to get a job; twenty-six percent became a parent; and twenty-two percent had to

help their family (Bridgeland, Diulio, & Morison, 2006). A few of the programs that have been developed to keep students in school are:

1. Graduation Coach Program
2. Accelerated Learning Option Program – Performance Learning Centers
3. School Age Parenting Programs – GRADS
4. A Drop-Out Prevention Program
5. The School-within-a-School Model
6. High School Reform Models

Each of the above mentioned programs works in conjunction with the current curriculum to provide supports for obstacles that prevent students from staying in school.

### **Graduation Coach Program**

The Graduation Coach Program is based on the concept that relationships are critical in keeping students in school. Graduation Coaches are hired to work in middle and high schools. The coaches job is to work with the at-risk students by motivating and inspiring them throughout the school year. The Graduation Coach is actively engaged in establishing vital relationships with students at-risk of dropping out (Young, 2008). Georgia is one state that has introduced the graduation coach program. The coaches meet with the students once a week during lunch hour or in study hall. The purpose of the meeting is to smooth out difficulties and assist the student with prioritizing tasks that need to be completed. Linking adult and peer mentors with disenfranchised youth helps build healthy, supportive relationships. Young (2008), suggests that this ongoing support that a mentor can offer is invaluable in keeping students focused and on track to graduate. Studies show that students become dropouts when they have an accumulation of small obstacles that they are unable to overcome. The coaches help resolve those obstacles one by one. The Graduation Coach program is very similar to other mentoring programs. The basic premise of mentoring is that providing at-risk adolescents a mature adult role model who can provide support, nurturance, and guidance outside the immediate or extended family will lower the probability of such

adolescents from experiencing and engaging in problematic behaviors (Hickman & Wright, 2008). Through tutoring and modeling, mentoring programs have been established to help at-risk adolescents acquire germane academic skills needed to enhance school performance (Hickman & Wright, 2008).

### **The Accelerated Learning Option Program**

The Accelerated Learning Option Program, which aids in preventing dropouts, can come in several forms. It is a credit recovery program for students that have been retained during their tenure in school and are over age. The program does not use the traditional classroom as we know it today. Students are able to take their course work online. The online curriculum is coupled with daily direct instruction. One Accelerated Learning Option Program is called Performance Learning Centers. The Performance Learning Center (PLC) is a small, non-traditional high school geared toward students who are not succeeding in a traditional high school setting (Mitchell, 2012). PLC is similar to the smaller learning communities concept or SLCs. Funding from the U.S. government has helped 1, 535 larger high schools “convert” into smaller communities or adopt key features of such SLCs (Levine, 2010). The small schools movement – including the conversion of large high schools into SLCs-was termed the “biggest and hottest high school reform in education today” in 2005 (Miner, 2005, p.21), and it appears to be the reformers’ best current answer for improving high schools and treating the graduation epidemic.

The PLC creates a business-like environment and emphasizes personal support and an intense academic program anchored by an online instructional program and project-based learning. The Performance Learning Center prepares students for high school and post-secondary education. Preparation for college and career are the standards of success for the PLC. Performance Learning Centers can either be stand-alone programs or housed within a high school. Statistics for Performance Learning Centers indicate that ninety-four percent of PLC students graduated from high school, 91 percent of students were promoted to the

next grade, and 84 percent of PLC graduates pursued post-secondary education in 2012 (Mitchell, 2012).

### **School Age Parenting Program**

Another program that has assisted in decreasing the dropout rate is the School Age Parenting Programs. This program affords students that are parents the opportunity to stay in school while child care is provided at the school location. Students are faced with the obstacle of not being able to come to school because of child care issues. Overcoming this challenge to graduation can be complex without proper support. One specific school-age parenting program is called the Graduation, Reality and Dual-Role Skills (GRADS). This is a program for pregnant teens and/or young parents. The curriculum focuses on work and family foundation skills of significance to these students. GRADS programs include student demonstration of skills leading to high school graduation and economic independence. The GRADS program curriculum is developed at the local level using standards from the Work and Family Foundation areas of study in the National Standard for Family and Consumer Sciences Education (FACSE). The program requires a FACSE certified teacher who has also completed GRADS training. The program includes on-site child care and practicums, as well as coordination of learning activities outside the classroom. According to a 2010 national study, only 51 percent of teen moms will receive a diploma or GED by age 22, compared with 89 percent of non-teen moms. In 2012, Harshman found that the GRADS program had helped 74 percent of the teens in the 2010-11 school year earn their diploma or GED, or plan to continue with the GRADS program.

### **Check & Connect**

Check & Connect is a relatively intensive program for mostly high school students. The Check & Connect model was initially developed for urban middle school students with learning and behavior challenges and was designed to promote student engagement with school and learning, and to reduce and prevent students from dropping out

(Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The signature feature of Check & Connect is the assignment of a “monitor” to each student in the program to be the student’s mentor and case worker. In the Check component, the monitor continually assesses the student’s school performance, including attendance, behavior and academics. Monitors are trained to follow up quickly at the first sign that a student is struggling in any of these areas (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The Connect component combines individualized attention to the student with coordination of services and information about the student across school personnel, family and community service providers. The Connect component is an example of how comprehensive, whole school reform can turn around low-performing high schools by discarding the large bureaucratic factory model for a more personalized, flexible, and responsive approach (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). In two separate experimental evaluations, Check & Connect showed positive effects on students staying in school and progressing through school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

### **The School-within-a School Model**

Career Academies are another approach that is parallel to the school-within-a-school model, and is another form of interventions that has proven to be effective in lowering dropout rates, at least for students most at-risk of dropping out (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The career academy model has three key features. First, it is organized as a school-within-a-school: students in a smaller more personal learning atmosphere stay with the same teachers over three or four years of high school. The Career Academies approach is very similar to SLCs and PLCs. Second, it includes both academic and vocational coursework, with both integrated in the curriculum and pedagogy. Third, it uses partnerships between the academy and local employers to build links between school and work to provide students with career and work-based learning opportunities. The most important study of career academies is an experimental evaluation of more than 1,700 students who applied for admission to one of nine career academies across the nation. The study found that among high-risk youth, the

career academies reduced the baseline dropout rate of 32 percent by 11 percentage points, and that in the students' projected twelfth-grade year, 40 percent of the high-risk academy students had earned enough credits to graduate compared with only 26 percent of the high-risk students in the control group (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

### **High School Reform Models**

Talent and Development High Schools, which are best described as whole school reform. High school reform models do not usually state "dropout prevention" as the sole objective for school restructuring. Nevertheless, these reform models often have goals related to dropout prevention, in particular, goals relating to increasing students' school engagement and academic achievement (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). New school creation is increasingly being used as a means to provide more supportive and challenging environments to students who are at-risk of not graduating from traditional high schools and to transform or replace low-performing high schools (Letgers & Balfanz, 2009).

Successful programs have some or most of five elements in common:

1. Close mentoring and monitoring
2. Case management of individual students
3. Family outreach
4. Curricular reforms that focus on a career oriented or experiential approach or an emphasis on gaining proficiency in English and Math or both
5. Attention to students out of school problems that can affect attendance, behavior, and performance

Comprehensive whole school reform and new alternative schools have their successes, challenges, trade-offs, and pitfalls (Letgers & Balfanz, 2010). Research has suggested that neither approach is a sure road to success. Implementation is key; substantial amounts of human capital are required to sustain implementation of research-based programs and their substantial resources.

### **The Impact and Challenges of SLC's**

Research on high school size has associated larger populations of students with increased dropout rates, increased incidence of violence and vandalism, and reduced participation in school activities. Small learning communities, interdisciplinary teams, and flexible scheduling enable students to benefit from experiences that demonstrate the connection between school and their future goals, and from efforts that promote student involvement, active learning, and adult support for a manageable number of students (Letgers & Balfanz, 2010). Although larger high schools typically offer a more diverse array of courses, this diversity also creates stratification of student outcomes, as students are tracked into different levels of courses and as a result experience different levels of rigor and academic learning. A study of stand-alone, small high schools found no difference between small and large high schools in three or four districts studied (citation?). Another study of math achievement gains found a curvilinear relationship (citation?). Researchers, scholars, and reformers worry that large schools are alienating, bureaucratic organizations that hinder

- strong professional communities that help teachers improve their instruction
- a teacher's capacity to know individual students as people or as learners
- development of communication and trust between educators, students, and families.
- (Levine, 2010)

The more impersonal, bureaucratic nature of traditional large high schools may limit their ability to promote caring bonds or culturally-responsive practices.

### **Conclusion**

Yearly statistics reveal the hard fact that students are dropping out of high school in large numbers. This has definitively demonstrated that dropout is a major educational issue. While there is no simple solution to the dropout epidemic, there

are various programs that provide supports to students who would otherwise dropout of school. There are clearly supports that can be inclusive of the academic curriculum that will improve students' chances of graduating (Bridgeland, Diluio, & Morison, 2006). The literature presented reflects statistics and causations to why students drop-out of school, and what supports can be provided by way of specialized programs and school reform to increase the graduation rate of students at-risk of dropping out of school. As stated in the opening paragraph, school should be a place that can provide meaningful programs that support student success and the ultimate goal of graduation.

#### References

- Bridgeland, J., Dululio, J., & Morison, K. (2006). *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Civic Enterprises and Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.
- Christle, C., & Nelson, C. J. (2007). School characteristics related to high school dropout rates. *Remedial and Special Education, 28*, 325-339.
- Harshman, M. (2012, June 6). Overcoming challenges to graduation.
- Hickman, G., & Wright, D. (2008). Academic and school behavioral variables as predictors of high school graduation among at-risk adolescents enrolled in a youth-based mentoring program. *The Journal of At-Risk Issues, 16*(1), 25-32.
- Legters, N., & Balfanz, R. (2009). Do we have what it takes to put all students on the graduation path? *New Direction for Youth Development, 126*, 11-24.
- Legters, N., & Balfanz, R. (2010). Do we have what it takes to put all students on the graduation path? *New Direction for Youth Development, 127*, 11-23.
- Levine, T. (2010, July). What Research Tells Us About the Impact and Challenges of Smaller Learning Communities. *Peabody Journal of Education, 85*(3), 276-289.
- Messacar, D., & Oreopoulos, P. (2013). Staying in School: A Proposal for Raising High-School Graduation Rates. *Issues in Science & Technology (Winter)*, 55-51.
- Miner, B. (n.d.). The Gates Foundation and small schools. *Rethinking Schools 19*(4), 21-26.
- Mitchell, A. (2012). Communities in Schools November 2012 Newsletter.
- Oakes, J. (2012). Missing citation.
- Olivia, P., & Gordon III, W. (2013). Developing the curriculum. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Tyler, J., & Lofstrom, M. (2009). Finishing High School: Alternative pathways and dropout recovery. *Future of Children, 19*(1), 77-103.
- Young, D. (2008). Improving Alabama's Graduation Rates. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin (Summer)*, 34-36.