

Chapter 34

Dropout Prevention: Unpacking the Mentor– Mentee Relationship

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ABSTRACT

The high incidence and prevalence of high school dropouts is not a new problem and may be viewed as an issue that has been researched time and time again with no clear next-step solutions. Indeed there does not seem to be a single key to solve the problem of students dropping out but, there are ways to help mitigate the factors that lead students to drop out of school. This chapter will provide research based indicators for identifying students at-risk for dropping out and present a myriad of approaches to reduce the dropout rate. While no one approach will likely yield large improvements, multiple approaches thought of in systemic terms can have a positive impact. Mentoring has been proven as an effective tool if implemented appropriately. Key indicators from highly effective mentoring programs are closeness of the mentor-mentee relationship, mentor characteristics, consistency of interaction, duration of mentoring, and contextual variables relative to the mentee's social world. The ultimate goal is to improve the high school graduation rate and ensure students are college and career ready.

INTRODUCTION

The incidence and prevalence of high school dropouts is not a new problem and may be viewed

as an issue that has been researched time and time again with no clear next-step solutions. Although there does not appear to be a single key to unlocking the dropout problem there are ways to help mitigate the factors that lead students to drop out of school. Over the last 20 years the incidence

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of high school dropout rates has not changed significantly (National Educational Goals Panel, 2002; Woods, 1995), and economic downturn only deepens the consequences for those students who do drop out.

Recent estimates indicate that over a lifetime, the difference in lifetime earnings between graduates and dropouts will be \$260,000 (Dynarski, Clark, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, and Smink 2008). This number potentially will increase as low-skill jobs become scarce. Communities, states, and the federal government are directly impacted by the dropout population by smaller tax contributions, and increased reliance on government programs such as food stamps, housing assistance and welfare programs (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003; Rouse, 2005; Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009). Dropping out of school has a significant impact on the personal well being of the individual in addition to financial challenges. Freudenberg and Ruglis (2007) cite educational attainment as one of the strongest predictors of health. The more education a person acquires the more positive correlation to better health. Dropouts are more likely to engage in risky health behaviors, including smoking, lowered physical activity, and increased body weight (Lantz, House, Lepkowski, Williams, Mero, & Chen, 1998). Of those students who drop out, according to Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin and Palma (2009), nationally “black dropouts were the least likely to be employed (31%) followed by Asians (43%), Whites (46%) and Hispanics (53%)” (p.3). These researchers also examined the nation’s incarceration rates among these 4 groups and found that black men under the age of 30 had the highest rates of incarceration. These factors combined have re-committed communities and educators to dropout prevention.

Many organizations, federal and state agencies, colleges and universities, and K-12 schools are focused on dropout prevention. Local communities too are now focusing their efforts in this important issue. The desire to have all students graduate from

high school and keep communities healthy and viable has led to restructuring schools, developing innovative programming, and implementing a variety of interventions. Through federal funding, dropout prevention guides were developed to assist schools and communities address the dropout issue on a local level. The National High School Center produced executive summary detailing effective, research-based steps to identify students at-risk for dropping out of high school (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). The National Dropout Prevention Center based at Clemson University has developed 15 effective strategies for dropout prevention (Smink & Schargel, 2009). Alternative schools were designed to meet the educational needs of students who were not successful in traditional K-12 settings. This can include students who are substantially behind academically, have poor attendance, or behavioral issues (Aron, 2006). Alternative schools can be at any grade level, are typically part of a public school district, and have a clear vision and mission that defines the type of student attending, structure of the school, and pathway to completion. Charter schools are a fast growing phenomenon and the most popular choice alternative. There are approximately 3,000 charter schools across the United States, serving roughly 700,000 in 40 states that have passed charter school laws (US Charter Schools, 2010). Charter schools were envisioned to provide choice for families and stronger accountability for achievement. At the heart of these initiatives is a desire to close achievement gaps, increase graduation rates, and decrease the number of students who exit school.

Across each initiative common themes emerge, predominantly related to the relationships students form with adults and what population is choosing to exit school. Identification of at-risk students has historically been related to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and single-parent households. Research has yielded factors that cut across all demographics. Key indicators include: core subject grades, attendance, promotion trends, and engagement (Azzam, 2007; Kennelly & Monrad,

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