

Early Warning Signs: Detecting Potential High School Dropouts

FACTS ON DROPOUT PREVENTION

Based on an analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, researchers identified three primary risk factors for high school dropout: academic risk (low GPA in the 8th grade); low socioeconomic status, and behavioral problems (e.g., at least one suspension).^{8*} Moreover, as these, and additional, risk factors accumulate, students become more likely to drop out and less likely to respond to intervention efforts, thus indicating a need for early intervention targeted at a number of risk factors.

A study by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) further notes that dropout almost always occurs via a long process of disengagement, beginning as early as kindergarten.³ Therefore, it is imperative to recognize and address the factors contributing to this early disengagement, in order to decrease the risk of dropout later on.

The National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET) presents two sets of predictors of dropout: Status variables and alterable variables.⁷ Because status variables are difficult, if not impossible, to change, prevention

programs should focus on those variables that can be addressed. Both categories of risk factors that can be addressed are described below.

STATUS VARIABLES

- Age:** Students at risk of dropout are likely to be older than their grade-level peers.
- SES:** Students from a lower socioeconomic background drop out at a rate of more than six times their peers from higher-income families.⁶
- Sex:** While some sources state that males are more likely to drop out of school⁴, others note that there is no measurable difference between males and females in terms of dropout rates.⁶
- Sexual activity:** Pregnancy is a risk factor for females⁴, and a first sexual experience at age 15 or younger increases the risk of dropout for both males and females.⁸
- Race/Ethnicity:** African-American, Hispanic, and Native American youth experience higher rates of dropout, as do students from “non-English speaking backgrounds.”⁷

•**Residence:** Students who live in urban settings, the South, and the West have higher rates of dropout, as do youth from households with high levels of mobility.⁷

•**Family structure:** Youth from single parent or divorced families and those residing in foster care homes are more likely to drop out.⁴

•**Disabilities:** Students with lower scores on measures of cognitive ability and those with disabilities (particularly emotional or behavior disabilities) are also at greater risk of dropout. It is estimated that as many as 36.4% of youth with disabilities drop out of school.⁹

While students with disabilities are at greatest risk of dropping out of school,⁷ most prevention programs are targeted to students without disabilities.⁵

Structural factors: Parental unemployment, large school size, and type of school (public vs. private) are also linked to risk of dropout.⁷

ALTERABLE VARIABLES

•**Grades:** Students experiencing poor grades or academic failure are at greater risk of dropout.^{5,7}

•**Discipline:** Behavioral and disciplinary problems as well as the number of fights at school are associated with dropout.^{7,8}

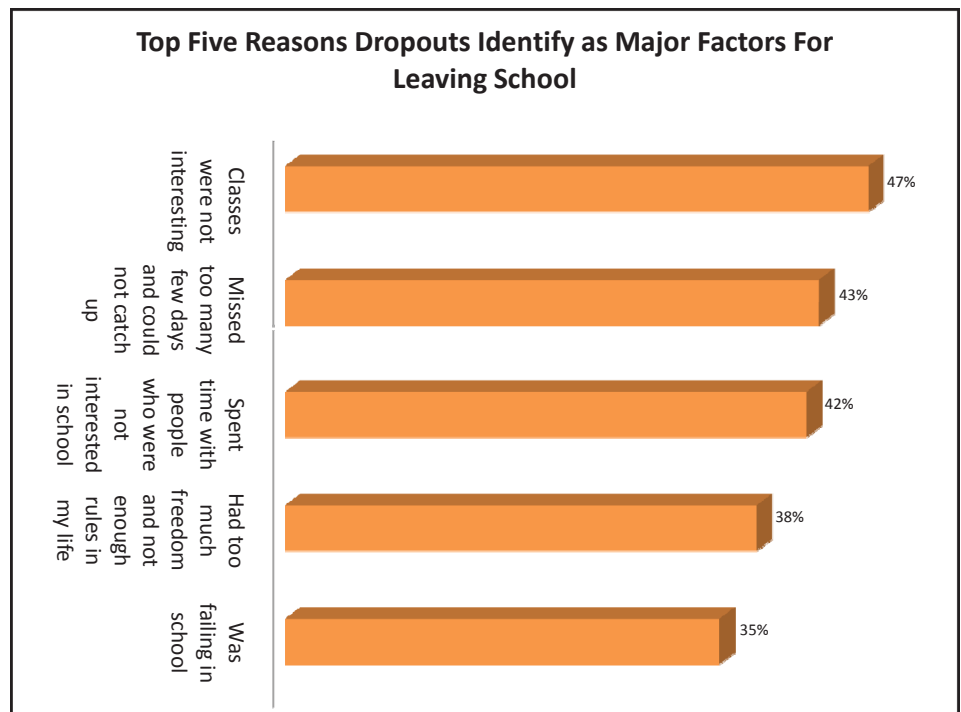
•**Absenteeism:** Absenteeism is also a strong predictor of dropout,^{7,8} and is particularly a problem for students without disabilities more so than for students with disabilities.⁵

•**School involvement:** Low levels of school engagement,^{2,8} student alienation, and an uninviting school climate are associated with higher rates of dropout.⁷ Perceived teacher support is closely associated with Latino students “level of perceived meaningfulness.”¹⁽⁶¹⁾ Both factors are tied to rates of dropout for these students. Further, perceived teacher support may be an even more important factor than parental support with regard to levels of problem behaviors in school.¹

•**Perceptions:** Young people’s perceptions of their own ability, their educational expectations and their values, as well as their perceptions of the availability of economic and educational opportunities, are associated with dropout.⁴

The increased ability of adolescents to think abstractly, along with the developmental stage of identity formation, may lead to an increased awareness of discrepancies in their own circumstances as compared to their peers.

This realization may in turn lead to a decrease in student motivation for academic success and an increase in behavioral problems.⁴



Source: <http://www.civicenterprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-06.pdf>

•**School policies:** Being held back a grade, school policies that raise academic standards without adding complementary supports, and frequent use of suspension are associated with dropout.⁷

•**Parental style:** Permissive parenting styles,⁷ punitive or coercive parenting styles, negative role-modeling,⁴ and a lack of educational supports in the home are also predictors of dropout.⁷

•**Student motivation:** Student expectations to stay in school, their expectations of academic success or failure,⁸ and their motivation to achieve in school are important.⁷

•**Stress:** Students who experience high levels of stress and “the presence of stressors (e.g., financial difficulty, health problems, early parenthood) are associated with increased rates of dropout.”⁷

RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING EARLY WARNING SIGNS

There are any number of early warning signs for dropout, including both status and alterable factors. Because those factors defined as status variables are impossible to change or highly resistant to change, prevention programs should focus primarily on those variables that are adaptable.

Awareness of students’ self perception influences, levels of stress, and motivation to achieve on dropout allows the development of targeted prevention efforts.

Moreover, early recognition of these warning signs will allow school and community professionals to address concerns before the process of student disengagement begins.