



RESOURCE GUIDE

Not Just This Kid's Story!

by Hilary Tackie

Although “Butterflies in the Hallway” details the journey of a single student, it echoes the trajectory of many other students who leave school before graduation day and reflects findings from the dropout literature: (1) No single factor accounts for a student’s decision to drop out; (2) dropout is related to both a student’s experiences inside the school building and outside, in their family and community; and (3) dropout is not an event, but rather a process that often begins early in a student’s educational career.

As complicated and varying as these factors can be, there are many actions that educators can take that work toward preventing dropout, even during high school. Below we provide basic information about engagement, disengagement, and dropout in an effort to expand this narrative beyond Cornelius and provide information about what efforts can improve outcomes for students.

I. The Current Situation

Each year the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) calculates the national status dropout rate. This number represents individuals between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not enrolled in school and do not have a high school diploma or equivalency credential, such as a General Educational Development certificate. In 2012, the status dropout rate was estimated to be 7 percent — the lowest rate in a decade. However, the rates — 12 percent — were worse for low-income populations, as well as for African Americans and Hispanics/Latinos at 8 and 13 percent, respectively.

In addition to the status dropout rate, NCES calculates the event dropout rate, which represents individuals who were enrolled in school, were expected to return, but were not enrolled in grades 9-12 by Oct. 1 of the following year. In 2009-10, NCES reported a 3.4 percent event dropout rate, which represents over 500,000 dropouts that year. This rate has not changed much over the past few years — NCES reported a rate of 3.3 percent in both 2010-11 and 2011-12.

The decreasing status dropout rate and an increasing graduation rate clearly demonstrates that America’s dropout situation, which has been referred to as a “crisis” and an “epidemic,” can get better. In 2012, the NCES Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate exceeded 80 percent for the first time. Despite this accomplishment, the breakdown shows that students of color and low-income students have yet to reach that milestone. One barrier is that many students of color and low-income students attend what have been termed “dropout factories,” or schools that fail to graduate more than 60 percent of their freshman class four years later. GradNation reports that, in 2014, 23 percent of African American students and 15 percent of Hispanic/Latino students, (compared with 5 percent of white students) attend dropout factories. Although there is still a lot of work to be done, this is progress: In 2004, a decade ago, 46 percent and 40 percent of African American and Hispanic/Latino students, respectively, attended schools where graduation was not the norm.

NCES Dropouts, Completers, and Graduation Rate Reports
http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/pub_dropouts.asp

GradNation

<http://gradnation.org/resource/building-gradnation-progress-and-challenge-ending-high-school-dropout-epidemic-2014>

Why Students Drop Out of High School, According to Their Own Reports

<http://www.dropoutprevention.org/statistics/quick-facts/why-students-drop-out>

II. The Process of Disengagement

Students do not wake up one morning and decide to drop out of school. Dropping out of high school is, for many students, the culmination of a long history of increasing disengagement.

School engagement is typically measured by a student's academic, social, and extracurricular school participation; their positive feelings about teachers and the school environment; as well as their investment in learning and willingness to put forth effort. It is a strong predictor of graduation and is also tied to better academic performance and overall well-being. In comparison, disengaged students often display behaviors such as chronic absenteeism, course failure, disruptive behavior, feeling bored or unchallenged, and social isolation. One review of the literature on engagement and motivation finds that between 40 and 60 percent of high school students are "chronically disengaged."

While a disengagement trajectory is triggered by many factors over time, a weak support system for students is a commonly cited cause. Students who feel that their school environment is highly impersonal, neglectful, or against their personal success are likely to disengage from school. So, too, are students who feel their teachers have low expectations and standards of performance. This type of thinking is often internalized, leading students to believe that they are not capable of performing at high levels.

Without effective intervention, students who are no longer engaged can end up dropping out. The good news is that engagement is malleable and responsive to changes made to the school environment.

School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence

<http://ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/Fredricks.pdf>

Approaches to Dropout Prevention: Heeding Early Warning Signs With Appropriate Interventions

http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/nhsc_approachestodropoutprevention.pdf

III. Dropout Prevention and Re-engagement: What Works?

When asked why they dropped out (<http://www.dropoutprevention.org/statistics/quick-facts/why-students-drop-out>), students often respond that they were absent too often, they did not like school, or they could not keep up academically. Thankfully, there are actions schools can take to identify and provide intervention for these students — bringing them back into the building and engaging them in learning.

For example, research conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) showed that graduation can be predicted with 80 percent accuracy based on whether students qualified to move on to 10th grade and had not failed more than one core academic course (<http://ontrack.uchicago.edu/>). The use of the CCSR early warning indicator has helped keep Chicago students

in school and greatly increased the city's graduation rate. Tracking truancy and achievement data not only allows struggling students to be identified, it also helps schools to identify and address potential institutional problems. For example, using data to identify schoolwide patterns can help schools to recognize the individual talents of teachers and place students accordingly, change the upcoming year's master schedule to offer the classes that students need to catch up, and determine other supports students may require to succeed.

So what works? What do engaging schools look like?

Engaged students report feeling supported, challenged, and respected by their teachers. Their classrooms utilize curriculum that is both rigorous and feels relevant. Engaging high schools also make an effort to smooth the transition from middle school and work hard to catch early those who struggle. These schools hold high expectations for all students, but are also highly responsive to their students' needs.

National Dropout Prevention Center/Network Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention:
<http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effective-strategies>

What Works Clearinghouse on Dropout Prevention:
<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/topic.aspx?sid=3>

National Academies Press: Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn (2003) http://www.nap.edu/download.php?record_id=10421