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School Dropout Prevention
Information and Strategies for Parents

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High School Dropouts Cost Everyone Something!

There are both personal and societal costs of dropping out. The loss of taxes, loss of production and the cost of assistance provided to dropouts make the problem of high school non-completion an issue for every taxpayer. Each year's class of dropouts will cost the country over $200 billion during their lifetimes in lost earnings and unrealized tax revenue. Dropouts comprise nearly half of the heads of households on welfare and an even higher percentage of the prison population. The average annual cost of maintaining a prisoner is at least three times higher than the annual dollars expended to educate a school-age child. This cost does not take into consideration the costs of adjudicating the crimes that sent these dropouts to prison and the monetary and personal costs of the crimes themselves.

The personal costs of dropping out include earning only half as much annual income as a high school graduate by the time prime working age is reached, while the likelihood of living in poverty is nearly three times higher for high school dropouts than for those who finished high school.

How Big is the Problem?

Calculating an accurate dropout rate is nearly impossible, since schools differ in their definitions of a dropout, their counting methods, and their methods of following a student who drops and reenters, or those who leave the district and reenter another one. Even with the discrepancies in data collection methods, it still appears that *no less than 15%* of all persons aged 16 to 24 are not enrolled in school or have not earned a high school diploma or equivalency certificate. The rate of high school non-completers aged 16 to 24 in many urban areas is as high as 35%. The 1994 U.S. Bureau of the Census indicated that 20% of adults over the age of 25 had not completed high school.

Who is At Risk for Dropping Out?

Ethnic status: Demographic information suggests that while African American students complete high school at a lower rate than whites, when adjusted for differences in family socioeconomic status, their completion rate is comparable. Hispanic and Native American students, however, have lower high school graduation rates than whites and blacks, even when socio-economic status is taken into consideration. By the year 2010, the Hispanic population is expected to be the largest minority group in the U.S., or 21% of the population. Dealing with the dropout population in this particular group has become the primary concern in many urban

areas.

Gender: It appears that boys and girls do not significantly differ in dropout rates. However, they seem to drop out for different reasons: Girls are most likely to drop out of school due to pregnancy and marriage, while boys are more likely to drop out to seek employment. Additionally, boys are twice as likely to dropout as girls due to behavioral difficulties.

Achievement: Poor academic performance is the single strongest predictor of dropping out of school. Poor grades and low test scores, regardless of ability, may increase student frustration and reduce motivation to stay in school. Additionally, retention in grade is highly related to dropping out of school some research indicates that retained students are three times more likely to dropout than nonretained students.

Behavior: Students who drop out are more likely to have a history of serious behavior problems than those who complete high school, and this history may date back to the primary grades. Prevention efforts may be enhanced by viewing behavior problems as symptoms of disengagement from school that can be addressed if identified early.

School attendance: School dropouts have higher rates of chronic truancy and tardiness that those who stay in school. Attendance problems can be an early signal that the student is disengaging from the schooling process; daily school attendance reflects both student motivation and parental support.

Student attitudes toward school: Students who drop out are more likely to perceive the school setting as nonsupportive and/or irrelevant. Some researchers suggest that the student's psychological attachment to school and investment in learning are keys to academic and social success, and consequently keys to remaining in school.

Family characteristics: Limited economic resources is highly related to school dropout rates, but the relationship appears to be indirect. Many at risk factors are related to family income parents' education, single parenting, academic achievement, behavior problems and school attendance. Parent attitudes are clearly related to student engagement in learning and graduation rates: Parents of dropouts are more likely to view school negatively, to have minimal involvement with school and to place little value on school attendance and achievement. Siblings as well as parents are likely to influence a student's decision to drop out of school students who have a sibling who dropped out of school are at much higher risk of dropping out themselves. Families from diverse cultures and families whose primary language is not English also face additional barriers to school engagement that appear to place students at-risk for dropping out. School personnel may misunderstand customs and parenting styles as lack of interest in schooling, and fail to identify appropriate and effective means of promoting parent involvement in education. These students are more likely to experience alienation and to disengage from the school setting.

Peer relationships: Dropouts are more likely than nondropouts to report social isolation and lack of involvement in school-based social activities. While dropouts tend to be involved in community-based activities, those who remain in school identify with cl

What Can a Parent Do to Keep a Student in School?

An unsuccessful, and often unhappy, student affects the whole family. When a student drops out of school it is easy to blame the student for his or her school failures.

Sometimes the student has neglected attendance and school work. Sometimes the school has not been responsive to the individual needs of the student. Sometimes school staff feel that the parents should have been more responsive to the school's efforts to help.

While assigning blame for the unsuccessful student may feel good to the blamer, it doesn't address the most important problem: What can be done to educate this student? Following are some hints to get you on the road to problem solving:

Focus on student goals: Instead of focusing on why the student is unsuccessful in school, have the student identify what he wants to get from the school experience. Have him/her list school, home, and personal barriers to reaching that goal. Sometimes talking about getting past the barriers to reaching a goal helps focus efforts more productively than just complaining or quitting.

Encourage school involvement: Encourage your student to attend school regularly and to be involved in at least one extra-curricular activity at school or with groups of students who are currently in school. These activities make the student feel part of the group, important to the school and more motivated to perform in order to participate. If students' lack of academic success restricts them from every activity except academics, they often see no value in continuing to try. They must have something positive to look forward to that will meet the kinship/companionship needs of being a teenager. If they aren't able to meet these needs in the school setting, they often find ways to meet these needs in less desirable settings and groups.

Consider alternative school settings: Speak with the school counselor and/or school psychologist to see if the student's goals can be reached in the current school environment. If not, have the school identify ideas for alternative settings for the student's learning. Include the student in all discussions with school personnel. If you investigate alternative education settings, have the student make the contacts, visits, complete forms and ask questions. He/she must see that personal responsibility is a must when being asked to be treated as an adult.

Consider realistic post-secondary goals: Don't get hung up on the issue of the student going to college. The more important question is "What does the student find interesting?", "What is the student good at?", and "Which of these skill areas is marketable?" If attending college is the way to reach the vocational goal, set steps in place to get there. In many cases, a post-secondary technical training or 2-year community college program is more appropriate to meet the student's goals and get him/her employable. Some facts to remember when helping your student plan his/her educational future:

- Skilled jobs will increase to 65% of all jobs by the year 2000.
- The largest and fastest growing segment of the emerging technical workforce is occupations that do **not** require a 4-year college degree.
- Nearly 30% of college starters leave after the first year.
- The success rate for college completion is 25%.
- Only 25% of all new jobs in the future will require a 4-year college degree.

Consider the GED (general education development) if an appropriate educational environment is not available for your student in the regular school setting. This equivalency examination is very well respected among employers and higher education institutions. Students can study for this examination through community education programs, alternative education programs, or independently. The point is to stress to all

students that the diploma or GED is only the **first** step to finishing their education. The workforce of tomorrow will require post-secondary education for even entry level jobs.

Identify special needs: Consult with school personnel to determine if the student might have a specific learning or behavior problem interfering with learning. Low achievement, retention in grade and behavioral difficulties are highly predictive of dropping out of school. Assessment of possible learning and behavior problems might help identify special services to help your student find school more successful.

Resources

Gausted, Joan (1991). *Identifying potential dropouts*. Eugene, OR. ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational management (ERIC No. Ed 339092).

Martin, M. , & Waltman-Greenwood, C. (Eds.) (1995). *Solving your child's school-rela*ted *problems.* New York: HarperPerenniel.

Office of Educational Research and Improvement (1993). *Reaching the goals, Goal 2: High school completion*. Washington. D.C.: Author (ED 365 471).

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