

School Completion: Helping Handout for School and Home

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INTRODUCTION

Dropping out of high school is a serious concern for educators, policy makers, parents and other caregivers, and the general public. Students who drop out often face many challenges. For instance, they are more likely than students who graduate to be unemployed and receive welfare. When employed, nongraduating students, on average, make less money, lack health insurance, suffer health problems, and are more likely to be involved in crime than their graduating peers (Rumberger, 2011). Additionally, since most dropouts are undereducated and ill-equipped to meet the rapidly advancing technological needs of the country's workforce, they present numerous challenges at a societal level, including a serious socioeconomic problem (Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012).

Dropping out is a process, not an event. It does not happen overnight but results from decisions made and actions taken over several years. As a result, there are often early signs that a student is at risk for dropping out of high school. Early indicators of dropout risk include low grades, increasing absences, multiple disciplinary actions (e.g., suspensions), and insufficient units for timely graduation. Identifying and supporting students who are at risk for dropping out of school are key factors in increasing high school completion rates. Educators and parents need to identify students at risk for dropping out early and actively encourage high school completion. In addition, educators and parents should employ evidence-based interventions to support students at risk for dropping out. The purpose of this handout is to provide educators and parents with recommended evidence-based interventions.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

Teachers and parents can help at-risk students by understanding, identifying, and intervening in the various factors that influence dropping out. Students who are considering dropping out or have decided to drop out of school often have multiple reasons. For instance, given their age, they may no longer be required to attend school. They may have had a baby. They may want or need to get a full-time job and begin earning a regular paycheck. They may be bored or socially isolated at school. They may have missed so many days of school that they need to repeat numerous courses. They may recognize that, given their completed units, they will not complete the requirements to graduate from high school on time, and they may not have access to the supports they need to be successful in school. Each of these reasons warrants serious consideration when aiming to support the student and help him or her successfully complete high school.

The following sections highlight some individual, family, and school factors that are important to consider when helping a student successfully complete school (Jimerson, 2008; Jimerson, Reschly, & Hess, 2014; Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, & Tyler, 2004).

Individual Student and Family Characteristics

Individual student characteristics often linked with high school dropout include the following:

- *Demographic factors*, such as the student being a male, of ethnic minority status, and from a low-income family.

- *Academic factors*, including a high rate of absence, a history of retention, low academic performance, and low number of units necessary for graduation.
- *Social factors*, such as the student being socially isolated or aggressive; having poor peer relationships, poor problem-solving skills, or friends who dropped out; and having experienced trauma.
- *Family factors*, such as low family involvement in the student’s education and family stress.
- *Personal problems*, such as the student having mental health challenges, behavior problems, or substance abuse.

A combination of the above, especially continuing over time, is the best indicator that a student is likely to drop out of high school.

School Characteristics

School characteristics associated with high school dropout include the following:

- *Norms* that fail to support the student’s engagement at school and or don’t support high school completion in general. For example, a student is more likely to drop out if a large percentage of students in the student’s high school are dropping out.
- *Zero-tolerance policies* toward problem behaviors—policies that emphasize the use of punitive techniques, especially school suspensions.
- *Poor school climate*, especially poor teacher–student relationships, in which students are not frequently engaged in caring conversations about their well-being and future goals.
- *High percentage of unqualified or poorly qualified teachers and student support staff.*
- *Lack of opportunities for students to engage in positive social interactions with others.* These would include interactions with other students and teachers and support staff, such as in extracurricular activities, clubs, sports, and service learning.
- *Limited availability of student support professionals.* These would include remedial education teachers, school counselors, and school psychologists.
- *School culture that emphasizes academic and athletic accomplishments*, such that struggling students may become further isolated and disengaged from school activities.

The most effective schools place an emphasis on promoting positive teacher–student relationships, actively engaging students, and providing comprehensive supports to facilitate student success (Freeman et al., 2015).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Because each adolescent varies, support strategies for promoting successful school completion also should vary. Thus, every intervention will require individualization. Prevention efforts are most effective when they focus on creating school and community systems that help all students to graduate. This change in focus—from reducing the incidence of school dropout to increasing the rate of school completion—reflects an important shift in contemporary thinking. Focusing on completion encourages families and school professionals to address this issue through a wide range of services that include targeted interventions and broader systemic reforms. Fostering student engagement at school is also critically important in supporting school completion. Lack of student engagement has been identified as a central component of the process of dropping out. Engagement is composed of student behavior (involvement with classroom and school activities) and identification with school.

The following theory-informed and research-based recommendations are for teachers, the school, and the home. Working together is critical for success. Some of the recommendations may not be feasible in all contexts, others may have already been implemented, and student responses will vary. After identifying the particular risk factors or challenges that an individual student is facing, and that student’s strengths or assets, adults can consider the following strategies for supporting successful high school completion.

1. **Promote student engagement at school.** Students may need support to become involved with classroom and school activities. Helping a student get involved in particular clubs or activities at school may foster the student’s sense of belonging at school. (See *Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for School* for a list of recommendations on student engagement.)
2. **Check in and connect with the student.** Having a teacher, school counselor, or school psychologist check in with the student each day will establish a

connection. The school professional can find out how the student is doing and whether he or she needs any help with personal or school-related challenges. (See *Teacher–Student Relationships: Helping Handout for School* for additional recommendations.)

3. **Provide information and help arrange for resources, as needed.** For a student struggling to cope with unexpected events, such as the death of a loved one or pregnancy, connecting the student with appropriate professional support at school or in the community will reduce stress. School psychologists and counselors typically have a list of community professionals to whom a student may be referred to receive additional support services.
4. **Promote family involvement in school success.** Helping the family become actively involved in the student’s school courses can be valuable. By helping with homework, checking on how things are going at school, and being present to support the student, the family can help the student navigate the stressors and challenges of high school.
5. **Acknowledge and address challenges at home.** The student may need additional support to face stressors in the family, such as substance abuse, mental health, and other challenges in the home. Providing appropriate referrals to community resources may be helpful to support the student and the family.
6. **Address the student’s individual needs.** In some instances, providing mental health services or substance abuse treatment is necessary. Left unaddressed, such individual challenges are likely to derail a student’s success at school. Providing appropriate referrals to community resources may help support the student.
7. **Identify and support academic needs.** If the student has skill deficits that contribute to academic struggles, it is important to assess the student’s strengths and needs. Identification of academic needs should be followed by the provision of support services.
8. **Promote positive peer relationships.** Students who are actively engaged in positive peer relationships are more likely to experience success at school. Surrounding the student with peers who are positive influences is an important source of social support. Finding peers with similar interests or those

who can help tutor the struggling student can promote student success. (See *Peer Relationships: Helping Handout for School* for recommendations on improving student–student relationships.)

9. **Communicate the benefits of school completion.** Given the many negative outcomes associated with dropping out of high school, it is important to highlight the tremendous advantages that accompany high school completion. For instance, high school graduates have many more employment opportunities and higher wages.
10. **Emphasize positive school discipline and student support policies.** School policies that promote learning and support for challenging behaviors—rather than punitive methods—are most likely to foster student engagement and success. In addition, school policies that offer students support services to address academic, cognitive, social, emotional, and mental health needs help the students succeed, for instance, by helping them qualify for tutoring, special education, individual education accommodations, social work and wraparound services, and other school supports.
11. **Consider alternative education settings.** Many school districts have alternative education settings that afford more flexibility in schedules and coursework. Some of these alternative settings emphasize specific technical and trade skills that may further engage a student’s interest and help him or her successfully complete school. Some of the alternative settings may enable a student to complete a general equivalency diploma, which may allow continuing education in a college, trade school, or technical school.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

<http://cdrpsb.org/>

This website for the California Dropout Research Project includes extensive information, resources, and reports to help educators understand and address school dropout.

<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/FWW/Results?filters=,Dropout-Prevention>

The Institution of Education Sciences’ What Works Clearinghouse website is a valuable source of scientific evidence regarding dropout prevention programs and practices.

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab5_1.asp

This website of the National Center for Education Statistics includes a listing of state compulsory attendance laws.

Related Helping Handouts

Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for School

Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for Home

Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for School

Improving Teacher–Student Relationships: Helping Handout for School

Peer Relationships: Helping Handout for School

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