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If the early warning signs of the potential dropout can be identified, perhaps services designed for these students can be provided.

School Dropouts: The Need for Early Identification

by Artis J. Palmo and David S. Honeyman
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The Year of the Dropout is over. While the nation has spent millions of dollars and tried hundreds of intervention programs, the conclusion remains—while the situation has not worsened neither has it improved. Somewhere between 13 percent and 14 percent of high school age students continue to “drop-out” (Hahn, 1987, p. 257).

The dropout places a tremendous burden on society. First, once the student leaves school, the financial burden placed upon society is immense. Dropouts are more difficult to employ, have poor work habits, and generally do not relate effectively with their peers and superiors (Palmo, Beuchle, & Osswald, 1980). If the social welfare system does not pay for the dropout, they become a financial burden on their families. Second, many dropouts come from family situations that do not support education; therefore, the dropout is continuing a tradition that may be several generations in duration (Palmo, 1978).

Third, if the several hundred dropouts with whom we have had contact are an adequate sample to make a generalization, the dropouts add significantly to the drug and alcohol abuse problem prevalent today in adolescent society. Most of the dropouts treated through out programs had involvement with drugs and alcohol. Fourth, many of the dropouts were involved in criminal activities of various levels. Some of the criminal activity was related to the drug abuse problem, while some related to the boredom of not being in school.

Finally, dropouts as a group represent a large segment of our unemployed society because they are ill-prepared vocationally and basically unskilled. In 1985, almost one-half of all unemployed youth age 16–24 were not in school (Hahn, p. 260). Our increasing technological society cannot support the unskilled dropout, which means the dropout will most likely remain a burden on society. Therefore, whatever the school system or various social programs can do to assist the potential dropout in obtaining a viable occupational skill is of paramount importance. However, those pro-

fessionals responsible for this programming should understand that they are faced with a very difficult population to train, educate, counsel, and understand.

The Seven Warning Signals

One of the ways to attempt to solve the dropout problem is for the educational system to recognize the problem and identify as early as possible those individual students who are potential dropouts (Honeyman, 1984; Larson & Shertzer, 1987). Listed below are seven warning signals for educational personnel and parents to utilize in the identification of potential dropouts. These warning signals were developed with the help of many dropouts who assisted by identifying the various important moments in their school careers that attributed to their leaving school prematurely.

Alienation. Because of low self-esteem (Honeyman, 1984; Sewell, Palmo, & Manni, 1981), the dropouts frequently mask their thoughts and feelings with a phony self-confidence that is viewed by adults around them as “cockiness.” Subsequently, this attitude causes them to become alienated from parents, teachers, and certain peer groups. The important point to remember is that the potential dropout becomes more and more alienated from school and finds that life away from school is better than life at school. The alienated youth is relatively easy to identify in school. This is the student with few friends, frequently absent, poor grades, problems with authority, and a general lackadaisical attitude. Any student who shows these signs is a potential dropout. It should be remembered that the alienation does not only affect those students from low socioeconomic groups, but students from all socioeconomic levels.

Absenteeism. The most readily identifiable characteristic of the potential dropout is frequent absenteeism. Absenteeism, however, is not the real problem, but only a symptom of a much larger problem(s). Students are absent for numerous reasons, including: poor academic record, problems with family, drug abuse, delinquency, or general personality instability. Students who begin to demonstrate any signs of a pattern of absenteeism should be immediately referred for assistance. The error most frequently made by school personnel is waiting until the absenteeism is at a crisis stage. Once a student has missed a month or two months of classes, the likelihood of that student returning to school is remote.

Students missing school completely, cutting classes on a regular basis, or not being in school for medical reasons are potential dropouts. Once students become comfortable with being away from school, it is almost impossible to make them return. The problem with many dropouts is the home situation. Some parents do not care if their children fail to attend school, while other parents hide or cover up the fact that their child is cutting school. Either way, the parents support the non-attendance.

One point needs to be stressed, of all of the high school dropouts treated in our program, none of the dropouts ever went back to the traditional high school setting. Some chose to enter night programs for GED preparation, but none of the dropouts ever went back to the traditional school. Early intervention may have helped.

Addiction. One of the most serious problems exhibited by dropouts, although not unique to dropouts, is drug and alcohol abuse. Over the ten years of treating dropouts in therapy or training programs, it is the exception to find a dropout who has not been involved to a significant level with drugs or alcohol or both. The very frightening aspect of the abuse problem is that most report that their experimentation began as a child of 11, 12, or 13! Most school person-

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nel are aware of the drug abuse problems in their school, but many are unaware of the extent of the problem.

Since many of the potential dropouts seen in therapy are from rather affluent families, it is very difficult to simply condemn the lower class families for not "making" their children go to school. The pattern in middle and upper-middle class families is to ignore the drug problems and support the non-attendance through providing excuses for why the student is not in school. Issue avoidance is a common suit! While the family is trying to determine if their child has a medical problem that prohibits attendance, often the child is using these free days at home to experiment with drugs.

School personnel at the lower grades need to be more effectively trained in the signs for identification of students who are drug and alcohol abusers. Many of the students who are about to leave school are more likely to be involved in some form of drug/alcohol abuse. The education of school personnel must be followed by special awareness programs for parents. Most parents will deny that their child is drug involved and assume that observed inappropriate behaviors are simply caused by the "raging hormones" of adolescence.

Antagonism. The problem most frequently reported by our dropout group as the primary reason for leaving school was the conflict with authority figures that occurred at school. In fact, these students were not only in conflict at school but at home and in the community as well. The potential dropout and the dropout possess one common trait—difficulty with rules. These students are in constant power struggles with teachers or principals at school and have running battles with their parents at home. They will not follow the guidelines established by their teachers or parents.

When searching for the potential dropout, look for those students who seem to antagonize most adults around them. This is the student who does not complete assignments, makes promises that are never kept, and generally manages to disappoint any adult who attempts to rectify the problems that the student is facing. As you work with the antagonist, remember to remain somewhat unattached, because their goal in life is to frustrate and antagonize those adults trying to help. They constantly attempt to prove that they are not worthy of the assistance and caring of the adults around them.

Anti-Establishment. As the dropout "progresses" through school, he/she develops an atypical value system. Regardless of the student's social class or family situation, the potential dropout seems different, feels different, and subsequently becomes different in comparison to the norm of the school. This abnormal set of values is manifested in an acting-out adolescent who never completes assignments, is frequently absent, often exhibits open hostility toward teachers, and is relatively uncommunicative with peers. This type of activity is a manifestation of the perception that no one in the school or at home really cares about them. In fact, they generally feel inadequate in the school setting, and reverse their feeling of defensiveness to become the attacker in any threatening situation.

Avoidance of Responsibility. As a result of these factors mentioned, the potential dropout does not complete assignments, breaks the rules, rebels against those who attempt to help, and takes no responsibility for the consequences of these actions. A student who is unwilling to accept the significance of such behavior should be considered a potential dropout. The student who transfers blame to everyone else may ultimately face the choice of staying or leaving school.

Academia-Phobia. Last, and most important, the dropout and potential dropout can be easily classified as being anti-education! The dropout has an abbreviated attention span and lower academic skills (Sewell, Palmo, & Manni, 1981). Therefore, those individuals having academic difficulties must be considered as potential dropouts. Limited reading and math abilities are predictive factors that can be easily monitored and utilized in identifying the potential dropout.

No Quick Panacea

It is important that educators understand that there are no easy or uncomplicated answers to the problem of saving students from dropping out of school. Throughout the literature, various suggestions and ideas have been presented for resolving the problem; however, many of the suggestions are too simplistic. Although a variety of authors can list various aspects that are common to most dropouts, this listing often masks the complexity of treating the dropout or identifying the potential dropout. The reasons for leaving school are very individualistic and every professional in the school must realize this fact. Too many times the student thinking about leaving school is told by some professional, "Other's have left school, and it has proven to be an awful decision." The potential dropout does not want to be parented, given a pep talk, and most of all, lectured on the benefits of school. What they want is to be heard and treated as a unique individual, not one of the many.

The other important point to be remembered is that some potential dropouts cannot be helped. No matter what is offered to help the potential dropouts it may not be sufficient to keep them in school. Once the student has left school, it is almost impossible to get them to return to finish. Educators need to show continued concern for the student and encourage them to contact the school should they decide to return at a future time. Leaving a door open for the returning dropout may be all you can do.

Educational personnel must realize that alternative forms of education must be developed, within the school district, to accommodate this "different" student. Instituting alternative educational programs does not imply the compromising of the education offered to students, but rather, increasing the options available to all students.

Recommendations

The following is a list of suggestions and recommendations that has been developed over the period of the last ten years. Remember, some of the dropouts will not respond to any of the alternatives provided.

Early identification. School and community personnel at the upper elementary, middle, and junior high school levels must begin to identify those individuals who seem to be potential dropouts as early as possible. Observable patterns begin to emerge very early in the school career for most dropouts (Honeyman, 1984). Parent involvement and counseling should be initiated at the earliest possible moment. There have been numerous reports from teachers, "I knew that kid would never get through school. He was a problem in elementary school." There is sufficient research that provides screening devices for most schools to initiate an early identification program. For school officials, early recognition of the Seven Warning Signals, acceptance of the responsibility that the signals are there, and the willingness to do something about it is a start.

Alternative credit programs. If the schools are to maintain the potential dropout's interest, then alternative forms of education must be developed. Expanded co-op programs

for more students, pre-vocational experiences, released school time for work, night school options, and a more flexible curriculum seem to be necessities to meet the needs of potential dropouts. All of the programs listed would be alternative methods available for credit towards the student's diploma.

It is important to remember that contrary to what has been written, even with all of the programs and options for students, students will leave your school before graduation. Many potential dropouts and dropouts have severe problems that cannot be addressed by normal educational programming. Many need therapeutic assistance to enable them to understand why they have chosen to combat the normal process of adolescence. Attention must be focused on the long term continued assistance to the marginal dropout.

Life education. The dropout and the potential dropout are typically quite immature and unrealistic about the basic facts of life. School personnel must realize that the majority of the students leaving school lack basic knowledge about human relations, marriage and family problems, money, working, drug and alcohol abuse, and many other concerns. It seems that school system personnel can no longer ignore these problems, rather they must realize they exist. Very early in the students' academic life, the curriculum must begin to stress the basic facts of living. Too many dropouts have reached their junior or senior year without the slightest understanding of living on their own, budgeting money, finding employment, or long range planning.

Parent and teacher re-education. In conclusion, parents and teachers must be informed of the extent of the dropout problem, potential ways to assist in helping to curb the dropout problem, and widespread nature of the dropout problem. Dropping out of school is a disease and the adult population must be given ways to cope with and correct the problem. The most than one million dropouts per year (Larsen & Shertzer, 1987) are the tip of the iceberg!! With the

many changes in the family system over the past 15 years, the problem of students dropping out of school has expanded to all social strata. Being a dropout is no longer limited to the disadvantaged, the poor, or the foreign.

Conclusion

Our intent in writing this article is to express the obvious: The problem of treating dropouts, educationally and therapeutically, is much more difficult than appears in much of the popular literature. Concern for the potential dropout must begin at the elementary and middle school levels. The resolution of the problems facing dropouts and potential dropouts is a tremendously difficult task and there is no single, simplistic solution. The resolution of the dropout problem will take a long-term, concerted effort by the community, school, state and local government, and individual families. Without this concerted and *coordinated* effort, the problem will remain for generations to come.

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