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A comprehensive approach to dropout prevention programs

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A comprehensive approach to dropout prevention programs

Abstract

Educators have begun to focus on the "third wave" of reform, the prevention of dropouts (Hill, 1987). The first two waves of reform which took place during the 1970 1s and 1980's focused heavily on how to improve teaching—which ultimately led to higher standards in academic performance. These standards, along with a variety of other factors, have increased the population of "potential dropouts." Beck and Muia (1985) agree that the first two reforms had the unintended result of leaving further behind the students most in need of help in meeting higher standards. Therefore, the third reform taking place in the 90 1s is concentrating on what schools can do to prevent these students from dropping out of school and subsequently, failing to become productive members of society.

A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAMS

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Educators have begun to focus on the "third wave" of reform, the prevention of dropouts (Hill, 1987). The first two waves of reform which took place during the 1970's and 1980's focused heavily on how to improve teaching--which ultimately led to higher standards in academic performance. These standards, along with a variety of other factors, have increased the population of "potential dropouts." Beck and Muia (1985) agree that the first two reforms had the unintended result of leaving further behind the students most in need of help in meeting higher standards. Therefore, the third reform taking place in the 90's is concentrating on what schools can do to prevent these students from dropping out of school and subsequently, failing to become productive members of society.

Reducing the number of dropouts rate has been one of the most difficult and ongoing problems in education (Larsen & Shertzer, 1987). It has been estimated that 43.1% of youths are not enrolled in school or are not graduating from high schools (Johnston, Markle, & Harshbarger, 1985). According to Rumberger (1986), these students are leaving schools for a variety of reasons such as pregnancy, family circumstances, economic necessities, substance abuse, lack of academic success, or disciplinary actions.

As research indicates, there is no single solution to the dropout crisis. Just as there are a variety of causes

behind a student's decision to drop out of school, many different strategies exist to prevent this event from occurring.

This review of literature will examine some of the major considerations involved in trying to understand this complex educational problem. Included will be the definition of the problem, its major causes, and the guidance counselor's role in the implementation of a comprehensive dropout prevention program.

Background of Dropout Prevention

To some extent, the high school dropout has been a point of concern for guidance counselors for many years. For example, at the first national guidance convention in 1913, a feature report was given on the high school dropout (Schreiber & Kaplan, 1984). Certainly, poor children always have had trouble finishing school, some teenagers have gotten pregnant, immigrant children have had to struggle to learn English, and achievement gaps have existed along racial and socioeconomic lines for many years. It was not until the 1960's "that the schools began explicitly to recognize that these potential dropouts had to be provided with tailored educational programs if they were to succeed and stay in school" (Levin, 1987, p. 20). Up to that point, the blame for student failure and dropping out of school fell on the

students and their families, with schools taking little or no responsibility (Pittman, 1986).

Many school programs today are attempting to implement prevention strategies to meet the needs of these students. Available literature indicates that dropout efforts have focused too much on the administrative aspects of dropout prevention programs. Instead of depending solely on administrators for leadership, Hill (1987) believes it is time for school administrators to join hands with school guidance counselors and exert strong leadership efforts to identify the potential dropout and provide strong preventive and remedial measures to keep these students in school. The guidance counselor is in an excellent position to become involved in the implementation of an effective comprehensive dropout prevention program.

Statistics and Definition of Dropout

Although there is considerable concern about the proportion of young adults who have not completed high school, there have been few efforts to explore in detail how school systems define dropouts and how they arrive at rates of completion. Because definitions of dropouts vary, and because there is no nationwide standard for computing dropout rates, estimates vary on the number of dropouts in the U. S. as well as at state and local levels. However, to illustrate the scope of the problem, the following are some more commonly

used figures reported by researchers. According to Weber and Mertens (1987), approximately 800,000 to 1,000,000 students drop out of school annually. Among states, North Dakota has the lowest dropout rate (6.2%), and Louisiana has the highest dropout rate (43.8%) (U.S. News and World Report, 1985).

While national estimates of rates of leaving school before receiving a diploma range from 18-25% for eighteen-year-olds, estimates from large cities are often double these rates, and for some sub-groups of urban students, rates have been reported at 60% or higher. To assure accuracy of dropout rate there is a great need for a universal definition to be developed. For the purpose of this paper, the following definition of a dropout will apply: a student who leaves school for any reason except for death, before high school graduation or completion of a program of studies and without transferring to another school or institution (Hahn, 1987).

Reasons for Dropping Out

Understanding why young people drop out of school is critical to developing effective policies and practices for encouraging students to stay in or return to school. According to Pallas (1984), students drop out of school for a variety of reasons related to academic performance/school behavior, social adjustment, early transition into adulthood, and family factors.

Academic Performance/School Behavior

Pittman (1986) reports that the four most cited reasons for leaving school were lack of interest, failing grades, dissatisfaction with teachers or principal, and unhappy school experiences. From the dislike for school, often comes behavior problems. According to Hahn (1987), at least 25% of all dropouts had been suspended before they had been designated as "behavior problems" by their teachers.

Students' marks in school, and to a lesser extent, performance on standardized tests, can be the single best predictors of whether a student will drop out of school (Levin, 1987). Hahn (1987) reports that over 50% of all dropouts had basic skills in the bottom 20% of the score distribution. The sixteen to seventeen year olds with basic skills test scores in the bottom 20% of the score distribution were 14 times more likely to have dropped out than those in the upper 20% range (Hahn, 1987).

Students who have been held back a grade are up to four times more likely to drop out than those who have never been held back. The effect of being over age is increased if the student reads below grade level and/or is black (Gonzalez, 1989). Students who are misdiagnosed as learning disabled or emotionally disturbed are also at greater risk of dropping out.

Another educational factor is that of language difficulties. The student's ability to communicate effectively with teachers and peers is crucial to his/her success in school. Those youth whose English skills are limited are at a disadvantage to compete academically and build a social network with other students (Beck & Muia, 1985). Thus, districts with substantial numbers of immigrants from non-English speaking areas or large groups of non-native-English speaking students are likely to have greater problems with dropping out (Hahn, 1987).

Social Adjustment

Students experiencing difficulty negotiating the personal and social adjustments of adolescence are more likely to drop out of school. According to Gonzales (1989), students who are rebellious, delinquent or chronically truant drop out of school at higher rates than those who are not. In a study of 82 rural high school dropouts, Pittman (1986) found that only 36% of the reasons given were purely academic. Personal, affective, or social interrelationships made up the remaining 64%.

Truancy and getting in trouble in school frequently foreshadow dropping out of school. Among high school sophomores, chronic truants are 40% more likely to drop out of high school than regularly attending students. Hahn (1987) believes that one reason students dislike coming

to school so much is fear, and feels some youth are not ready or willing to face the pressure schools create. This fear is often related to fear of failing or fear of rejection from friends and teachers. Pallas (1984) finds juvenile crime as an additional factor that can place a student at risk of dropping out. Delinquent youth are 25% more likely to drop out than are comparable nondelinquent youngsters.

Early Transition Into Adulthood

Adolescents who assume adult responsibilities at an early age may find it difficult to cope with both school and adulthood. Teenagers assuming adult family and work roles are more likely to drop out of school than youngsters who postpone these roles (Hill, 1987). Substantial numbers of young women claim pregnancy or marriage as reasons for dropping out of school (Pallas, 1984). Among young women, only poor academic performance rivals the importance of adult family roles as a reason for dropping out of high school (U.S. Department of Education, 1986).

When adolescents go to work during their teenage years, this too can play as a factor in dropping out. According to Rumberger (1983), many dropouts report that they leave school to go to work. Other reasons dropouts report leaving school are to support a family, or because they were offered jobs and chose to work (U.S. Department of Education, 1986). There are also students who work at a regular job while

attending school. Pallas (1984) finds that students who have jobs during their school career have more than a one-third chance of dropping out than youngsters who are not involved in work while attending school. High school students who work over 20 hours per week are more likely to drop out than those who do not work at all (Pittman, 1986). Rumberger (1983) believes that a student working more than 20 hours per week may contribute to an increased likelihood of dropping out because of lack of time and energy available for schoolwork. On the other hand, D'Amico (1984) believes that working may teach youngsters the importance of persistence and dependability, traits he feels are crucial for successful schooling. This may account for the fact that those who work less than 20 hours per week are less likely to leave school than those who work more hours or do not work at all.

Family Factors

Epstein (1987) suggests that a primary characteristic of high school dropout is an unsatisfactory relationship with his/her family. Downing and Leong (1982) finds that among family factors affecting student's education or likelihood of dropping out, are family care, family attitudes and values towards school, family tensions, parental role-modeling and guidance, and family economic status. Beck, et al., 1985 report that the dropout's family is less solid, less influenced by a father figure, and from a low

socio-economic status. Obviously, considerable research has been conducted on the family conditions of the dropout, and as researchers indicated above, most of the studies affirm the existence of non-supportive conditions in the dropout's familial environment (Johnston, et al., 1985). Pittman (1986) also finds a positive relationship between unstable homes and high achievement and between instable homes and low achievement. With stable homes being an important determinant to school success, one would certainly be concerned with the high figure of divorce rate. The U.S. divorce rate is about 2,300,00 per year, leaving approximately 24% of all children under 18 living in single parent homes (London, 1987). Pittman (1986) proves that dropouts do often come from homes where there is only one parent and often that the parent also failed to graduate from high school. Agreeing with Pittman's research, studies conducted by Pallas (1984) also show that children from single-parent families do worse in school and are more likely to drop out. Beck, et al. (1985) reports that children living in a mother-only family decreased the likelihood of completing high school by 5% for white children and 13% for black children.

The socio-economic status of the family often has a tremendous effect on student decision to stay in school or not to stay in school. Research shows that problems associated with school failure and dropping out often are found among

children who are poor (Larsen, et al., 1987). Twenty-five percent of the nations's 40% poor children are dropouts and live in families under economic distress and are often unable to provide crucial necessities for academic achievement (Rumberger, 1986). Kaplan and Luck (1977), find that many dropouts live in homes that lack good home experiences of love, have poor communication, and cannot afford to provide the extra stimulants to insure intellectual development. They cite the lack of books, art supplies, lighting, desk chairs, privacy in home, and parental involvement all as examples of stimulants.

Epstein (1987) believes that with parent involvement, regardless of the social class, students have a better chance of success if teachers work with parents so that they are more involved in their children's schoolwork. However, research often indicates that this effective communication between home and school is sadly lacking in the case of most dropouts (Pallas, 1984). Therefore, it is certainly very easy to understand why a child living in a non-supportive environment and who feels like a failure at home would also express these same feelings of inadequacy at school. Eventually they feel disconnected, incapable, and believe they don't contribute in the classroom. They escape from this pain by the obvious route, dropping out.

Drop-out Prevention

What schools can do to reclaim these at-risk students is a persistent problem, but a greater challenge for educators is how to provide educational experiences positive enough to change the lives of these youth before they drop out. From this perspective, the most important issue facing educators is to eliminate factors that may encourage young people to drop out and to supply features that will make staying in school more attractive, yet effective enough to promote their learning and development. A comprehensive approach in dropout prevention is far more effective than a sole program implemented at one level because comprehensive solutions address the multiple needs of these at-risk students (Duckenfield, Hamby, & Smink, 1990).

According to Duckenfield, et al. (1990), components in effective dropout prevention programs include: early identification and early quality education, active parent involvement in school experience, remedial programs, work force readiness career counseling, mentoring and tutoring, individual and group counseling, and staff development programs. The following sections will explain each component.

Early Identification and Early Quality Education

According to Gonzalez, (1989) some dropouts begin showing signs of academic failure and disengagement in school as early as the third grade. Successful identification of

at-risk students in elementary grades provides more time to intervene and address the different needs of these children (Rumberger, 1986). In the primary grades especially, children are better able to respond to the message that they can succeed despite significant odds. Therefore, early identification is a key to successful dropout prevention programs. Rumberger (1986) believes that the following five school related factors are indicators of a child who is a risk of dropping out.

They are:

1. The child is one year older than other students in the same grade level.
2. The child scores below the 20th percentile in reading based on a standardized test.
3. The child demonstrates behavior problems which require disciplinary measures.
4. The child is chronically tardy or absent.

The at-risk student passes through a variety of stages in the school before dropping out. The at-risk stage can begin as early as the elementary school years and will continue until the child becomes high risk at the secondary school level. At this level the student will become a dropout. Obviously, there is no special period, no single critical stage in development that determines all or most of whom a child will or can become. Therefore, a comprehensive approach complimented with a variety of prevention strategies

implemented by the counselor during the early years will be most successful by aiding the students at numerous "critical points" spread across their developmental continuum.

Along with early identification, Hahn (1987) believes that quality early childhood education is another key ingredient which reduces the dropout rate. A child's early years are crucial for successful intellectual, social and emotional development. The federally funded Head Start program is one example of an effective early quality childhood education program in which head start children show positive gains in cognitive and social development, which ultimately makes it less likely they will be placed in special education programs once they reach school.

Admittedly, parents have the primary and most important responsibility to provide a nurturing environment for their children, but the school has a vital role since a major part of a child's formal learning is guided by the school. According to Gonzales (1989), high quality early childhood education programs:

1. Provide significant and enduring benefits for young children, especially those at risk of school failure and social alienation.
2. Are the most important link connecting the family with the school.

3. Take on added importance as the number of two-parents and single-parent families increases. (Gonzales, 1989, p. 51)

Rumberger (1983) supports the enrollment of children in developmentally appropriate full-day preschool and kindergarten classes because trained teachers provide children with opportunities to improve in language development, increase levels of self-esteem and social skills, and better prepare the children for school. All are characteristics that many school dropouts lack as described earlier. Results are even better when parents are involved in their child's early education (Hill, 1987).

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement is a key component in student academic success. But studies also show that few parents--perhaps 20%--know how to help their children (Rumberger, 1983). The desire to see their children succeed is just as strong among disadvantaged or disenfranchised parents, but they often do not have the skills or knowledge on how to go about getting help for their children (Pittman, 1986). The guidance counselor can play a significant role in providing assistance and in connecting parents more with the school. The counselor can increase participation of parents in school by:

1. Offering parent education workshops with training in parenting skills.

2. Sending out school newsletters.
3. Allowing parents access to videotapes to learn new parenting skill.
4. Offering special school programs where parents can serve as a tutor for their own or other's children by helping with homework.
5. Assisting the teachers by preparing materials.

(Epstein, 1987)

When parents are involved, there are many expected benefits. The children benefit with achievement and self-esteem increases (Rumberger, 1983). Obviously, students will value school more if they see how highly their parents value it. The schools also benefit with the open support and communication between parents and teacher which leads to improving common goals.

Remedial Programs

Many students drop out of school because they have not mastered basic reading, writing, and math skills. The ability to read and write is the foundation of success in school, and if these basic skills are not learned in the earliest grades, students have increasing difficulty with expanding literacy as they progress through the grades (Larsen & Shertzer, 1987). However, even students with poor readiness and learning skills can develop adequate reading skills with appropriate remedial instruction implemented early in the

primary years along with continual reinforcement across all curriculum areas in all grades (London, 1987). With this assistance, the frustration so often experienced by dropouts is lessened, thus increasing the potential dropout's chances of achieving academic success, graduating from school, and obtaining career and employment goals. Finding the time during regular school days to implement remedial programs can be problematic for schools, therefore, many schools are relying on the summer months. Summer school allows potential dropouts to receive more individualized attention and intensive instruction in a wider variety of areas than is possible during the regular school year. Hahn (1987) believes that for at-risk students with a high probability of dropping out of school, a summer program: Allows them to continue the pace of learning established during the regular school year and to master skills in which they are deficient; provides opportunities for academic enrichment beyond remediation in basic skills; provides work-study activities with pay for development of employability and job skills; and helps prevent possible retention. The counselor could play a crucial role in identification of students and the possibility of implementing a summer remediation program within their school.

Work Force Readiness and Career Counseling

Nearly twenty-five years have passed since President Johnson drew our attention to the plight of young Americans

who lack the education and skills to make their way in the modern world. Yet, the conditions he described persist and the high dropout rate persists (Weber & Mertens, 1987).

According to London (1987), vocational education is a critical ingredient in the school's ability to hold young people in the system and to train those who have dropped out. In and of itself, however, vocational education cannot solve the dropout problem. Larsen et al., (1987) believe that for vocational education to be most effective in dropout prevention, it must be embedded in a system that includes a broad range of other critical elements. First, the guidance counselor can play a significant role. Counseling programs must be restructured to emphasize career guidance for job-finding as well as for going to college. Secondly, career guidance needs to begin early in the primary grades. These prevocational education experiences should be interactively linked with the counseling program to assist students in making informed and appropriate decisions about careers, work readiness skills, and knowledge needed to enter the job market. Additionally, the guidance counselor can provide professional counseling for at-risk students individually and in groups that can help them with personal problems, and give the direction for academic and career choices (Weber, et al., 1987).

Mentoring & Tutoring

One of the most effective strategies for helping a potential dropout is one-to-one involvement with a significant other--either in a mentoring or a tutoring situation (Schreiber, et al., 1984). A mentor can serve as a role model, guide the student into new experiences, and provide the necessary adult attention and support that will encourage the student to finish school and plan for the future. Mentoring activities can be business or community oriented, use school personnel, or focus on work and careers. Furthermore, since most potential dropouts are nearly always deficient in academic subjects, a tutor can provide extra help in subjects and reinforce study skills that will be helpful in other school activities (Larsen, et al., 1987). Peer tutoring and cross-age tutoring have been shown to be a particularly powerful intervention for this at-risk population (Hahn, 1987). According to Rumberger (1983) mentoring and tutoring have helped these at-risk students reduce their disruptive behavior and suspensions; increase school attendance; increase bonding to school; improve school achievement and likelihood of graduation; increase personal growth and self-confidence; and develop more awareness of the world of work and future career requirements. The guidance counselor plays an instrumental role in coordinating the program, selecting the participants, and providing inservice

to tutors and mentors interested in volunteering in the program.

Individual/Group Counseling

A 1986 study on dropouts, published by U. S. Department of Education found that dropout prevention programs need to address many different needs. This study finds that the most important need is the students' psychological need for someone to care about them individually. Counseling for potential dropouts in an individual or group setting often fulfills that important need. Counseling is a strong component in many programs. Many potential dropouts benefit from being able to talk over problems and seek guidance from adults and respected peers (Pittman, 1986). At many middle, junior high, and high schools, advisor/advisee programs have been started to link teachers with a core group of students, in some cases providing life skills as well as academic counseling (Beck, et al., 1980).

Staff Development Programs

In examining the dropout profile, one must conclude that for a prevention program to be effective it must be staffed with flexible and understanding teachers. (Kaplan, et al., 1977) believe that many teachers, principals, and counselors are not prepared to teach and guide potential dropouts. Pittman (1986) reports that potential dropouts believe that teachers do not show much interest in them.

Therefore, continuous and relevant staff development where administrators, teachers, and other staff members can receive training in approaches and techniques working with potential dropouts must be provided. Helpful activities include training in the identification of at-risk students, using special instructional strategies, making shared decisions, and developing or enhancing personal characteristics such as empathy and caring (Gonzalez, 1989). Larsen et al. (1987) believe that effective staff development must derive from identified needs of those involved and include field based experiential activities. As a result of appropriate staff development, teachers and other school personnel are more effective in helping potential dropouts achieve their potential when they are attuned to the students' specific problems and needs; are less likely to become subjects of "burn-out;" and become more enthusiastic about education for all students in their school (Duckenfield, et al., 1990). The counselor can be a key person in providing these in-services to staff to improve working with these high need students.

Conclusion

According to current research, much is known about what can make schools more effective in retaining potential dropouts. As one can see, the most important factors in any comprehensive dropout prevention program are to provide students with as many success experiences as possible. As

mentioned earlier, consistent failure in elementary grades has much to do with a student's decision to quit school. Remedial programs in fundamental mathematical and verbal skills on each level also seem essential for such programs to be effective. Guidance, both personal and vocational, from empathic counselors also plays a major role in dropout prevention (Beck, et al., 1980). Finally, Kaplan, et al. (1977) suggest that for a prevention program to be effective it must be staffed with committed, empathic adults, who understand the nature of child development and have high expectation for themselves and students.

This review of literature shows reasons for dropping out, characteristics of the dropout, and prevention components that can be used within or in cooperation with dropout prevention programs to ensure that all students will receive a high school diploma.

Obviously, the task of reducing high school dropouts is no easy job. For example, many school districts are carving out of already strained budgets the money needed to implement creative dropout prevention programs. Other districts are still struggling to find what will work best in their communities. The schools cannot--and should not--be expected to do the job alone. But they can--and must--provide the leadership. And as research effectively states, the guidance counselor is in an ideal leadership position in playing a

crucial role in laying the groundwork for an effective comprehensive dropout prevention program.

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