Increasing the High School Retention Rate

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Abstract

High school dropout is a serious problem in today's educational system. It affects not only the high school dropout, but also the rest of society. Research shows that lack of interest or engagement, poor attendance, behavioral issues, disabilities, poor relationships, and poor class performance are all predictors of high school dropout. Solutions include educating staff, students and parents in prevention; assisting educators to identify and help at-risk students; and developing more concentrated and effective individual student interventions aimed at supporting their ability to meet high school graduation requirements.

Increasing the High School Retention Rate

Not long ago, in a small Midwestern town, a few residents began trickling into the local emergency room complaining of vomiting and diarrhea. They were diagnosed with food poisoning. An increasing number began showing up with the same symptoms. More doctors and nurses were called in to the E.R. to assist and stabilize patients. Fifteen patients grew to 50, then to over a hundred. The problem kept growing until one doctor decided to investigate. He assembled a task force, engaging poison control experts, paramedics and other local resources who worked together until they finally uncovered the problem: a sewage pipe that had broken and was contaminating a local water main. Once the pipe was repaired, the number of new cases coming into the hospital dropped significantly. The medical staff were finally able to finish treating those last few still manifesting signs of contamination, the media were asked to notify the population to avoid drinking tap water until the contaminants cleared out of the water supply, and the municipal authorities took charge of inspecting the pipes in other districts for signs of breakage or decay, replacing or repairing those in danger of contaminating other populations.

The enormous flood of high school dropouts entering U.S. society – more than 7,000 every school day – is like a stream of patients through the door of a community clinic emergency room. And, like the cost of treatment given to that wave of patients entering the E.R. without regard for the patients' ability to pay, the public's financial and material resources that are being used up to address the symptomatic end result of the dropout problem is mounting. Unfortunately, few of those resources have been allocated and engaged to pinpoint and eliminate the source of the problem. For that reason, the outcome for our society has been the same as that for the hospital: more and more resources being spent, with the number of dropout "cases" continuing to increase rather than decrease no matter how many have been treated.

For the small town in the story, it was only when a team of professionals took the initiative to investigate the cause and utilize their resources to neutralize the source of the problem that the number of affected patients coming through the door began to decrease. A similar preventive approach, one that addresses the cause instead of the effect, must be implemented in the U.S. public school system on a universal, nationwide scale if the high school dropout problem is to be all but eliminated.

The Problem: Cost of Dropout

Social scientists and economists of varying theoretical perspectives agree that high school dropout comes at great social and economic costs. Specifically, they point to increased costs resulting from growing demands on the welfare system and other aid programs, and on the justice system because of criminal activity (Belfield & Levin, 2009).

At almost 7,000 new dropouts per school day, the compounding cost of the high school dropout epidemic in the United States is in the tens to hundreds of billions of dollars annually and rising ("The High Cost of High School Dropouts," 2011). Without a high school diploma, individuals are more likely to be unemployed, and even when employed unlikely to obtain a job above subsistence income. For this reason, they are often in poverty and seek out public assistance (White & Kelly, 2010). There is also a greater likelihood that, in order to address their economic needs, they will involve themselves in criminal enterprises, which costs taxpayers in the form of additional police presence, court and penal system expenses, and the cost of incarceration and rehabilitation (approximately 70% of all jail and prison inmates are high school dropouts), not to mention the direct losses and insurance costs of the crime itself (Kaufman, Kwon, & Klein, 1999; Harlow, 2003).

To the actual financial costs to society may also be added what economists call

"opportunity cost," especially for the individual. This refers to the potential for personal

economic gain that is foregone by dropping out, because those who finish high school usually are

able to support themselves and their families (Amos, 2008). And even beyond reaching the

initial goal of simply graduating, with a high school diploma in hand the additional prospect of

completing at least some college makes itself more realistic. In today's modern, technological

society, it is important for a person to finish not only high school, but to continue on to post-

secondary education in order to compete for many of today's more specialized occupations.

Lynn Olson and the 2007 Diplomas Count team drew upon U.S. Department of Labor and U.S.

Census Bureau statistics regarding jobs and their education requirements, and concluded that

"Having at least some college under your belt is more likely to land you a decent job at a decent

wage. And young people who lack a high school diploma have a tough time finding any job at

all" (Olson, 2007, p.7).

   The purpose of this paper is twofold. Its first objective is to identify the factors that

disengage students from school and eventually lead them to drop out of high school by looking at

past and current statistical trends in high school dropout data. Its second, and perhaps more

important purpose, is to promote awareness of ways to increase high school retention and

graduation rates by describing a highly successful three-tier model for dropout prevention and

intervention.

Dropout Demographics and Predictors

   In the past decade, there has been little progress in reversing the trend of U.S. students

not completing high school; one out of three high school students in this country still fails to

graduate (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006). It is worth examining why there are so many

students not graduating, whom the students at high risk of dropping out are, and how those of us

in the field of professional education can make a difference.

School officials use many indicators or predictors to identify students "at risk" for dropout. For example, males are significantly less likely than females to graduate. Hispanics are 26% less likely than whites to graduate, African Americans a little more than a third less likely, and Native American a little less than a third. Being low income puts a student at higher risk, as does being a non-native English speaker. Students whose parents move frequently are less likely to graduate high school, and those who have a learning or psychological disability are among those at highest risk (Amos, 2008; Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio & Thompson, 2004).

When two or more of these indicators are combined, the risk factor increases. For instance, almost 40% of disabled students drop out of high school, but if the disability is coupled with an ethnicity indicator, it becomes an even greater risk factor; Blacks and Hispanics with disabilities are about 30% more likely to drop out than whites with disabilities, and about 50% more likely than Asian minorities (Holt, 2006).

The indicators listed previously are considered "fixed" indicators. A student cannot change his or her ethnicity, sex, disability, etc. However, there are other factors, called "alterable indicators," that a student can change, or that the adults in the student's life can impact. The three most significant "alterable indicators" for dropout are known as the ABCs: Attendance, Behavior and Course failure (MacIver & MacIver, 2009). Attendance indicators include cutting classes and simply not showing up for school. Behavior indicators tend to manifest as repeated, conduct-related disciplinary actions and suspensions which are related to not getting along with students, teachers or school personnel. Course failure indicators are poor academic performance, such as failing core courses, or not doing well in various standardized tests (Balfanz, Herzog & MacIver, 2007).

All three of the ABC indicators are impacted by a student's sense of engagement. Engagement is a psychological connection between the student and their schooling. Dropout is a progression of disengagement, not merely a single event; this progression occurs through time when a student begins losing interest, is therefore no longer focusing, then not attending, and finally achieving poor academic results. A student who is disengaged will usually end up walking away from school and failing to graduate (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010).

Three-Tier Model

The most useful framework within which to create strategies to assist students to stay in school is a three-tier approach based on the public health model. Its components are 1) "primary" universal dropout prevention strategies for all students, 2) "secondary" targeted group intervention strategies for students who have been identified as members of defined risk categories, and 3) intensive, individualized "tertiary" treatment for specific students showing serious potential for failing to graduate (MacIver & MacIver, 2009). The three-tier model contains both proactive and reactive elements, with components that increase in intensity as they narrow in focus.

Students tend to become disengaged because of what the Center for Evaluation & Education Policy calls "the new 3 R's of education reform": Relationships, Relevance, and Rigor (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Students who have at least one strong relationship with one or more adults in the school tend to feel invested and enjoy a sense of belonging, while those who do not have the benefit of such a relationship feel more disconnected from the school and, as a result, disengaged from their own educational process (Lessard, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin & Royer, 2009). With regard to relevance, a survey of students who dropped out indicated they often felt that the information presented in their school had no connection to their everyday lives. When,

on the other hand, teachers create a strong link between their academic subjects and the real

world, students can see the connection between what they are learning and how it will impact

their future, and are more motivated to apply themselves (Bridgeland, et al, 2006). In the

dimension of academic rigor, many students who ultimately dropped out of high school did so at

least in part because the demands on them, in both subject matter and assignments, provided so

little challenge that the students became disinterested and bored. Experience has shown that

when a school sets high expectations and provides a challenging curriculum, students are more

likely to rise to the occasion and meet the expectations set for them (Bottoms & Anthony, 2005;

Bridgeland, Dilulio & Balfanz, 2009).

Data Gathering Strategies

The literature for this paper was gathered from a search of electronic resources such as

the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC - EBSCO Industries) and the Education

Full Text-HW Wilson. The search terms used to locate the reference articles were "high school

dropouts," "high school retention rate," "dropout prevention strategies" and similar. Additional

articles and books were also located online through Google Scholar and Google Books also using

the same search terms.

Field data was gathered by contacting Tom Jones via phone to schedule a personal

interview. Mr. Jones is a speaker, champion athlete and child advocate who never completed

high school. The interview was conducted on April 9, 2012. Mr. Jones shared personal

information regarding his childhood, education and experience growing up through the foster

care system.

Tier 1 - Primary Prevention

Importance of support and the 3 Rs. Giving all students the tools, support and

environment to graduate from high school and go on to college is the ideal. Universal dropout

prevention, in the form of proactive practices to establish programs and initiatives to ensure that

each student gets equal access to these benefits, is of paramount importance. And creating an

environment of "belonging" that starts with strong on-campus relationships is a primary building

block in any Tier 1 dropout prevention strategy. In the High School Survey of Student

Engagement (HSSSE), research on student engagement was conducted on more than 80,000 high

school students throughout the nation who were still in school. The survey found that students

who felt less supported personally by their schools were most in danger of dropping out of

school, and that more students (81%) felt greater support from their teachers than from the

administrators of the schools (61%) (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007).

The Eco-Interactional Developmental model (EID) is a tool that offers a framework for

understanding how interactions among neighborhood, school, family and peer groups can

support students' successfully completing high school. Through after-school programs and other

initiatives, the model focuses in part on creating a social environment that fosters a student's

sense of community and connectedness with the local environment, which has the side benefit of

enhancing the student's feeling of engagement and identification with the school. The results of

a number of studies support the validity of the EID model (Bowen, 2009).

While there are many formalized programs that incorporate Tier 1 dropout prevention

measures, one in particular, called High Schools That Work (HSTW), emphasizes "new 3 Rs"

and has demonstrated significant positive results. A research study by the Southern Regional

Education Board focused on nine high schools that incorporated the HSTW program campus-

wide over a three-year period. They significantly improved overall academic achievement and

graduation rates through creating more challenging curricula and raising expectations of the

students' abilities to meet those challenges (rigor). The schools also tied career and technical

studies together with their curricula (relevance). Finally, they paired up adult staff with every

student for trusted mentoring (relationship). The result was that 62% of the students successfully

completed two to three areas of more demanding level curriculum, compared against 45% of

students at the non-participating control schools in the area. The HSTW schools' average

reading/math/science scores improved from 279/303/296 to 289/309/306, while the non-

participating schools were relatively unchanged (Bottoms & Anthony, 2005).

Start time preventions. An unexpected, yet powerful area of study is that of start times

for schools. Medical research has demonstrated that teenagers and middle school adolescents

have circadian rhythm that are physiologically different from those of children and adults.

Researchers have determined that the typical adolescent has sleep deprivation and suffers from

"sleep lag syndrome," and because of this, when schools start their classes prior to 8:15 a.m.

there are negative consequences in cognition, impaired performance and poor memory. But

there is growing evidence that delaying start times until later in the morning may be a universal

preventive measure that improves overall student attendance and mental engagement (Wahlstrom

& Davison, 2001).

In a recent four year study in Minneapolis, MN, a large urban school district changed

school start times from 7:15 a.m. to 8:40 a.m., which affected a large population of 12,000 high

school students. Perhaps the most important finding related to high school dropout was that

overall attendance increased. For instance, when start times changed to 8:40 a.m., the school

attendance rate increased from 72% to 76%, which is statistically significant. Also noted was

that late-start students reported less depressive feelings (another dropout indicator) than those

with earlier start times. Furthermore, the schools participating in the later start time reported that

students were less likely to arrive late to class due to oversleeping, and the majority of teachers

reported students were more alert and less likely to fall asleep in morning class session

(Wahlstrom & Davison, 2001).

In the late-start schools, most principals reported fewer instances of serious behavior

problems, and counselors reported student were having less peer relationship difficulties or

problems with their families. Parents reported better connection and communication with their

children in the mornings, as well as fewer confrontations with their children (Wahlstrom &

Davison, 2001).

An important finding of this study was that these positive results were the same in both

urban and suburban areas, and not affected by the differences in local socioeconomic conditions

or the size of the school. Lead author of this Minneapolis study, Kyla Wahlstrom, noted similar,

earlier studies done in other parts of world, in places like Brazil, Italy and Israel, which

demonstrated that sleep phase shift occurring in adolescents appears to be universal, is

physiologically-based due to their developing neurological system, and is not a cultural

phenomenon (Wahlstrom & Davison, 2001).

These findings on the impact of later start times on adolescents may be important to

school districts looking to increase their retention and graduation rates by decreasing many of the

following risk factors that can lead students to become high school dropouts: poor attendance

and low grades which lead to diminished engagement, higher incidence of student depression,

increased behavior and disciplinary issues in school, and relationship problems at home and in

their personal life (Wahlstrom & Davison, 2001).

Role of school counselors in Tier 1 primary prevention. There are various basic

strategies counselors may employ to create preventive supports for students; one is creating

social support structures and working early with families in engagement, such as connecting

parents to the educational process directly upon their student's entering high school. Another

would be to help all students feel a sense of community by joining existing campus clubs, or

participating in afterschool programs that may inspire interest in other areas, or enhancement

programs that can create intrinsic motivation (Solberg, Close & Metz, 2001).

One of the essential responsibilities of counselors in prevention is to foster a sense of

community, not just academic performance. Counselors should deliver workshops to educate

teachers and staff to make personal connections with students, such as refer to each child by first

name. A counselor's goals must go beyond academic proficiency to community, the result being

a greater sense of engagement, which itself will reinforce academic proficiency in a self-

sustaining cycle (McAlandin, 2010).

Tier 2 – Early Onset Prevention/Intervention

Warning signs. Primary prevention strategies are not enough to decrease dropout rates

significantly for certain categories of students, and Tier 2 activity is aimed toward these students

with predictive risk factors for dropout. These include fixed or static indicators that the student

cannot change, like low income; having social, emotional or learning disabilities; being a Black,

Hispanic or non-native English speaker; even attending a large school. They also include the

"alterable" indicators like the ABC risk factors for dropout (Absenteeism, Behavior problems,

Course failure), and early problem recognition and intervention is the next step here. In some

cases, an at-risk student may not show any of these ABC warning predictors that signal danger of

dropping out, but all students in "at risk" socioeconomic groups must still be monitored.

Another of the many predictors associated with high school dropout is high mobility,

meaning those who frequently move from one school to another. A longitudinal study published

in *American Journal of Education* revealed that if a student moves just once during eighth and twelfth grade, there is a 100% greater risk of dropping out of high school than those that did not move, and even higher chance with more frequent mobility (Rumberger & Larson, 1998).

Solutions and intervention approaches. Resiliency has been well-defined as "a set of qualities that foster successful adaptation and transformation despite risk and adversity" (Benard, 1995). A student's level of resiliency is one of the most important factors in predicting success in school. In personal narratives and interviews with resilient students who did not drop out of school despite extreme difficulties at home, one of the main resiliency factors that helped a student stay in school was their ability to create a close relationship with a peer, teacher or other paraprofessional at the school. Especially if they found little support in their homes or with their families, a positive relationship at school helped sustain them and kept them coming back (Lessard et al, 2009). In one self-report study of more than four-hundred students, when students enjoyed a strong connection with someone at the school they were more likely to feel self-efficacy and be more confident in their academic ability. There was also a significant correlation between that sense of "connectedness" and greater attendance and better grades (Close & Solberg, 2007).

One report found that a large majority of students who did not graduate saw little relevance or real-world applicability in completing school, and nearly half were bored in class. More than 80 percent of dropouts surveyed believe if the school would have created a more relevant style of teaching they would have been motivated to stay in school (Bridgeland, et al, 2006). Service-learning is an approach to teaching that bridges this gap, showing great promise as a strategy to address the school-real world connection. It helps struggling groups of students see the relevance in learning by combining classroom knowledge with outside service project

endeavors and collaborating with other students in decision making. An example is an actual

project that connected the curriculum of a biology class to doing hands-on water testing for a

nearby toxic waste dump. After the real-world activity, students participate in cognitively

stimulating reflection activities. Researchers found that those that students participating in

service-learning deemed the related classes more interesting than other classes. Service-learning

shows promise for increasing student engagement and attendance (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Wulsin,

2008).

One of the many formalized intervention programs for helping groups of at risk students

is Success Highways. It is a program conceived and developed by educational scientists at the

University of Wisconsin, and is focused on reducing the dropout rate in middle schools and high

schools across the United States. The program works on keeping struggling students in school

by teaching them effective strategies to meet their life and academic challenges, such as how to

deal with school and social pressures, and how to get higher marks on achievement tests. It also

encourages students by showing them ways to find resources that will create and enhance

personal resiliency factors. It helps strengthen family factors by educating parents about the

importance of parental support so that they can communicate positive expectations of school

performance. Success Highways also builds protective factors such as caring teachers and

teachers who are setting high expectations for the students so they can feel a connectedness or

sense of community with the school. Success Highways helps the student stay invested in school

by seeing the relevancy and importance in continuing their education and by empowering the

student to graduate from high school and reach their academic potential. The program also

encourages them to transition to college, or learn an occupational skill ("Success Highways: The

road to a better future," n.d.).

The Success Highways curriculum is designed to be used in any classroom and may be delivered by a teacher in any subject area. It is conveyed through 45-minute classroom sessions throughout the year. Scientific data demonstrates that 64% of Success Highways participants rise in retention rates, 137% improve in school attendance, 52% improve in grades and 33% increase in classes passed ("Success Highways: The road to a better future," n.d.).

Another formalized intervention program is ALAS, which means "wings" in Spanish. *ALAS* is an acronym for "Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success." It is an intervention program that targets the at-risk Latino community, and seeks to short-circuit the problem of high school dropout by focusing on middle/junior high school students in 6th-8th grade who are beginning to show signs of learning difficulties or demonstrate emotional or behavioral problems at school or home. Many of these students often need assistance in finding community, environmental and relationship support, so ALAS is designed to address challenges on all fronts: student, school, family, and community. Because these students are already displaying risk predictors that put them in jeopardy of not being able to meet the requirements for high school graduation, the program has the students interact closely with counselors who monitor their attendance, behavior and academic achievement. The counselors provide feedback and coordinates support activities among students, families and teachers. The counselors also serve as advocates for students with more challenging external risk factors, and assist with intervention later if Tier 3-level problems are identified. Students participating in ALAS are trained in problem-solving skills, and parents are educated in parent-child problem solving, the importance of participating in school activities, and how to contact teachers and school administrators to address issues. ALAS has demonstrated a more than 40% overall improvement in ongoing school enrollment and a 20% average improvement per student in

progressing in school, in terms of credits and promotion ("Dropout Prevention," 2007).

Another Tier 2 risk group is students with learning, psychological or emotional disabilities. Because research shows that students with disabilities drop out of high school at a rate two to three times higher than the non-disabled, early identification of disabilities is critical for helping students find appropriate resources to assist them in succeeding academically ("Dropout Prevention," 2007). Essential steps for intervening with these students are 1) creating Individualized Educational Plans for them as early as possible, and 2) establishing a standard collaboration process among the educators and paraprofessionals who work with them, so that students with disabilities become just as likely to meet the necessary criteria to graduate as non-disabled students (McAlandin, 2010).

Role of counselors in Tier 2 early onset prevention. It is imperative that professional school counselors collaborate with others in the school and community, including faculty and paraprofessionals, to promote and assist at-risk students in developing resiliency and coping skills, finding resources and supports that will help the students succeed in graduating from high school and beyond.

Counselor should review academic records to identify students who might require additional help, and then engage local resources for tutoring or mentoring of students who might need additional academic or social supports. They can also create mentoring and peer mentoring programs, form clubs for students, host workshops for families, and do in-service training for teachers so that the educators themselves can be aware of resources, and support the efforts to assist these at-risk students ("The Professional School Counselor and Peer Helping," 2008; "The New Vision for School Counselors," n.d.).

In addition, counselors can also introduce and help implement research-based dropout

prevention programs targeted to high-risk groups. Examples discussed are Success Highways and ALAS, but many others are available, like Talent Search, a program which assists low-income, college-hopeful students whose parents are not themselves college graduates ("Dropout Prevention," 2007).

Tier 3 – Intensive Intervention

   Working with high-risk students. There are a variety of predictors that schools use as "triggers" to identify students at severe risk of not graduating: low grades and test scores, high mobility, disciplinary problems, absenteeism or truancy and those who have fallen behind a grade or two. Tier 3 is all about intensive intervention to turn around individual students who are demonstrating high "ABC" risk factors for dropout, like poor attendance, behavioral issues, and poor class performance. Students who fall into the Tier 3 category are those who need severe intervention because they are at highest risk of not graduating. Examples would be students who have cognitive and learning deficits, have behavioral and emotional disturbances, have continual attendance problems, and have fallen behind in credits for their grade level (Rumberger, 2004).

   As mentioned, one of the many predictors of high school dropout is mobility, meaning those who move from one school to another. In addition to mobility being merely a Tier 2 risk factor that may predict higher likelihood of dropout from high school, a higher instance of mobility can also be a result of disengagement itself (Rumberger & Larson, 1998), elevated to a Tier 3 warning sign. For instance, sometimes a student will move to another school to avoid peer embarrassment at non-promotion; or sometimes schools will even move students in order to decrease their own potential dropout numbers. Other reasons for high mobility may be due to forced moves from being in foster care. Because high mobility rates are correlated with increased levels of high school dropout, this factor must be continually monitored to identify and

prevent the kind of story offered next:

Field Data: Tom Jones Interview. Growing up in a highly dysfunctional family, champion fighter and endurance athlete Tom Jones had a father who abused him both physically and emotionally. He would wake Tom up in the middle of the night, put knife to his throat and ask, "Do you love me? He would put a pistol to his forehead and play Russian roulette with him. Tom had a mother who was clinically insane and also attempted to kill him. The people who were supposed to protect him were the people who hurt him on a daily basis.

After Tom was removed from his abusive home, he was shifted more than 30 times from one foster home to another, and completely disengaged mentally from school because he never stayed at the same school long enough to feel any sense of community or belonging. Tom said he was always in remedial classes and never able to catch up. He viewed school work as trivial, seeing no relevance in it even when he took up residence semi-permanently at a large group home, because his central focus in life became surviving the daily sexual abuse by the adult pedophiles which staffed the home where he lived.

Ultimately, Tom fell so far behind in school, and became so discouraged by his poor academic record, having functionally only a sixth grade education, that he felt it would be impossible to earn enough credits to graduate. So he gave up his formal education completely. Instead, he decided to do something he was good at and could excel at and make money at, and that was to fight professionally. Ultimately, Tom won multiple world titles and now also holds multiple world records for extreme endurance sports. Tom finally also won a lawsuit award against the organization that ran the group home, but says he definitely would have traded the money in exchange for someone who would have taken the time to identify what was going on while he was failing in school, solved his problem, and helped get him back on track

educationally (T. Jones, personal communication, April 9, 2012).

There were a number of Tier 3 high-risk triggers in Tom Jones' life, and any one of them should have been enough to induce a school counselor or other concerned adult to step in and turn around Tom's situation. If he had been identified as high risk due to his extraordinarily high mobility factor alone, for instance, he could have benefited from targeted intervention to engage him, assist him academically and prevent his eventual dropout.

Solutions and intervention approaches. There are many different approaches, resources and programs that meet struggling students right where they are and help them academically, behaviorally, socially and emotionally. A particularly good method of Tier 3 intervention is peer tutoring. A peer tutor may either be of the same chronological age or close in age to the other student/tutee, and may also be in the same grade level. The peer tutor must demonstrate academic proficiency in reading, writing or mathematics in order to assist another student who may be exhibiting academic deficits in his/her course work. Tutor and tutee typically meet either once or twice a week, working on a one-on-one basis to improve academic ability. Through this approach and interaction the tutee continues to gain academic confidence, and also learns to socially interact with his peers.

Peer tutoring can have surprising results. Meta-analytical research conducted by Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes & Moody (1999) suggest that for students with reading disabilities, same-age peer tutoring can be effective for both tutor and tutee, but in cross-age tutoring where older students tutored younger students it had the unexpected result that the tutors themselves showed significant reading improvement, but the younger tutees did not.

A number of formalized programs exist that incorporate Tier 3 intervention strategies. The Check & Connect program is a research-based sustained intervention program that improves

enrollment, attendance, and improves graduation rates for students who are in the process of disengagement and at risk for dropout. Check & Connect has several essential features, the foremost of which is a mentor who commits to working with the student and family for two years. The mentor is in continual communication with the mentee, monitoring the student's academic progress and working closely with the school to intervene when necessary. Together, they keep the student engaged in school and learning. The mentor's goal is to improve a pupil's educational and social proficiencies by working in partnership with the mentee, family and school. The mentor regularly and methodically checks alterable indicators by monitoring the ABC's for signs of disengagement: poor Attendance, problems with Behavior, or failing Classes/coursework ("Check & Connect: A Comprehensive Student Engagement Intervention," n.d.).

In one instance, Check & Connect selected a group of 175 ninth grade students with emotional or behavioral disabilities. They were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. The result was that Check & Connect students were significantly less likely to drop out of school than students in the control group at the end of four years (39% vs. 58%), and in a second subgroup at the end of five years (42% vs. 94%) ("Selected Findings from Check & Connect Research Studies," n.d.).

Another Check & Connect study (2010) that worked with ninth graders concluded that there were significant improvements in the treated group from the beginning to the end of their ninth grade year: attendance had increased 85% vs 64%, there were no three-week periods of absences, and 91% vs. 70% were still enrolled at the end of the year. Finally, participating students were more than twice as likely to be on track to graduate within five years (Christenson & Reschly, 2010).

Role of school counselors in Tier 3 treatment. The role of high school counselors in

addressing intervention activity should take many forms. One activity would be to liaison with

counselors and educators from feeder middle schools to identify and help students at risk for

academic failure. They can also within their own schools work with teachers and the school

psychologist to assist in identifying academically struggling students who may have learning

disabilities, such as dyslexia, or physical disabilities, such as vision or hearing impairment ("The

New Vision for School Counselors," n.d.).

One of the most important jobs of professional counselors should be to encourage

administrators and teachers to create a culture of higher academic expectations. Interestingly,

one reason for significant numbers of dropouts is that academic standards are too low, and the

work is not demanding enough. But, unfortunately, more than 50% of principals and teachers

refuse to believe that high-risk students are capable of responding to higher academic

expectations. Even though research says almost 70% of dropouts would have applied themselves

more if the schools would have required them to actually work, and not simply promote them

along automatically without passing their coursework (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Balfanz, 2009).

School counselors can also educate teachers and parents regarding resources to support a

struggling student in catching up and meeting the criteria to graduate. Another strategy is to

bring in complete outside programs, or just selected materials and methods from successful

programs. Such programs mentioned are Check & Connect, ALAS, Success Highways and

others.

Outside programs cost money to acquire and execute, so a relevant point to consider is

return on investment. When a school loses a student to dropout, it loses thousands of dollars

from the state. In California, for instance, a student's attendance can provide a school more than

$6,000 per year (*Analysis of the 2008-09 Budget Bill: Education*, n.d.). Dropout reduces

resources for a school, some of which could have gone into prevention programs and treatment

for dropout. So by helping keep kids in school, counselors keep money flowing into the school.

A counselor's contribution to increased retention rate can bring more resources to continue to

impact other students and keep more counselors in the school who can do the same thing. In this

way, success becomes self-perpetuating (McAlindin, 2010).

More intimate strategies for school counselors serving students who are not achieving

academically are: taking time to get to know them personally via casual conversations around

campus, committing to provide counseling during lunch and after school, and having an open

door policy (as much as possible). Who knows but that some of these informal strategies,

combined with proven, formalized programs and processes, could have rescued Tom Jones?

There are thousands of Toms out there, and a school counselor who is committed to making a

difference in young lives, and works diligently to create a campus "safety net," can have an

enormous impact not just on the students but on society as a whole.

Conclusion

The problem of high school dropout is serious because it affects everyone, not just the

dropouts themselves. Most people make the assumption that the problem stops with the

individual who drops out, but aggregated high school dropout has added so much to the larger

continuum of societal decay that it has itself become a significant financial burden through social

services, welfare and criminal activity. Instead of paying billions for these individuals on the

"back end" after they have dropped out, why not invest much less up front to identify and

implement programs to prevent high school dropout and increase retention rate by finding ways

to stimulate students and keep them engaged in school?

The road ahead is not going to be easy, but there is promise because professionals in education, whether administrators, teachers or counselors are all there to help and genuinely want to make a difference in students' lives. Everyone just need to work together in a uniform fashion to keep pushing forward and making adjustments to the current system so that all students can succeed and society can continue to improve and future generations can continue to flourish.

Implications for future research and practice. There are several areas of research and practice that should possibly be addressed. One is in the disproportionate male/female dropout rate. Research has demonstrated that boys and girls learn differently. Since most behavior issues in school originate with boys, and poor behavior is usually a reaction to frustration, further research needs to be done to find ways to engage boys in school and giving positive behavioral supports instead of constant reprimands, a progression that leads to frustration and a higher dropout rate than girls.

More standardization needs to be done in how dropout is measured. There is not a single, universal way of measuring high school dropout, and low-performing students can be shuffled, and numbers skewed positively, by districts in order to appear to meet minimal government requirements and continue bringing dollars into the district.

Even though many will argue that establishing later start times for schools is not practical because of the initial disruption, including changing student transportation arrangements, and changing teachers' and administrators' schedules, and therefore should not even be attempted, the benefits to students' lives in terms of increasing attendance, finding classes more stimulating, increasing engagement, and becoming happier and more socially well-adjusted people, far outweighs the temporary disruption of schedules. School districts should reconsider their start

times to fit the biological needs of their adolescent students in order to decrease the risk factors

for high school dropout and improve their "product output."

There also is a definite disparity between what is going on in students' classrooms versus

what is happening in their households. Students are still often subjected to 19th and 20th century-

style teaching approaches in their academic experience, and experiencing 21st century technology

in their personal lives – they are seeing the old as less and less relevant, because schools

typically are not keeping up with where students are in their "real" lives. Before they lose more

of the next generation to disinterest and irrelevance, schools need to train teachers in new, up-to-

date teaching strategies that incorporate various technologies that mirror the current learning

styles for kids today, and educate teachers to find more creative ways to stimulate their students

in order to maintain their academic interest in a world that is ever-increasingly competing for

their attention.

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