2001

Dropping Out: Why Students Leave School

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Executive Summary

Dropping Out: Why Students Leave School

Previous research has indicated that students permanently leave school for a number of reasons including low grades, overage, high absentee rate, behavior problems, pregnancy, work, family problems, or drugs/alcohol. While many of these factors are often described in nebulous terms, the purpose of this study was to examine specific academic factors within the classroom that lead up to students' permanent departure from school, and to learn firsthand, from students who have dropped out of school.

The Study

The purpose of this study was to use qualitative, in-depth interviews of students who had left school for academic reasons, to identify specific factors in the classroom that they believe contributed to their departure. We also wanted to examine what school personnel could do to prevent other at-risk students from leaving school.

The students identified in this study were located by asking school personnel in seven school divisions to identify students who had left school for academic reasons. Of the 39 participants who were identified by school personnel, 24 were interviewed in individual sessions lasting between 20 to 40 minutes in length. Notes were taken during each interview and interviews were tape recorded. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed to determine important themes.

Findings

The findings from the interviews indicated that students were influenced by both academic and personal factors in their decision to leave school. Students indicated that their lack of connection coupled with academic frustration often led them to leave school. Students also noted that they had experienced both "good" teachers and teaching and "bad" (poor) teachers and teaching. Most students could explain the series of events that led up to their decision to leave school. In addition, students reported that their parents and other school personnel played an important role in keeping them in school.

Implications

The results of this study suggest the need for school personnel to make connections with students and the need for teachers to improve their presentation of materials. Many students suggested that teachers need to improve their teaching to motivate students better and they need to make better personal connections to them. In addition, because students were often frustrated by academic subjects, school personnel should consider tutoring or other remedial programs that would aid students learning difficult information. Finally, overage was also viewed as a potential problem for a number of students.

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Preface

This is the final report of a project sponsored by the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium. The Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC) is a collaborative research effort in central Virginia which involves Virginia Commonwealth University and seven surrounding school districts: Chesterfield County, Colonial Heights City, Hanover County, Henrico County, Hopewell City, Powhatan County, and Richmond City. The seven districts represent a cross-section of urban, suburban, and rural public schools. One of the major purposes of MERC is to commission and support research studies that will have an impact on improving the quality of instruction in schools. This study was initiated in December 1998, to provide information on programs and policies that can be implemented to improve the academic success of students who are at-risk for dropping out of school. This project was directed by a research team that included, a professor and graduate assistant from Virginia Commonwealth University, and representatives from each of the MERC public school systems. The design, data collection, and findings of this study reflect the views of the team and do not constitute official policy or position by Virginia Commonwealth University or participating school divisions.

Research Team

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(Gwen Hipp, VCU, assisted in the preparation of this and other documents related to the study. Her assistance was greatly appreciated.)

Dropping Out:

Why Students Leave School

The purposes of this project and its final report "Dropping Out: Why Students Leave School" are to provide background information about why students choose to leave school, to review pertinent literature about students who have dropped out and prevention programs, to present a study about why students in the greater Richmond area choose to leave school, and to present implications of the findings.

Background Information

Many children will function fine in the school environment over their many years of education; however, some will encounter numerous problems while in school. For example, for today's child, "one in four of them is poor, one in five is at-risk of becoming a teen parent, one in seven at risk of dropping out of school, and one in two has a mother in the labor force, but only a minority have safe, affordable, quality child care" (West, 1991, p. 1). Research has long established that academic failure is often the major cause for students dropping out of school and, in fact, some (Kronick & Hargis, 1998) refer to these children as "curriculum casualties" (p. 5).

According to these researchers, when comparisons are made of those who are achievers of the curriculum with those (low achievers) who try to learn the same curriculum, the result is disastrous for the latter group. The path for low achievers is fraught with barriers that prevent them from learning and ultimately progressing smoothly through our educational system. Granted, personal, family, or financial problems may be contributing factors in their decision to drop out, but they are just that: contributors. Kronick and Hargis (1998) firmly believe that there is a direct relationship between the lock-step curriculum that many schools use and students who drop out. This link is

confirmed by a number of studies that have examined academic failure and dropping out (Cantelon & LeBoeuf, 1997; Harvey & Cunningham, 1994; Trusty & DooleyDickey, 1993). In fact in one study (Cantelon & LeBoeuf, 1997), four in ten students who dropped out of school said they left school because they were failing or they did not like school.

For many students, failure (or at least academic difficulty) begins immediately. When a sufficient number of failing events occur early in their academic career, retention is often suggested as a possible solution. Interestingly, research has documented that a large number of students who have dropped out have been retained in one or more grades (Kronick & Hargis, 1998). As students progress through school, the curriculum becomes increasing more difficult and students who have been retained (along with others who encounter academic difficulties) may become disengaged with the academic system and eventually leave school. In middle grades, for many of these students, they are physically in school, yet in many respects they have already dropped out because they no longer find school interesting or find that "giving up" is a better option than "trying and failing." Trying to understand this process is of paramount importance because it may provide indicators that school personnel can use to prevent students from becoming disengaged, and ultimately prevent students from dropping out.

Rationale For the Present Study

While much literature has been written about the drop-out problem, little has been done to examine the specific "academic issues" surrounding a student's decision to drop out of school. In the literature, a number of studies indicated "poor grades" (Peng, 1983) or "academic influences" (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990) as the reasons why students drop out. Despite these often ambiguous reasons, the purpose of this study is to identify specific classroom variables that influence a student's academic decision to drop out.

Therefore, in May 1998, a preliminary survey was distributed to school personnel to determine the extent of the problem in the Richmond, Virginia region. As reported by school divisions, (lack of) "achievement" was the top reason (as reported to Virginia Department of Education) why students dropped out of school. A follow-up telephone interviews of survey results found that "poor grades" or "lack of progress" were the specific "achievement" reasons. The results of surveys found that 67% reported achievement as the top reason why students dropped out of school, followed by behavior problems at 17%, followed by family issues at 9%, and finally, health issues were reported at 7%.

Review of Literature

This review of the literature is an analysis of the research concerning students who dropped out of school. The review will present an overview of the prevalence of the problem, common characteristics of students who are at-risk for dropping out, why students drop out, how students drop out, drop-out prevention programs, and implications of the research on future prevention programs.

Prevalence

Approximately five out of every 100 young adults enrolled in high school in 1997 dropped out of school before October 1998 without successfully completing a high school program (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Over the past decade, 300 to 500 thousand 10^{th} through 12^{th} grade students dropped out of school. This rate represents the number of students ages 16 through 24 who are out of school without a high school credential (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). The drop-out rate has essentially remained the same over the past decade (U. S. Department of Education, 1977), and "many young people are still short changing their lives", according to U. S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997).

Types of Drop-Out Rates

Rates of students not completing high school are measured through three different means: event, status, and cohort. Event rates reflect the proportion of students who drop out of school in a single year without completing high school (National Institute on the Education of At-risk Students, 1996). In terms of recent data, of those young adults who were enrolled in high school (grades 10-12) in October 1997, one year later 4.8% were not in school and had not successfully completed a high school program (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Status rates represent the cumulative effect of students in a given age range who have not finished high school or are not enrolled in school at one point in time. For example, the status drop-out rate for students 16- to 24-year-olds is estimated to be 11.8% as of the 1998 program (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Finally, the last way that drop-out rates are measured is by cohort rate. Cohort rates reflect the percentage of a single group of students who drop out over time. According to the most recent cohort data (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999) on drop-out rates for the 8th grade class of 1988, by the spring of 1992, 10.8% of students in this group had not completed a high school program.

Composition of the Drop-Out Pool

People are often surprised to discover that students who drop out come from groups that are not typically regarded as at-risk. For example, from October 1990 the composition of students who dropped out (all of those who dropped out) of grades 10-12 (event drop-out rates) shows that 67% were Caucasian, 68% came from two-parent families, 42% attended suburban high schools, 71% had never repeated a grade, and 60% had a C average or better (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1993). More recent data indicate that these rates have remained about the same.

While these percentages may seem unusual, this is what the pool of drop-outs looks like (i.e., in the general population there are more Caucasian students than African American and Hispanic students; therefore, a small percentage of Caucasian students actually produces a large number of Caucasian students in the pool than African American or Hispanic students). Yet, when each variable (e.g., race) is examined separately, a very different picture emerges.

When drop-outs are disaggregated (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999) by racial groups, data show that of the Hispanic population of students, 9.4% have dropped out, while 5.2% of African American students have dropped out of school, compared to 3.9% of Caucasian students. These data show that Hispanics are at the greatest risk. Furthermore, over the past few years, the event drop-out rate for Hispanics has grown, while the rate for Caucasians and African Americans has remained steady, or in some cases, declined. In terms of sex and age, students age 19 or older constitute the highest event rate of drop-outs, and the event drop-out rate for males and females was similar in 1998, at about 5% for each sex. Finally, in terms of income, students from low-income households have the highest event drop-out rate (12.7%), followed by students from middle income (3.8%) and high income (2.7%). It is important to note the disparity in the drop-out rate between low income versus middle/high income families.

Leaving School: Why It Happens

Students leave or drop out of school for a variety of reasons. The following reasons were found in the research:

- they could not get along with school personnel (including teachers and principals)
- they chose to go to work
- they experienced academic difficulty (poor grades)
- they did not feel like they "fit in" (overage)

- they had a poor connection to a support system
- female students became pregnant or got married
- students experienced a financial hardship

(Balentine, 1997; Cantelon & LeBoeuf, 1997; Schumer, 1993).

While none of these variables in and of itself insures failure in school, similarly, an absence of these variables does not guarantee success (Balentine, 1997). However, some of these factors greatly contribute to a student's success in school and, in turn, can lead to the student staying in school for a longer period of time. One such variable that can be modified by school personnel is the area of academic success.

At-Risk Students

At-risk is a term that has been used in a number of fields (psychology, social work, and medicine). Since its first usage in the 1980's, it has been applied to education. Students are typically considered at-risk based upon factors that may include minority culture membership, low socioeconomic status, single parent family, or parents who have low educational attainment (May & Kundert, 1997). Younger children are often labeled at-risk for developmental issues, such as developing emotional, adjustment, or academic problems, while older students are usually identified as at-risk for dropping out of school (Fernandez & Shu, 1988). It is with the latter group that this literature review will focus. Therefore, the term at-risk will refer to those students who are at-risk for dropping out of school.

Identifying At-Risk Students

Perhaps the most difficult part of providing early intervention is identifying who needs the services. Since its inception in the 1980's, the term *at-risk* has been defined using a number of

characteristics. Pallas (1989) identified five factors that would place children at greater risk: poverty, race and ethnicity, family composition, mother's education, and language background. Others, McMillan and Reed (1998) summarized at-risk characteristics as: low socioeconomic status, poverty, transient family, minority family, dysfunctional family, drug problems, trouble with the law, poor academic performance, failure to pass state and national tests, absenteeism, behavioral problems, retained in grade, overage in grade, and/or suspension or expulsion from school. Depending upon the study or project, at-risk is often uniquely defined.

Despite the fact that studies use different characteristics to identify students, Trusty and Dickey (1993) felt that a framework should be used to identify potential drop-outs. The four tenets of the framework are: 1) identification should be school-based; 2) identification methods should be multifaceted and flexible; 3) potential drop-outs should be identified early; and 4) identification methods should take into account the degree to which relevant variables are present in students. All four tenets are important because each is based on "best practices" for accurately identifying at-risk or potential drop-outs.

Trusty and Dickey (1993) contend that schools and students interact to produce drop-outs. Therefore, the characteristics that place a student at-risk for dropping out at one school may not be present at another school. Thus, any model that identifies potential drop-outs should take this into consideration. Two, schools should use flexible and multifaceted techniques for identifying potential drop-outs. Because there are probably unique reasons why each student drops out, there should also be different methods that attempt to identify these multiple characteristics. Three, identification should occur early. A number of studies have illuminated the fact that predictors may be present very early in the child's education. For example, third grade permanent records could be used as a tool to examine the potential *at-riskness* in students. Four, methods should take into

account the severity of each factor. Using this fourth tenet, schools should not only look for the additive effects of risk factors, but they should also judge the severity of each factor. For some students, a single risk factor (e.g., financial hardship) may be the only reason for their decision to drop out of school.

Academic and School-Related Problems

A number of studies have indicated that a large majority of at-risk students eventually leave school for academic or school reasons (Cantelon & LeBoeuf, 1997; Harvey & Cunningham, 1994; Trusty & Dooley-Dickey, 1993). In fact, four in ten students who dropped out of school say they left school because they were failing or they did not like school (Cantelon & LeBoeuf, 1997). Similarly, other studies have indicated poor *grades* (Peng, 1983) or *academic influences* (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990) as important reasons why students drop out.

In terms of academic reasons, a survey by Schumer (1993) found that at-risk students (who stayed in school) typically ranked getting good grades and getting assistance with homework and class assignments as important factors in their decision to remain in school.

Furthermore, this group ranked three factors: getting assistance with assignments, homework, and the teachers' lectures as the most important factors in their own learning success.

In terms of other academic factors that occur in the school or classroom, studies have found that school personnel need to become better *connected* to students, particularly those students who are most at-risk for dropping out of school, and these personnel need to provide an active, motivating, learning environment (Cantelon & LeBoeuf, 1997; McMillan & Reed, 1993; Wilkinson & Griffith, 1994).

Leaving School: How It Happens

In addition to identifying school or classroom-based factors to help students stay in school, early intervention appears to aid in higher retention rates. Research (Tomlinson, Frase, Fork & Gonzalez, 1990) supports this notion and has shown that *dropping out* of school is very much *a process* rather than an *event.* In other words, it appears rare that students make an instant decision to drop out, but that the process begins during an earlier time (e.g., junior high or for some students elementary school). A number of studies have documented that this process of dropping out actually occurs during earlier school years as students become *disengaged with* school and the educational process (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Evans & DiBenedetto, 1989; Finn, 1989). Some have indicated that at-risk students could be identified as early as ninth-grade by examining school records (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Lloyd, 1978). Lloyd's (1978) study goes further in that indicators from student records as early as third grade served as useful predictors of students who would later drop out of school. From his study, he found the school factors that were most useful at predicting drop-outs were low achievement test scores and non-promotion from grade to grade.

Why At-Risk Students Remain In School

In a study by McMillan and Reed (1993), at-risk students who exhibited what these authors called *resilience* were more likely to remain in school and remain academically successful than students who lacked resilience. As a group, these resilient, at-risk students liked school, performed well in a positive learning environment, and had teachers who played an important role in their lives. Many of these students claimed that their teachers made the learning environment fun and interesting. Their classroom teachers also "took the time to explain difficult content to them" (p. 66). Perhaps as important, many of these students claimed that one or more teachers in their school took the time to make *a personal connection* with them. These connections to teachers and other relevant

school personnel are important because many resilient students credit these connections as the reason they stay in school and perform well.

Keeping Students Educated: Programs That Work

Developing a drop-out prevention program that works is often dependent upon the unique needs of the individual; consequently, a number of different programs have been developed. However, to insure the effectiveness of any program, Balentine (1997) has suggested the following overall components be present in any drop-out prevention program:

- intensive attendance outreach
- mentoring and tutoring
- staff development
- parent involvement and use of parents and all other available resources
- partnerships that tie high school graduation to the promise of a job
- internship and authentic learning experiences
- summer enhancement programs
- flexible schedules and alternative programs

Characteristics of Effective Drop-Out Prevention Programs

Numerous programs are mentioned in the literature; however, few are supported by research data. Of those research-based drop-out programs, only four research-based drop-out programs were identified. One other study (resilient at-risk students) will be mentioned because much of its findings are related directly to the four research-based studies.

The Austin Program

The Austin Independent School District's Drop-out Prevention Program (The Austin Program) developed five separate programs, each with slightly different components, to address the

needs of identified students (Wilkinson & Griffith, 1993). Of the five, only three were effective at reducing the drop-out rate. Those programs were Project AVID, Project PASS, and School-to-Work Transition Program. Project AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) consisted of a support team of one teacher, one social worker, a social work intern, and a program manager (who served to monitor the progress of the student on a weekly basis). Each student was personally scheduled into the regular school program based upon his/her needs. Teachers with high success rates were assigned to AVID students. One teacher was hired to provide individual tutoring and other students were hired as peer tutors. Classroom instruction focused on state standards. Mentors were also incorporated from local businesses and once a week students took field trips into the community to businesses.

Project PASS was designed to prevent students from dropping out by making modifications in the curriculum, instruction, and support systems available to students. One of the goals of Project PASS was to make students more responsible for their own learning through a series of strategies that taught self-management and responsibility skills. In addition, teachers learned strategies that were intended to *accelerate* student learning. Finally, teams were developed that would provide mentoring, peer tutoring, and other peer support strategies.

The School-to-Work Transition program was designed to provide students with the skills needed for a work environment. Courses centered on a specific vocation, on-the-job training and apprenticeship, as well as private sector involvement, such as mentoring.

Of the three successful programs, all had demonstrated lower drop-out rates than previous years; however, there were mixed results on other measures such as attendance, discipline incidents, and grades.

The ABC's Program

The ABC's Program (Thurlow, 1995) consisted of ALAS (Achievement for Latinos the Academic Success), the Belief Academy, and Check & Connect. The five interrelated interventions that were used included monitoring, relationships, affiliation, problem solving, and persistence plus. In this project, school personnel developed a relationship with an identified student. Through monitoring, the adult knew where the student was at all times. In addition, students were taught problem solving skills. Students were also provided opportunities to develop an affiliation with the school through extracurricular activities. Finally, through persistence plus, the adult provided support if the student became disengaged with school. The results indicated that students in the ABC program exhibited higher levels of continued enrollment, increased academic performance (as measured by passing grades), increases in credits earned toward graduation, fewer days absent, and fewer behavior problems.

Community-Based Learning (CBL) Program

The CBL Program (Shumer, 1993) was developed so that students could attend job sites two days a week to see how basic skills were applied on the site. The program also incorporated individualized instruction, small group work, student initiated learning activities, and caring and involved teachers. The results from this program indicated increases in both attendance to school and grades. Students also reported that they enjoyed the personal relationships with adults. Many of these factors, such as personal relationships or connection to teachers are important, as will be explained later.

Priority One Program

Priority One (Balentine, 1997) was developed in the Tucson Unified School District. The components of the Priority One Program included staff development in areas such as cooperative

learning, learning styles, curriculum integration, conflict resolution tutoring for targeted students, summer school program, tutoring/mentoring programs, and a special program that would systematically monitor native American students. The results from this program demonstrated a decreased drop-out rate, despite increases in enrollment.

Resilient At-risk Students

One final study deserves mention because many of its findings are reflected in other drop out studies. In 1993, McMillan and Reed conducted interviews with resilient at-risk students. Their findings point out some very special characteristics and attitudes among these children. The five unique characteristics are: effective coping skills, internal locus of control, connection in the school through extracurricular activities, personal connections with teachers and other school personnel, and required helpfulness.

First, effective coping skills were often noted in many of the resilient students that they interviewed and often helped them succeed where other students may have given up. Second, many of these students exhibited an internal locus of control. The authors point out that in their study many of the students took responsibility for their actions. These students "credited themselves" for their success and believed that their failures were because they did not put forth enough effort. Third, often these students felt connected to the school or larger community by participating in extracurricular activities in school or involvement in the community (e.g., through their church). Fourth, many of these students had teachers who had connected with them. This connection occurred through their teachers' understanding them or through personal connections that they had with individual teachers. Many students credited one or more of their teachers, administrators, or counselors for their academic success. In addition, many of these same teachers made learning "fun" and "interesting" for them and often these teachers took the time to explain difficult content to them.

Fifth, many of these students had the type of personality in which they were helpful to others in their lives. In other words, they had learned to care for others at a very young age, either because they were required to (e.g., care for a younger sibling because one or both parents were working) or because they volunteered to (e.g., helping a grandparent).

Impediments to Successful School Experience

From an analysis of the research on college students who drop out (Tinto, 1975) West (1991) makes an interesting parallel with that of high school students who drop out. From Tinto's (1987) work on college retention, four factors were identified that contributed to students leaving college. These four include:

1. poor adjustment
2. difficulty in academic areas
3. incongruence
4. personal isolation

These factors are often found in studies that examined high school students who drop out.

1. Poor adjustment refers to how students adjust to a new environment. Students often have a difficult time adjusting to the norms and expectations of the new environment. For those students who are experiencing academic or social difficulties in their current environment (e.g., junior high), they may be at a higher risk as they transition into a new environment such as high school. The norm and expectations are quite different when one compares junior high with high school.
2. Difficulty in academic areas can also increase the likelihood of students leaving school. In particular, when students experience difficulty in academic areas, they may question whether they can live up to the academic standards of the new environment.

3. Incongruence between cultures, another factor, may contribute to a student's decision to leave school. Incongruence refers to how the student's background (culture or class background) conflicts with the culture of the new environment. If students in the new environment (e.g., high school) differ greatly from the student's own culture, the student may be rejected by students in the new environment or the student may have a difficult time "breaking into" established social groups.
4. Personal isolation has been attributed to students leaving college. Isolation may result from a student's appearance or personality and often leads to a feeling of "disconnect" between the student and the school. If the student becomes isolated, it is only a matter of time before the student leaves school or college.

Summary of the Literature

While much literature has been written about the drop out problem, little has been done to specify those " academic or classroom" factors that might contribute to a student's willingness to leave school. Moreover, a May 1998 survey found that (lack of) "achievement" was the top reason (as reported to Virginia Department of Education) why students dropped out of schools in the Richmond, Virginia region and thus, provided further support for the following study.

Research Questions

1. Even though achievement was listed as the reason for dropping out, specifically what were the reason(s)?
2. To what extent did poor performance in school (poor grades) influence students' decision to drop out?
3. In what grade did students decide to drop out?

4. What were the reasons why these students did well in some academic areas and performed poorly in others?
5. Who did these students turn to in the school, if they experienced trouble in academic subjects?
6. In the classroom, what modifications did the teacher make to help them when they experienced trouble in subjects?
7. From their perspective, what could teachers and school personnel do to help students remain in school?

Methodology

These questions were best answered through a qualitative case study. Using a qualitative case study, a structured interview process was incorporated that included open-ended questions. This approach was selected because it provided an in-depth process to examine factors related to students dropping out of school.

Using this methodology, students were interviewed using a semi-structured format. The interview questions were designed by the research team and incorporated information derived from the literature (e.g., level of support in the classroom, teacher's ability to interact with students, teacher's use of motivating teaching methods, etc....) that would allow the team to understand the experiences and perceptions of the participants. Students were free to comment about those areas related to the questions.

Participants

Participants were chosen because of their unique perspectives on the topic. Team members, many of who work as teachers or directors in drop-out prevention programs, identified potential participants. Each member of the research team was asked to identify five students who met the

predetermined criteria of being either currently out of school or in GED programs, had left school for academic reasons, and were between the ages of 16-21. Finally, the team decided that it was best to exclude students in Special Education because their unique experiences (i.e., were provided a specially designed education program, were exposed to teachers who are trained to deal directly with students who are at-risk or students with disabilities) that were different from students in regular education who did not receive any special education services.

From this process, over 60 students were identified; however, when these students were approached to participate in this study, only 38 agreed to participate. Of those 38, 14 were lost to attrition because either they failed to show up at interviews (even when requested a second time), or they failed to return parental permission forms. The end result was a cohort of 24 students who were either currently out of school or were attending a GED program at local schools.

Procedures

An interview and protocol form were developed by the research team (see Appendix A). These forms followed the same structure as those used in the study, "Defying the odds: A study of resilient at-risk students" (McMillan & Reed, 1993). Because of the similar nature of this study and its methodology, the forms from this study served as prototypes and were modified accordingly. A draft of the interview form was pilot tested by three team members of the research team with three participants.

Structure of the Interview

The interview was structured to ask "rapport type" questions first. These questions included information about their name, current school, current work-related (or school-related) activities, place of employment (if any), and place where they reside (i.e., living at home or on own). Next, the interviewer asked questions relating to their school experience, such as desire or ability to return to

school for a GED and additional training (vocational or on-the-job). Next, came a series of questions relating to when and how the students dropped out of school and to what extent academic reasons influenced their decision to leave school. This was followed by a question which asked them to quantify the extent to which grades (poor grades) influenced their decision to drop out. The next area involved asking about academic areas in which students performed well and areas they performed poorly. Each of these questions asked students to identify those academic areas and queried them about the reasons why they performed poorly in some areas and well in others. In addition, we further queried participants about the extent to which their teachers did anything special to help them with their performance. Finally, following these questions, interviewers returned to the subject of school and asked about specific modifications that were made to assignments, tests, notes, or other areas that might have helped the student succeed in certain subjects.

Following up the teacher questions, reviewers then asked if there was anyone else in the school who could help students with those academic areas in which they had problems. Related to this question, we asked if there was a social worker or counselor who worked with the student to prevent them from leaving school.

Next interviewers asked about outside resources (e.g., parent, minister, etc.) who might have helped the student with school or who might have prevented the student from dropping out of school. In addition, interviewers asked about any activities that they two did together (e.g., talking, spending time together, working on homework together, etc.).

Finally, the last two questions were designed as a "consumer" type question. By this, the research team was interested in finding out what school personnel (including teachers) could do better to prevent students from leaving school, and about what advice participants would give to

other students who were thinking about dropping out. These two questions hoped to get participants to talk about variables that might have been overlooked by the team.

Team Members

The research team consisted of one university professor, a graduate student, and six school personnel. The school personnel either directly or indirectly worked on a daily basis with students who had dropped out of regular education school or dropped out of special (drop-out prevention) programs. All interviewers had previous experience and training in conducting interviews. Further training and refinement came after the initial pilot testing. Refinements were made to the interview form and protocol. All interviewers followed the same sequence in asking questions as specified in the interview protocol. Notes were taken during each interview, with further written detail added after the interview. Twenty of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and took place at either the individual's school (GED or special program school) or at a school related location (e.g., school administrative offices).

Data Analysis

Two approaches were utilized during the data analysis phase. The first was to assemble team members as a group and review written transcripts or notes by question to reveal common themes. The second procedure was to have team members independently review a selected set of transcripts to answer the research questions. The coding for analyzing the transcripts is illustrated in Figure 1. An example of a coded interview is illustrated in the Appendix. Team members met and synthesized the findings from the analysis of the transcripts and integrated these conclusions in the review.

Figure 1

Transcript Codes

1 - current employment/status

2 - interest in school or GED program

3 - additional education

4 - reasons for leaving school

5 - importance of grades

6 - subjects that were difficult

7 - subjects that were enjoyable

8 - teacher's influence in difficult subjects

9 - teacher's influence in enjoyable subjects

10 - why other students do not do well in school

11 - why other students do well in school

12 - how each student learns best

13 - what their parents say/do to influence them

14 - what school could do better

15 - what parents could do better

16 - what other students could do to stay in school

17 - how teachers interact with students on a personal level

18 - outlook for the future

Results

The results are described based upon important themes that emerged throughout the study and throughout the analysis. The themes can generally be classified into the following six categories: opinions about "good" teachers, opinions about "bad" teachers, opinions about their parents, opinions about what went wrong, special school connections, and current goals and their future. There were no significant differences among responses in terms of race, gender, or age.

Characteristics of "Good" Teachers

Participants were very aware of what comprised a "good" teacher versus a "bad" teacher. When one considers that these students have been in a number of different schools, it comes as no surprise that students can often determine the characteristics of an effective teacher versus an ineffective teacher (i.e., one who has been in school system for years and has lost their zeal for teaching). Specifically, participants mentioned two main characteristics that made6 "good" teachers good and "bad" teachers bad. Moreover, participants linked "good" teachers with those subjects that they had the most success with and fondly remembered how these "good" teachers interacted and how they taught those classes. Conversely, participants painfully remembered the classes that were academically difficult for them (i.e., they failed or performed poorly) and how these teachers were neither personally or academically engaging.

In terms of "connectability," students clearly remembered those subject areas that they performed well in and the teacher's ability to "connect" with them. They often told stories about their personal interactions and engaging learning. Students related comments, such as: "Mr. ___ was pretty cool. He would tell jokes and all." "My chorus teacher... I could talk to her about anything. She wasn't just my teacher." "It's like he used to talk to you like he liked talking to you. If you did

Characteristics of "Bad" Teachers

Conversely, participants painfully remembered, those teachers who failed to help them learn. In most cases, these teachers were both "personally" and "academically" poor teachers. These "bad" teachers often failed to make connections and used poor teaching methods. Oftentimes, poor teaching was directly linked with poor communication skills. The combination of poor teaching and poor communication often led to unexciting, repetitive learning. For example, their statements included:

"Teachers wouldn't explain it more and we do all these worksheets. So basically we were working on our own. It's harder."

"It's just a boring class."

"No, they just give you the work and tell you to do it."

"Sometimes you just get tired of doing the same thing everyday." "No, just give the work."

"Because teachers didn't take enough time to help me through the math."

Opinions About Parents

"Opinions about their parents" was another popular theme that emerged through the interviews and analyses. Participants responses centered around the strong influence parents (and other caregivers) had in a student's decision to leave school. Most participants remarked how their parents strongly influenced their decision to not drop out. In terms of an influence, their parents were one of the most, if not the most influential individual(s) in their decision not to leave school entirely. Instead, parents urged participants to become enrolled in "any kind" of educational program after students had already decided to leave school. Their comments about their parents included:

something wrong, he'll still write you up, but he is a teacher that you really couldn't stay mad at. He was one of those people."

Some students, performed well in these classes and others, they performed average. But, the main focus of their conversations about their favorite subjects was that they enjoyed the teacher's interactions on both a personal and pedagogical level. Participants also pointed out that they enjoyed the classes despite the topic (e.g., some participants mentioned that they did not really care for science, yet the teacher made it so interesting that they actually enjoyed learning), because they often enjoyed the "act" of successfully learning about a topic. Their comments included:

"I'd say the most special thing they (teachers) do is keep my attention. I figure that's a pretty special thing."

"They compliment us on our work."

"World History, I always did well because there was a teacher there that really made learning interesting."

"Pushed me (to work harder)."

Participants also pointed out that "good" teacher would take the time to explain information again if students did not understand a concept or how to perform a skill. Participants related to interviewers how these teachers would personally come over to explain information (i.e., as opposed to explaining it again to the entire class):

"If you needed help, they would come over to you and explain it like in fine details how to do something."

"She showed me how to do math problems, of course to make them easier for me."

"My math teacher, she explained more than most teachers would."

"If we didn't understand something, all you have to do is ask and he'll show you."

"Parents, that's about it. I guess they just told me not to quit school."

"My granddad and my mother. He told me that if I didn't finish school, I couldn't get a good job. That's the only way I'll make it, if I finish."

Opinions About What Went Wrong

Participants clearly knew why they quit school and most accepted the blame for their decision. The two components to this theme revolved around grades and lack of attendance. They were acutely aware of the importance of grades (and poor grades) in their decision to drop out. Participants knew that effort and "good" grades were essential if they wanted to remain in school:

"I wasn't doing any work."

"I rode to school. It depends on what day it is that I feel that I should go or not go. If I don't want to go, I just stayed home."

"I was doing good, but I just got frustrated and just gave up."

"Beginning of the year grades were good. Then they started getting bad."

"Two or three report cards had already come out. They were not good, so I wasn't going to pass that year. So I figured, why stay there and waste everybody's time?"

Special School Connections

Participants had a special connection in schools that helped them remain in school or return to school. For some, it was a teacher in a favorite subject area; for others it was a counselor or principal. Regardless of the person, their (mentor's) influence was evident throughout their education. The special connection would work with them on school projects (e.g., tutoring of school subjects) or would just take the time to talk to them in an effort to engage the student in school or prevent them from dropping out. In many cases it was the school counselor who was actively involved in the student's life.

prevent them from dropping out. In many cases it was the school counselor who was actively involved in the student's life:

"I'll tell you one person who was always keeping me into school was my guidance counselor."

"My guidance counselor, she told me all the options, like things I could do instead of dropping out."

"My counselor would always talk to me whether I was having problems or not."

"My guidance counselor. Basically, she would just talk to me."

"My counselor would tutor me after school."

Current Goals & Their Future

All of the participants who we spoke to had future plans and a large majority spoke about the role that an education would play in their future. Often, they would reflect on how difficult it is to get a job without a diploma. When they gave advice to other at-risk students, they often mentioned how important it is to stay in school. Participants were acutely aware of the importance of some type of high school degree.

"Yeah, at least get a further education (beyond a GED) as much as you can."

"Stay in school. I wish I would've stayed in school... Just stay in school and try and work.

"You gotta want to do it. You can't just do it. You got to want to."

(Stay in school) "It'll give you a better future. That's what I can say."

"Don't do it (don't drop out). It'll mess up your life. That's one thing, you need all the education you can."

Implications

The implications of the findings suggest variables that can be modified and adapted by those working in the field to prevent students from leaving school, however, very often changes should occur first in the regular education classes. Using this information, the report hopes to suggest several changes in the way students are served in special programs (e.g., GED programs), as well as regular education classrooms. The implications will be addressed in terms of "key questions" used in the interviews.

Key Question 1. Why did you drop out?

Summary of Findings

The majority of students felt that overall, school (classes) were boring and that they weren't learning (failing). These were the two primary reasons influencing their decision to leave school. Other students felt like they had to drop out. For these students poor academic success was just one reason. Some had a family member who had died, were having problems at home, or felt they were too old (overage).

Implications

While a large number of students pointed out that they had trouble in academic subjects, a number of students indicated to us that compounding these academic difficulties were other factors. For some students emotional difficulties were also linked to their decision; therefore, a multi-pronged approach is suggested.

First for students who had academic difficulties or told us that "classes were boring", an option of offering staff development for effective teaching techniques might be considered. Tied to this component, schools should also provide remediation (tutors or summer programs) programs for students.

Second, components should be in place to address the emotional needs of students experiencing trouble in school. Because many students decided to drop out at a time in their lives when they experienced family problems at home, a program that involves counseling might also prove useful.

Finally, for those overage students, programs should carefully consider using retention as a method of keeping students in school. For some students, alternative programs may be a better choice than retention and schools should advertise these alternative programs, particularly for at risk students.

Key Question 2. What role did (poor) grades play in your decision to drop out?

Summary of Findings

For the participants of this study, grades were a major influence in their decision to drop out. Approximately, 87% claimed that grades were either a **major influence** or the **only influence** in their decision to drop out.

Implications

Academically, students need to feel successful in school. Research (Tinto, 1975) has shown that when students fail in school, they often question whether they can live up to the standards of the institution, leading them to becoming disengaged in the institutional environment and, eventually, contributing to their decision to leave the institution. Because of this, prevention programs should focus on helping students be successful in school subjects. For some students, the content was too difficult to understand and for others, the content was not interesting.

Close monitoring of student performance could be the first step to finding those students who have difficulty learning the content. Once these students have been identified, new techniques or methods should be used to help students learn information. Often referred to as the hidden (or

alternative) curriculum, skills such as note taking techniques, test-taking and study strategies, are skills that schools assume students will pick up on as they learn in content courses, but these skills are never taught explicitly. Schools should begin to address these skills in courses or as separate courses that might include better study methods, improved note taking, and new test-taking strategies. In a two-prong approach, students should be taught new ways to learn (as mentioned above) and teachers should try new approaches to teaching students content material, such as multiple presentation methods, improved lecture methods (e.g., the pause procedure), or hands-on materials.

Key Question 3. In what grade did students decide to drop out?

Summary of Findings

The majority of participants decided to drop out in 9th or 10th grade. In terms of how long it took them to decide to drop out, most participants responded that the "process" took place over a time period of about one year. But, the research has shown that the drop-out process actually has its origins much earlier in a child's academic career, in some cases as early as third grade (Kronick & Hargis, 1998). Because of this, indicators should be identified that could serve as early warning signals for students who are at-risk for school failure. Furthermore, all school personnel should realize the importance of "disengagement" among students. Recognizing when students become disengaged in learning, should serve as a cue for teachers to re-evaluate their teaching and should also serve notice that students may have to change the way they learn.

Implications

For school programs, one year is not really a long period of time to intervene. Research has shown that students become disengaged long before they drop out. Because of this, programs should

address the drop-out problem early. For most programs, it may mean using indicators for at-risk at an earlier age with students and then providing interventions at a much earlier age.

Key Question 4. What were the reasons why students did well in some subjects and poorly in others?

Summary of Findings

The two main factors seem to be "connections" and "content presentation." First, most students indicated that those classes that were interesting were taught by teachers who made personal connections with students in the class. These teachers could talk to students on a more personal level. Second, in these classes, the content was interesting for students. Students commented that they performed hands-on experiments, solved math problems together through real-life examples, and read interesting literature. Most claimed that the teacher "brought the material to life." Contrasting this information with the areas in which participants performed poorly, one can see the differences. Often, students cited the way the material was presented or lack of interest as the reason why they performed poorly in a subject area. No one academic area was cited as an area in which they performed poorly. For example, a number of students mentioned English as an area in which they performed poorly, but others listed English as their favorite subject.

Implications

It is the teacher and his/her teaching methods which seem to make the difference, particularly for these at-risk students. Effective teachers can not only relate to students, but can also sense when students do not understand the information that is being taught. These teachers often "bring to life" content that would otherwise be boring and difficult to understand. These same teachers are dedicated teachers who offer assistance to students who do not understand the content. Many

participants commented that they were offered additional assistance, often after school, by teachers to help them better understand content or concepts.

Finally, because no one area stood out as an area in which the majority of students did poorly, this seems to indicate that it wasn't the content, but it was the way the content was presented that made the class "interesting" or "boring."

Key Question 5. Who did these students turn to in school if they experienced trouble in academic areas?

Summary of Findings

The overwhelming majority sought help from their teachers. Some participants claimed that despite being offered help, they turned it down. The other individual in the school who helped with academic subjects was the school counselor. Almost all of the participants mentioned the school counselor as an individual whom they could turn to if they needed assistance. In some cases, the school counselor simply talked to the student, in other cases the counselor changed courses for the student, and in some cases, the school counselor even tutored the student in certain subjects. Regardless of their role, for many students the school counselor was credited with keeping them in school for as long as they could.

Implications

First, prevention programs should provide tutor programs that are run by teachers, students, or other school personnel as one part of their prevention program. Students seem to indicate that the extra help was needed and appreciated. For these participants, most seemed to indicate that tutor programs were helpful.

Second, school counselors play a **vital role** for at-risk students, as indicated by these participants. These individuals were not only someone to talk to, but often helped with subject matter and difficult-to-understand content.

Key Question 6. What could teachers or school personnel do to help students remain in school?

Summary of Findings

The most prevalent comment was that teachers "should make learning interesting." Some commented that teachers should try to change their teaching methods, and that all students do not learn the same way. The second most prevalent comment was that teachers should treat students with respect. Many commented how teachers should try to talk to them and try to understand them. Finally, most participants understood that it is a reciprocal process and that they need to do their part too. Many students understood that teaching is not easy and they also need to put forth more effort.

Implications

The overwhelming point that participants wanted to make is that teachers should change the way they teach. They felt that teachers should try new methods and should understand that all students do not learn alike. Most participants wanted teachers to try to relate to them on a more personal level. Many participants indicated that they want teachers to talk to them. Again, most want a "connection" with the class and the teacher.

Recommendations for Action

A review of the literature revealed that while there are many articles about the topic, relatively little empirical studies address the academic reasons why students drop out and which components of prevention programs are effective. In part, this is due to the complex nature of why students drop out of school and the complex nature of how the drop-out process begins. This study

sought to extend the literature by identifying specific classroom variables that may, in part, be responsible for students exiting school before completion.

Our study, as well as other research, has revealed several important variables that are important for keeping students in school. There appear to be **six** influential components needed for effective drop-out prevention programs, or effective regular education classes.

- *Personal connection.* It appears important for students who are at-risk to maintain a more personal touch with teachers or other school personnel. While this is not a trait that can be taught to pre-service teachers, it appears to be important that any teacher should exhibit a warm, caring personality and have a genuine interest in his or her students.
- *School or community connection.* A school or community connection also appears to be an important trait to prevent students from dropping out. It appears that a connection to a larger group or *membership* in a larger group aids in their retention in school. As important, helping students establish friendships with other students (or breaking into established social groups) appears paramount for those students transitioning to new environments (i.e., from junior high to senior high school). By doing so, schools can prevent students from feeling socially isolated and help them establish a vital connection.
- *Assistance for understanding difficult material or tutoring.* When these students experience school failure because the material is difficult to understand, they value the importance of *someone* reaching out to help them. Usually this *someone* is the teacher, but could also be an adult tutor or a peer tutor.
- *Students want learning to be fun or motivating.* Oftentimes, through the use of

novel materials or effective teaching techniques (e.g., story maps, webs, organizers, etc....), students are motivated to learn. At other times, the teacher needs to supplement the lessons with motivational devices (e.g., wearing historical clothing to teach Colonial History) to increase interest and in turn, increase student achievement. Grades and test scores are very important markers of achievement for students.

- *Students need learning that connects to the real world.* Students often lose interest in learning because it is not connected to real life or work experiences. Students should see the link between basic skills and how those skills are used in the community or work place.
- *Coping or social skills training.* In many of the studies, students who have dropped out of school do not appear to have effective coping skills. This appears to be an important component in that coping/problem-solving skills are needed to deal with frustrating school or social experiences. Many social/coping skills are not explicitly taught to students; instead, students must often "pick up" these skills (or unwritten rules) as they learn.

In summary, schools need to identify at-risk students at an earlier age. Once students are identified, the research points out that students should be provided with special training (tutoring, social skills, or other training), monitored closely, and mentored. It is important for students to be identified early in their education, possibly as early as third grade. It is also important that students make connections with *someone* in the school and become part of the larger school community. That "someone" should be a caring individual who can attend to students on a more personal level. Finally, because students care about grades, a strong effort should be made on the part of the school

to remediate or tutor students who have difficulty with learning. With work, schools can reduce the number of students who drop out, but only through serious changes will the "real" effect of their efforts be felt.

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Interview Questions
(Revised 3/18/99)

Background Information

Name:_____ Gender:_____

Age:_____ Race:_____

Rapport Questions

1. Tell me about yourself

   What is the name of the last school that you attended?

   What are you doing now?

   Do you work? If so, what do you do?

   Where do you live? At home? In an apartment?

   Who lives with you?

School-related Questions

2. Since leaving school, have you returned to a school to

   pursue your GED? Did you receive it? When?

Since leaving school, have you returned to school to receive additional training? What type of

   training? Where? For how long?

   In what grade did you drop out?

   In what grade did you begin to think about dropping out?

   Why did you not finish school?

If due to behavior or lack of attendance find out what academic reasons were related to decision to drop out.

3. How did grades or school performance influence your decision not to finish school?

Would you say grades/school performance:

1	2	3	4
Did not influence my decision	Some what influenced my decision	Major influence in my decision	The only influence in my decision

4. Which academic subjects did you do well at in school?
(limit 3 subject areas)

What were your grades in each subject?

What are the reasons why you did well in each subject?

In each subject area, did your teacher(s) do anything special to help you perform better?

5. Which academic subjects did you perform poorly?

(limit 3 subject areas)

What were your grades in each subject?

What are the reasons why you performed poorly in each subject?

6. Was there anyone in school who could help you with those academic subjects in which you experienced problems?

   If yes, who?

   What did you do together?

   Or

   How did they help you?

7. What other interventions did the school social worker or other non-teaching personnel (such as guidance counselor, student assistance/team coordinator, or other school staff) provide to you prior to you dropping out of school?

   If yes, who?

   What did you do together?

   Or

   How did they help you?

8. Was there someone outside of school who tried to provide some guidance or intervention in an attempt to prevent you from dropping out of school?

   If yes, who?

   What did you do together?

   Or

   How did they help you?

9. Within the classroom, what did the teacher do to help you with those subject areas that you experienced problems?

Were modifications made to assignments?

If so, what were they?

Were modifications made to tests?

If so, what were they?

Were modifications made to other aspects of your learning (e.g., studying, note taking, etc.)?

If so, what were they?

10. What could school personnel or teachers do to help students stay in school?

What advice would you give to students who are thinking about dropping out of school?

Interview Protocol*

1. The first step of the interview process will involve gathering background information. When asking the rapport questions, establish a warm comfortable atmosphere by telling the individual about the study and asking easy questions.

Tell the individual that the purpose of the study is to find out about them and how they fell (or felt) about school. Stress to them that there are no right or wrong answers and that everything they say will be confidential.

2. Follow the interview format, but feel free to move back and forth to the different questions.

3. Let the individual shape the content of the interview. When the individual can no longer answer the questions in his or her own words, the interview is no longer qualitative.

4. Be an active listener by providing verbal and nonverbal cues to the individual being interviewed. Use head nods and verbal encouragers to help the student tell the full story about their experiences.

5. For confusing statements, ask for clarification.

6. If necessary, feel free to ask for specific examples or events that may help illustrate the individual's experience.

7. Avoid "yes" or "no" responses. Ask for details.

8. Silence is fine. Allow the individual time to process the information. Tell the individual to take their time.

9. Tape-record the interview with the permission of the student. Keep the recorder unobtrusive. Try to tape record as many interview as possible. When recording the interview, continue to take notes.

10. Take brief notes during the interview. Keep talking while you write. Maintain eye contact whenever possible.

11. Immediately after the interview, fill in the interview guide with more detailed notes and observations. Try to record, verbatim, the students words, or as closely as possible.

12. Check over the interview guide before ending the interview to be sure that all of the important questions were answered.

* Source: Adapted from J. McMillan and D. Reed (1993), Defying the Odds: A Study of Resilient At-risk Students. Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Commonwealth University, Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium.

Student Profiles

Mary

Mary is 18 years old and a GED program. Prior to her attendance at in the GED program, she had been out of school for approximately one year. She currently lives at home with her dad, step mom, and step sister and plans to volunteer at a local hospital.

As the interview begins, Mary immediately states that at her last school, she attended ninth grade (for the second time). She then shares how tough ninth grade was and how the teacher had failed some students twice. She then relates how she dropped out because she "wasn't really doing nothing" and "wasn't learning." One thing that she makes clear was how "frustrating" it was trying to learn and that she "just gave up." When she mentions how frustrating it was at school, she tells about being taught information, but she "wasn't understanding the things they were going through." She also told about how she was also having problems at home that she feels contributed to her leaving school.

For Mary, the toughest subjects were Science and Social Studies and that she "hated those classes." She claims that "it (the content) just wasn't sinking in," she did a lot of "worksheets," and teachers "wouldn't explain it more (in detail).

Mary pointed out that school personnel did try to help her, in particular her ninth grade counselor. She claimed that her counselor tried to push her to work harder and even tutored her after school, but that it was just too frustrating. In those academic subjects that she enjoyed, Mary claimed that her English teacher was particularly influential. Mary relates how the teacher spent a lot of time reviewing information that she did not understand.

Outside of school, Mary told of how she had support from family and friends. She told about how she worked with her parents to ease up on pressuring her and how when they did, she performed better. She also told about how her grandmother and cousin would help her with assignments that were difficult or those assignments that she had problems completing. According to Mary, the same cousin, a recent high school graduate, would explain information to her. Mary says that, "she's done it all, so she'll go back and re-explain it easier. Since she's a teenager, she knows how to put things down to where I'll understand it and remember it."

In her advice to teachers, Mary feels that smaller classes with less students would give students more of an opportunity to learn. As Mary puts it, rather than have teachers "be rushed all around the room to 25 students, it would be easier to have smaller classes. Then they'll give more time to explain the lecture than rushing through it so they can help everybody else."

Finally, Mary when asked to give advice to other students in a similar situation as her, Mary states, don't do it. It'll mess up your life." She regrets dropping out and not working harder in school and says that, "I'd rather go to school and learn everything, instead of trying to pack it all into one or two classes. It's a lot harder."

Rodney

Rodney is 17 years old and is currently in a GED program. He did attend a special program that prepares students, such as Rodney, to work at local fast food restaurant. Rodney is "working the grill" at his current job. He lives at home with his father and sister.

Rodney has attended a number of school and says that he was kicked out of most schools beginning in ninth grade. He claims that both poor grades and fighting resulted in him being kicked out school. He currently attends a GED program at a local school and says that it is "better than going back to high school."

Rodney says that he did well in Science and Social Studies because he studied and was interested in those subjects. When asked about those subjects that he performed poorly in, Rodney claimed that Math was primarily a course that he constantly performed poorly. He told the interviewer that he typically earned "F"s in it. For the most part, Rodney claims that teachers did not "take the time to help me through the math."
He says that there were other subject areas, but math was the subject that gave him the most trouble.

Rodney realizes the value of an education because his advice to others thinking about dropping out is "don't do it." When asked what teachers could do to assist students, Rodney replied that teachers should, "just do their job. Teach them (kids) and be nice to them." "If they need additional help, Rodney suggested that teachers might "help some students out by coming after school."

David

David is 17 years old and currently is enrolled in a GED Program. He is not working and lives at home with his mother. David has been in the GED program for two years.

David says that he has been in the GED program for two years and prior to that was a freshman for three years. David says he dropped out in ninth grade because he got tired of being in ninth grade. He said, "I didn't want to be like 21 when I graduate. So, I just dropped out." Like other participants, David claims that grade were a major influence in his decision to drop out of school.

David commented that he got some good grades (A's and B's) in Science and Biology (his favorite subjects) because he like those subjects and the teachers were nice. For example, David mentioned that one teacher let him take a test that he missed and helped him prepare. He mentioned other teachers who were his favorite and explained that they would make

modifications like provide the students with notes or would spend extra time reviewing materials.

Conversely, in those areas where he performed poorly, David tells of his disdain for Math and English. When asked what he didn't like about those subjects, he says that he "didn't really understand those subjects" and that he "just didn't want to do the work."

Finally David was very vocal when asked what schools could do differently. He says that teachers should "treat us like real people" and "just have some respect for us." When pressed further, David explains, that "they come in here (to school) with an attitude and catch an attitude with us. We get mad." In addition, he advises other adolescents his age, "don't drop out. At least get something out of here (school) or you can't do nothing."

Coded Transcripts of Two Students in GED Programs

Chester C.***

INTERVIEWER:
How old are you?

RESPONDENT:
18

INTERVIEWER:
Why don't you start out by telling me about yourself? What are you doing now? What was your last school?

RESPONDENT:
I'm trying to get my GED. The last school I went to XXX High School.

INTERVIEWER:
Are you working part-time or anything?

RESPONDENT:
No.

INTERVIEWER:
Do you live at home?

RESPONDENT:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
With parents?

RESPONDENT:
Yep.

INTERVIEWER:
Which one?

RESPONDENT:
Grandma.

INTERVIEWER:

How long were you at XXX?

RESPONDENT:
About 8 months.

INTERVIEWER:

Where were you before that?

RESPONDENT:
XY.

INTERVIEWER:
Where?

RESPONDENT:
XY High School.

INTERVIEWER:
How long were you there?

RESPONDENT:
About a year.

INTERVIEWER:
What grade were you in when you were in XXX?

RESPONDENT:
9th

INTERVIEWER:
What about XY High School?

RESPONDENT:
9th

INTERVIEWER:
When you were at XXX or XY, right? XXX, then you came right here to school?

RESPONDENT:
No, I went to Job Corp.

INTERVIEWER:
What did they do there? What did you do there?

RESPONDENT:
Nothing , really.

INTERVIEWER:
What did they do? How did they help you? What did they try to do?

RESPONDENT:
Help you get a GED.

INTERVIEWER:
How long were you in Job Corp?

RESPONDENT:
About a month

INTERVIEWER:
Tell me about what it was like at XY or XXX in a matter of 9th grade. What was 9th grade like?

RESPONDENT:
It was good.

INTERVIEWER:

Did you do well in school?

RESPONDENT:
Not really because I wouldn't even go to school. But when I went, I did all right.

INTERVIEWER:
Why didn't you go to school?

RESPONDENT:
I really didn't want to go.

INTERVIEWER:
What made you go from XXX to XY?

RESPONDENT:
I moved.

INTERVIEWER:
Then what made you leave XXX?

RESPONDENT:
I wasn't doing any work.

INTERVIEWER:
What else?

RESPONDENT:
That's basically it.

INTERVIEWER:
You say you didn't go much? Did your grades influence your decision not to finish XXX?

RESPONDENT:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
Would you say your grades (1) did not influence your decision, (2) somewhat influenced your decision, (3) was a major influence in your decision, or (4) the only influence in your decision?

RESPONDENT:
4

INTERVIEWER:
#4, the only influence? What subject areas did you do well at when you were in school?

RESPONDENT:
Math and Science.

INTERVIEWER:
What were your grades in them?

RESPONDENT:
I had a B in Science and a C in Math.

INTERVIEWER:
What were your reasons why you did well in Math and Science? Why do you think you did well in those?

RESPONDENT:
They're my favorite subjects.

INTERVIEWER:

In these subject areas, did the teacher do anything differently to help you perform better?

RESPONDENT:
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
Which one? Pick with one at a time.

RESPONDENT:
Math

INTERVIEWER:
What did the teacher do to help you?

RESPONDENT:
He explained it better.

INTERVIEWER:
What else did he or she do? Was it a he?

RESPONDENT:
Yeah, it was a he.

INTERVIEWER:
What else did he do except for explaining it better?

RESPONDENT:
He gave me more help.

INTERVIEWER:
How did he do that? What did he do to give you more help?

RESPONDENT:
If we didn't understand something, all you have to do is ask and he'll show you.

INTERVIEWER:
What else?

RESPONDENT:
That's it.

INTERVIEWER:
So he just show you how it's done. What about Science, did the teacher do anything differently in Science?

RESPONDENT:
No.

INTERVIEWER:
No, you just like that subject?

RESPONDENT:
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
Were there any subject you didn't do well in?

RESPONDENT:
English

INTERVIEWER:
Any other ones?

RESPONDENT:
No, not really, just English.

INTERVIEWER:
What were your grades in English?

RESPONDENT:
I made an F.

INTERVIEWER:
Why do you think you did poorly in English?

RESPONDENT:
Went to sleep in most of his classes.

INTERVIEWER:
What else.

RESPONDENT:
That's it.

INTERVIEWER:
Why did you go to sleep?

RESPONDENT:
It was boring.

INTERVIEWER:
What made it boring?

RESPONDENT:
The teacher.

INTERVIEWER:
Why do you think it was boring? What did the teacher do to make it boring?

RESPONDENT:
Talk a lot.

INTERVIEWER:
What else did the teacher do any differently? Give a test differently?

RESPONDENT:
No.

INTERVIEWER:
Was there anyone in school who could help you with like English – any experienced problems?

RESPONDENT:
No.

INTERVIEWER:
Anybody else in the school like social worker or guidance counselor, school psychologist, team coordinator, peer coordinator to provide you with any information or any help or anything?

RESPONDENT:
If they could provide information, I didn't know about it.

INTERVIEWER:
Is there anyone who could kind of sit down and talk to you while you were there?

RESPONDENT:
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
Do you know what that person did? What their job was?

RESPONDENT:
I'm not sure.

INTERVIEWER:
Who was it? Do you remember who?

RESPONDENT:
I can't remember her name. It was a lady, but I can't remember her name.

INTERVIEWER:
That was at XXX? What did she tell you? What did you guys talk about?

RESPONDENT:
Basically about doing work – doing my work and potentially coming to school.

INTERVIEWER:
How did that person help you? What did they do?

RESPONDENT:
Nothing really . . .

INTERVIEWER:
But they talked to you?

RESPONDENT:
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
Was there anyone outside of school who gave you some guidance in terms of keeping you in school or keeping you going to the programs?

RESPONDENT:
My Granddad and my mother.

INTERVIEWER:
What did your Granddad do that kept you out?

RESPONDENT:
He told me about if I didn't finish school, I couldn't get a good job. That's the only way I'll make it if I finish school.

INTERVIEWER:
What else did you do to get it? Do a lot of things together with your Granddad?

RESPONDENT:
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
Like what?

RESPONDENT:
I helped him like plant flowers and plant vegetables. He grows a garden and I help him do stuff like that and work in the yard.

INTERVIEWER:
Anything else?

RESPONDENT:
That's about it.

INTERVIEWER:
What about your mother? What did you do together?

RESPONDENT:
We'll go out sometimes. Talk, that's about it.

INTERVIEWER:
Did she talk to you about school?

RESPONDENT:
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
How did their talking help you?

RESPONDENT:
They really influenced me to stay in school.

INTERVIEWER:
When you were in the classroom and you had problems in certain subject areas, did any of your teachers do anything differently?

RESPONDENT:
Not really.

INTERVIEWER:
Did they make any modifications in your assignments – change any of your assignments to make them easier or anything like that – like Science? Did they do anything differently in terms of like tests? They give you tests differently or let you take them at differently times, things like that?

RESPONDENT:
Well, sometimes they'd give you open-book tests. Other than that, it's really the same.

INTERVIEWER:
Was that different from what they did with other students or the whole class as a whole?

RESPONDENT:
Whole.

INTERVIEWER:
What about studying or note taking, anybody help you there? Did anybody help you study? That Math and Science teacher, did they help you?

RESPONDENT:
I took notes to help my grade.

INTERVIEWER:
They help you study for tests? What did they do? Do you remember what they did?

RESPONDENT:
They gave practice tests first.

INTERVIEWER:
Then what?

RESPONDENT:
Then the next day they'll give you the test.

INTERVIEWER:
If you had to talk to teachers or other people – the school principal or whatever - and wanted to tell them what they could do differently to help students stay in school or to help students learn information, what would you tell them?

RESPONDENT:
I'd try to tell them to get better teachers.

INTERVIEWER:
What do you think these better teachers could do?

RESPONDENT:
Make the class more exciting.

INTERVIEWER:
How can they do that? What do you think they can do?

RESPONDENT:
They just got to – instead of just like talking all the time, do experiments or something like that. A lot of them don't they do stuff like that?

INTERVIEWER:
What else could they do? That's a good idea – do experiments like hands-on stuff. What else?

RESPONDENT:
Yeah. None that I can think of right now.

INTERVIEWER:
Do you know any students who are thinking about dropping out? Anybody who want to quit or leave school or anything like that?

RESPONDENT:
Not really, not leaving school, but I got a couple of people – they fail for the year. They know they failed, but they just not going back to school.

INTERVIEWER:
What advice would you give them?

RESPONDENT:
Go back to school, try to pass what you can and do your best.

INTERVIEWER:
What else would you tell them? Why would you tell them those things?

RESPONDENT:
So they can get a job.

INTERVIEWER:
What else would you tell them? That's good advice. I'm just trying to find out what else would you might tell them.

RESPONDENT:
I don't know.

INTERVIEWER:
Have you given advice to some of your friends?

RESPONDENT:
A couple of them.

INTERVIEWER:
What do you tell them to give them advice?

RESPONDENT:
You got to finish school. You need it. Because I messed up in the beginning and I'm trying to get mine straight now.

INTERVIEWER:
So they would have to start at the beginning?

RESPONDENT:
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
What else do you tell them?

RESPONDENT:
That's about it.

Lee Interview***

INTERVIEWER:
How old are you?

RESPONDENT:
20

INTERVIEWER:
You're male I assume. And what's your race?

RESPONDENT:
Cambodian

INTERVIEWER:
What was the name of the last school you attended?

RESPONDENT:
I was in CCC County Schools.

INTERVIEWER:
Which school?

RESPONDENT:
It's called CCC County School.

INTERVIEWER:
So you were CCC High School? Did you attend the GED program?

RESPONDENT:
I tried, but they never called me back.

INTERVIEWER:
What are you doing now?

RESPONDENT:
Working

INTERVIEWER:
Where do you work at?

RESPONDENT:
Duxon, it's a printing company.

INTERVIEWER:
Do you live at home?

RESPONDENT:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
Do you live at home with your parents?

RESPONDENT:
Me and my mom.

INTERVIEWER:
Since you left school, have you returned to school to pursue your GED?

RESPONDENT:
I before I went to CCC High School, I went to XXX High School because they're telling me that I'm getting old and they don't think that I'm going to be that much of a succeed.

INTERVIEWER:
And then what happened?

RESPONDENT:
I was like, 'Just let me get my GED.' Me and my Mom decided I should get my GED and then they decided I get my GED, so I did – I tried to get the GED and then I slacked on GED and I was like I ain't wasting 16 or how many years I have been in school to get a GED diploma. I was here to get a standard diploma. So I tried to go back to school and then they got be begged in CCC County High School. So I got in there. Then when I got there, it's the same thing again.

INTERVIEWER:
So you tried to go back for your GED, right? Did you try to go back for any other type of training, like Job Corp or anything that?

RESPONDENT:
No.

INTERVIEWER:
If you had to say that you left school, what grade did you leave school?

RESPONDENT:
Oh, 12th

INTERVIEWER:
What grade did you think about leaving school?

RESPONDENT:
10th & 11th grades were OK. I really didn't want to leave school. I had fun in school.

INTERVIEWER:
So you really didn't want to leave. So then if I say why did you not finish school, what would you say?

RESPONDENT:
The reason I left school because sometimes I feel like it's too early for me to get up. And then when I'm sleepy in my head, I go to school, I really don't want to stay in school, it gets too tough. I just want to come home.

INTERVIEWER:
Any other reasons?

RESPONDENT:
I don't know, man.

INTERVIEWER:
When you attended, did you go regularly or did you skip some days?

RESPONDENT:
I rode to school, it depends on what day it is that I feel that I should go or not go. If I don't want to go, I just stayed at home.

INTERVIEWER:
Let's talk about when you were in school and some of your grades. How would you say that your grades influence your decision not to finish school? Would you say they did not influence; somewhat influenced; a major influence; or the only influence?

RESPONDENT:
Sometimes a major influence. Other times, I don't really look at my grades when I'm in school. As long as I can pass, that was my goal. That was in my head. As long as I pass, I'm all right. I don't care if get straight D's. I don't care as long as I pass.

INTERVIEWER:
When you were in school, you did well in some areas I guess. If you could name 2 or 3 areas that you did well at in school, what would you tell me?

RESPONDENT:
The only area I did really good in is Art.

INTERVIEWER:
What were your grades in Art?

RESPONDENT:
A's and B's and sometimes when it's exams and stuff I don't do that much good in exams, so they give me C's sometimes. I never failed it.

INTERVIEWER:
Why do you think you did well with Art?

RESPONDENT:
That's what I'm good at.

INTERVIEWER:
Did your teacher do anything special to help you do better?

RESPONDENT:
No. I don't think so because – Art, I understand since I was a little kid, so there's really not much that they can tell me what to do.

INTERVIEWER:
Are there any other academic subjects, like English, History, Science, any of those areas?

RESPONDENT:
No.

INTERVIEWER:
Did you do well in any of those?

RESPONDENT:
I would get sometimes average grades.

INTERVIEWER:
Let's just say, what was your 2nd best area other than Art?

RESPONDENT:
I liked P.E.

INTERVIEWER:
Was there anything like academic subject areas? Do you know what I mean by that? I'm talking like Science or History?

RESPONDENT:
No. I think I did good in Science. I was interested in Science. That used the subject that I hate the most, but that end up being the subject that I accomplished the most.

INTERVIEWER:
Why do you think that happened?

RESPONDENT:
I have no idea.

INTERVIEWER:
Did your teacher do anything differently?

RESPONDENT:
They tried their best to help me learn as much as possible. That's the good thing. When I understand something, I get to know it better and I just know.

INTERVIEWER:
In terms of your Science, did they do anything special in the classroom, do you think other than they just tried to help you learn? Get you interested in it or anything?

RESPONDENT:
I don't know. I'm not in regular programs like school programs. I'm in Special classes. I'm in those kind of classes.

INTERVIEWER:
Anything special occur when you were in those classes?

RESPONDENT:
Anytime I do good, they give me candy and stuff. They woo you with a candy when you do something good. I know I sound like a little child, but I liked that. None of them other teachers ever gave me candy.

INTERVIEWER:
Did they do anything special other than give you candy?

RESPONDENT:
No. They compliment us on our work. That's good from a teacher. They motivate students, though, to compliment you on your work and stuff.

INTERVIEWER:
If you had to talk about the areas that you didn't do well, that you did poorly, if you had to say, 'Well, these are my worst areas.' What would you say?

RESPONDENT:
It's just a boring class.

INTERVIEWER:
What areas did you do poorly?

RESPONDENT:
History

INTERVIEWER:
History kind of sticks out in your mind. What kind of grade did you get in History?

RESPONDENT:
I got F's. It's so boring. It put me to sleep, then I got in trouble for that. Most of my days I spent time in the office.

INTERVIEWER:
Why else would you say you did poorly in History?

RESPONDENT:
That's the only reason. It was just boring. It put me to sleep. I'm serious. Boring classes just put me to sleep and then I just don't feel like coming to class. That's one of the things that make me don't want to come to school. If I have a boring class and I know it's going to be boring, I'm going to show up. They can suspend me and do whatever, I'm just not going to show up.

INTERVIEWER:
Was there any other subjects other than History, English?

RESPONDENT:
I don't know.

INTERVIEWER:
How long ago was it since you quit school?

RESPONDENT:
A year ago, it was last – the XXX High School one? That one I quit way back before December of last year.

INTERVIEWER:
Was there anyone in school that could help you with those areas that you had problems in like History or any of those other areas?

RESPONDENT:
Teachers, themselves, they offered help. They offered me to stay after school and all that stuff, but I just didn't want to. I feel lazy sometimes for it because it's so boring, I don't want to get tortured, no more boredness out of it.

INTERVIEWER:
Did you ever stay after school or did they help you in any special way?

RESPONDENT:
I never had time. I had to come home, take my mom to work, things like that.

INTERVIEWER:
Was there any person who helped you out, like a social worker, guidance counselor, peer tutor, school psychologist?

RESPONDENT:
Helped me like what?

INTERVIEWER:
Like just even talked to you about school or helped . . .

RESPONDENT:
The guidance counselor, yeah, he just keep talking to me about school. He's the one who helped me stay on track. I never reached the 12th and I talked to him and stuff, he helped me and I reached the 12th grade.

INTERVIEWER:
So he helped you stay on track until 12th grade. What did you do together when you were away with this person?

RESPONDENT:
We planned things out. We sat down and he let me see where I'm at and where I could be.

INTERVIEWER:
What do you mean where you're at?

RESPONDENT:

See right now, I've got credits of just a sophomore and he said if you accomplish all this and all that, you'll be a senior. I did and I got to be a senior. And then he said after that, if you try your best, you can graduate, but you've got to work hard. I said, yeah I know. But it's hard, man. I feel that I'm not cut for school. I'm not school material. That's how I feel. I can do better things without school.

INTERVIEWER:

Was there somebody outside of school who tried to give you some guidance to prevent you from leaving school?

RESPONDENT:

You know, it's always parents. They don't want you to leave school. They lecture you all day about why you should stay in school. I'm just like, in 1 ear and out the other. There's nothing they can do, nobody can do to make me stay in school.

INTERVIEWER:

How did they help you to stay in school as long as you did?

RESPONDENT:

They just say, go to school and try to finish up what you can. I just go to school until I just got a little bit older. So, I just see all those things in the world and I wanted money fast. So I wanted a job. Then I was like, 'I can't have a job, I got to go to school.' So I just didn't think about a job. So I just go to school and then my mind be somewhere else and it's like school's not paying me, but now I know that school really pays you. I miss school while I'm working. I really want to go back.

INTERVIEWER:

Was there anyone else who may have influenced you, any grandparents or minister or anything like that or anyone else who you could think of that talked to you about school?

RESPONDENT:

No.

INTERVIEWER:

When you were in the classroom, what did the teacher do to help you with those subject areas that you had problems with? Did they modify any assignments, like History?

RESPONDENT:

Yeah. If I have any problems, she'll go over it and then I'll raise my hand and say I don't understand, then she'll come talk to me and explain to me and then she'll say, 'Stay after school and I'll tell you what's going on' and stuff like that and make sure that I really understand it.

INTERVIEWER:

Did they make any modifications to any tests that you took? When you took like History tests or anything, did they let you take it longer or did they give more time, read the question?

RESPONDENT:

There's no time limit. We don't have to have a time limit for a test. When we finish, we just put it up. But it's multiple choice anyway. It wasn't that hard, just find the answer that really fits it.

INTERVIEWER:
Did they do anything differently in terms of your studying or note taking to help you?

RESPONDENT:
Everybody got the same treatment. Everything's on the board and if we don't have the notes on the overhead, she got a whole sheet that's the same thing as the overhead on a pile. So we just pick it up.

INTERVIEWER:
What about studying? How did you do with studying in terms of – did the teacher help you out with studying?

RESPONDENT:
If we wanted to, but I just never wanted to. Other kids, they have their own notebooks and when it came to that, I just didn't care. Any credits that bore me, I just dropped it out of my head.

INTERVIEWER:
If you could kind of talk to teachers and you had to say what they could do differently or anyone else in the school, what would you tell them?

RESPONDENT:
I don't know.

INTERVIEWER:
If you wanted to give some advice to teachers and say, 'Hey, look. Here's what I didn't like about the school. Here's how you could change it.' Would you tell them to do anything differently? Do the same thing? Could they change in any way?

RESPONDENT:
They're doing fine, it's just the students. It's got to be the students, too. It can't just be teachers. Students, too, have to work their part. Teachers' doing the best they can. But some students with no motivation, what can you do?

INTERVIEWER:
If you had to give advice to other students who wanted to leave school, what advice would you give them? If one of your buddies wanted to leave school.

RESPONDENT:
I'd be like, 'Let them leave school.' He'll see what they get. They won't know it themselves unless their on their own feet. Then they'll go and say, 'Why did I leave school?' All you had to do was go to school. Then when you got to go to work, you got to pay this, pay that. It's a pain, man.

INTERVIEWER:
Any other advice? Anything else you would tell them to keep them in school?

RESPONDENT:
It'll give you a better future. That's what I can say. If you really want to leave school, it'll give you what you really want, what you want to be. That's why I wanted to go back to school. But I'm not trying to go back to school. I'm too old, man.

***** Participants' names and school names have been changed to protect their anonymity.**