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Dropping out of School: Problems and Solutions

National estimates suggest that about 10% of all students dropout each year, and about 70% of students overall complete high school. In Oregon, about 4.5 % of students drop out each school year and about 71% overall complete high school. Unfortunately, students are dropping out at an earlier age, typically between 9th and 10th grade rather than as Juniors and Seniors, which used to be more common. While dropout estimates vary because of discrepancies in defining and measuring dropout and completion rates, everyone agrees it is a big problem.

Of great concern, students in special education dropout at almost twice the rate of their peers in general education. Certain groups of students have even higher dropout rates, including African American and Latino/a students, students with emotional and learning disabilities, and students in foster care. For example, about 56% of students with emotional disabilities complete high school and only about 16% of students with emotional disabilities in foster care complete high school. Rising diploma standards and high stakes testing are making high school completion increasingly difficult for students in special education.

Youth who dropout are more likely to be unemployed, to earn lower incomes and to be incarcerated compared to young people who complete high school. For example, unemployment rates are about 40% higher for high school dropouts and 80% of incarcerated individuals are dropouts. School dropout hurts the future of young people and costs society in terms of poverty and crime, reduced tax revenue from employment, and lost productivity and community participation.

What Causes Students to Dropout?

Many studies have examined factors that predict which students will dropout of high school. A 2002 report by the U.S. General Accounting Office summarized these findings, concluding that, “multiple factors are associated with dropping out, and that

dropping out of school is a long term process of *disengagement* that occurs over time and begins in the earliest grades.”

Factors related to a student’s experiences in school and family background seem to have the greatest impact on dropping out. School experiences associated with dropping out include:

- being held back at least two grade levels;
- having low grades;
- high rates of absenteeism;
- frequently changed schools;
- having disciplinary problems;
- low engagement in school activities;
- poor relationships with teachers and peers at school;
- perceiving that what’s learned in school is not relevant to adult life; and
- lack of support services.

In Oregon, research sponsored by *Connected by 25* looked at the academic performance and graduation rates of the 2004 class from Portland Public Schools. By tracking students over time, they found certain “markers” associated with dropping out.

- 8th graders who failed to meet state standards in 2 or more areas of reading, math or science were 2.6 times more likely to dropout.
- 9th graders who failed at least one course were 4 times more likely to dropout.
- 9th graders who ended the year behind in credits were 4 times more likely to dropout of high school - this risk increased by year as students fell further behind
- Students who transferred into the district after their Freshman year were 3 times less likely to graduate, while students who withdrew from and then returned to school were 9 times more likely to end up dropping out.
- When a student experiences more than one risk factor, his or her likelihood of dropping out increases. For example, if a student ends 9th grade having failed at least one class and behind in credits, he or she is 5 times more likely to dropout of school.

Students from families with low incomes and education levels enter school less prepared and they are more likely to dropout than students from families with higher incomes and more schooling. Additionally, students with overwhelming life experiences may feel that school is inconsequential by comparison. For example, foster youth with disabilities - who often struggle with devastating life circumstances such as separation

from family, abuse and neglect, profound changes in their living situation, and uncertainty about the future - may have particular problems functioning at school, including behavioral and emotional problems that stem primarily from their histories of neglect or abuse. These youth also may be disconnected from their teachers and peers as a result of repeatedly changing foster placements and schools.

Dropout Prevention Strategies

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network and the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities provide information on key practices that research shows prevent students from dropping out of school.

Drop-out Prevention Practice	Key Elements
School-Community Collaboration	Volunteers, funding, after-school centers, school-to-work programs, drug abuse prevention programs, parental involvement programs
Safe Learning Environments	Early identification of students with antisocial or aggressive behaviors, violence prevention, anti-bullying and conflict resolution programs for all students, positive relationships among staff, students and parents, safe school plans
Family Engagement	Acknowledge that all parents are involved in their children's education and want them to succeed; link family and community engagement to student learning; support families to guide their children's learning; develop capacity of school staff to work with families; engage families in respectful and trusting relationships; embrace partnership and sharing power with families
Early Childhood Education	Head Start; birth-to-three; pre-school, kindergarten; high quality classroom instruction; child- and family-centered strategies for cognitive, behavioral, health, and living skill development.
Early Literacy Development	Rather than retaining or pulling out children, intervene early: read daily to young children; summer reading programs, targeted programs for poor, at-risk children.

Drop-out Prevention Practice	Key Elements
Rigorous Academic Support and Facilitation	Advanced instruction; high expectations; connection to resources, including remedial instruction; and ongoing monitoring, encouragement, challenge and support.
Mentors / Adult Allies	One-to-one, group, tele-mentoring, e-mentoring: a trusting relationship with someone who cares about the student and school performance.
Service Learning	Connect meaningful community service with academic learning, personal growth and civic responsibility: reciprocal relationships, learn by doing, reflection through writing and discussion, student leadership of projects, community engagement.
Alternative Education	Student/teacher ratios of 1:10; clearly stated mission and discipline code; continual staff development; high expectations for achievement; individualized learning program; flexible schedule, community involvement; total commitment to student's educational success.
After-School Opportunities	Day-care; after-school and extended-school day programs with academic, recreational and cultural activities.
Professional Development	Working with different student populations; higher order thinking skills (math); laboratory skills (science)
Active Learning	Centered on student's learning styles; cooperative learning; learning styles theory; multiple intelligences theory; project-based learning
Educational Technology	Computers; Internet connection; technology trained teachers; accommodate students who do not have home access.
Individual Instruction	Individualized planning; problem-based learning and reciprocal teaching; peer tutoring, cooperative learning; hands-on learning, journaling; projects; role play; simulation; inquiry.
Career and Technology Education	Career guidance and pathways; cooperative education, tech prep, school-to-career case management.

Drop-out Prevention Practice	Key Elements
Cognitive-Behavioral / Self-Determination Interventions	Students learning and applying goal-setting; problem-solving, self-regulation, anger control, and self-instruction strategies.
Positive Behavioral Support	Teaching and supporting positive student behavior in schools using stakeholder teams, clear behavioral expectations, data collection and analysis systems, and developing and teaching positive behavioral expectations throughout the school.
Educational Stability	Keep students in home schools whenever possible, transportation for students to remain in their home schools, ensure records follow transferring students, programs to welcome new students, foster connections for new students to supportive adults and peers.

For more information:

National Dropout Prevention Center/Network and National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities Internet portal: <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/>

Thurlow, M.L., Sinclair, M.F., Johnson, D.R. (2002) *Students with Disabilities who Drop Out of School—Implications for Policy and Practice*. National Center Secondary Education and Transition. Available at <http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=425>

Connected by 25: Go to: <http://www.connectedby25.org/>

Facts from NLTS2: High School Completion by Youth with Disabilities (November 2005). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Available at www.nlts2.org/fact_sheets/nlts2_fact_sheet_2005_11.pdf.