Staying on Track for High School Graduation: Promoting Student Engagement

By Karen E. Stout, Ph.D., and Sandra L. Christenson, Ph.D.

Traci is about to graduate from high school and is planning on attending a state college in the fall. Graduation and college were not always part of Traci’s plans. In ninth grade, as a Hmong immigrant in an urban high school, she struggled both with feelings of not belonging and with personal problems. Unable to adjust, she dropped out. Fortunately, Traci entered a dropout prevention program and returned to high school, where she was supported by a mentor in solving issues and developing her considerable talent as a performance poet, which helped her find a niche in the school.

Robert’s problems with school reflected a gradual pattern of disengagement. His father had not finished high school, and Robert’s friends had either dropped out or were on the verge of dropping out. In eleventh grade, when Robert’s parents divorced, he was forced to divide time between different homes. His attendance became sporadic, and he was in danger of failing three classes. Again, through enrollment in a dropout prevention program, Robert got back on track. He eventually finished high school and is now studying carpentry at a community college.

Both Traci’s and Robert’s stories illustrate the difficulty of describing typical pathways to school dropout; nevertheless, each had identifiable risk factors, like membership in a minority group and low socioeconomic status. Traci struggled to belong and Robert was not engaged in either academic or extracurricular offerings at the school. Traci dropped out in ninth grade, a critical transition time, whereas Robert gradually became disengaged.

Nationwide, only about two-thirds of students entering ninth grade graduate with a standard diploma four years later (Martin & Halprin, 2006). In fact, the current Diplomas Count “projects that 1.23 million students will fail to graduate from high school” in 2008–2009 (Editorial Projects in Education, 2008, p. 3). In what follows we describe the history of school dropout, predictors of dropout, student engagement as the critical factor, and research about promoting school completion, with Check & Connect as an example of a research-based prevention program.

HISTORY OF SCHOOL DROPOUT

At the beginning of the twentieth century, few teenagers attended high school and even fewer completed it. The term “dropout” first appeared in the late 1950s as the comprehensive high school flourished. By the 1960s, when graduation from high school became an expectation for all youth, worries about those who did not finish high school became prominent. Five motifs characterized the dropout literature at that time: “equating the dropout problem with unemployment, linking it with urban poverty, using the language of juvenile delinquency, assuming that dropouts were male, and asserting that psychological defects were a primary distinction between dropouts and graduates” (Dorn, 1993, p. 363).

For the next 20 years, dropouts seemed to disappear from policy concerns, but with the publication of A Nation at Risk in 1983, dropouts were again on the policy agenda. Early research efforts, responding to the belief that dropping out was the fault of individuals, correlated demographic and behavioral characteristics associated with dropping out, and the term “at risk” came to describe students with economic and other hardships that increased their risk of dropping out.

PREDICTORS OF DROPOUT

Early and ongoing correlational research efforts have identified three groups of factors associated with risk for dropping out:

• Students’ social background including minority group membership, male, highly mobile, overage for grade level, and growing up in a single parent home (Rumberger, 2004);
• Students’ educational experiences such as low grades, low test scores, retention one or more times, disciplinary problems, and absenteeism or truancy (Jordon, Lara, & McPartland, 1999); and
• School characteristics including large size, poor student/teacher relationships, and lack of teacher support (Reschly & Christenson, 2006).

Early dropout prevention programs enrolled students based on these risk factors, but it was quickly apparent that having any one risk factor, or even several together, could not reliably predict dropout. As Gleason and Dynarski (2002) noted, dropout programs that targeted students with these risks often served students who would not have dropped out, while missing students who did.

The use of longitudinal data clarified the shortcomings of correlational research by identifying some particularly salient factors. Rumberger’s (1995) analysis of National Education Longitudinal Study data found that students who had been retained a grade were eleven times more likely to leave school early. Some groups of students are particularly at high risk of dropping out including those of low-socioeconomic status
background; those with a parent who dropped out; those of Hispanic, African American, or Native American descent (Reschly & Christenson, 2006); and those living in the South or West. Additionally, students with disabilities are more likely to dropout than their general education peers; 44% of students with emotional behavioral disabilities do not finish school (Wagner et al., 2005).

Other researchers conducted longitudinal studies to see how students with risk factors fared over time in different environments. Roderick (1993) found that the transition years, when students move from elementary to middle school (typically in sixth grade), and from middle to high school (typically in ninth grade), are especially critical. Other studies have also noted the importance of ninth grade. Researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research developed an on-track indicator to signal when ninth graders are off track for earning a high school diploma (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Their research showed that students are on track if they earn enough credits to advance to tenth grade while receiving no more than one F in core academic subjects.

Noting a similar pattern around transitions in Philadelphia schools, Balfanz and Herzog (2005) examined risk factors from elementary through high school and found that four sixth grade risk factors predict early school leaving: low attendance (80% or lower), poor classroom behavior, a failing grade in math, and a failing grade in English. Sixth graders with just one of these factors had only a 10% chance of graduating on time and a 20% chance of graduating a year later. Longitudinal findings support that sixth and ninth grade are crucial years in determining whether a student will stay on track to graduate.

ENGAGEMENT AS A CRITICAL FACTOR

Most researchers believe that dropout is not an instantaneous event, but rather a long process of disengagement from school. Over the past two decades, students’ engagement at school has emerged as the critical factor across hundreds of dropout prevention and recovery programs in the United States (Christenson et al., 2008). Student engagement is a multidimensional construct involving academics, behavior, cognition, and affect; hence, programs emphasize both motivation-to-learn and sense of connection (National Research Council, 2004). In a seminal model proposed by Finn (1989), school completion is described in terms of students’ participation in and identification with school. To Finn, participation, the behavioral aspect of engagement, is characterized by involvement in class-related and extracurricular activities, whereas identification with school, the psychological aspect of engagement, is a student’s sense of belonging to school and valuing success in school-relevant goals.

Engagement requires psychological connections within the academic environment (e.g., positive adult-student and peer-peer relationships) and active student behavior (e.g., attendance, effort) (Christenson et al., 2008). The process of engagement works as follows: participation leads to successful performance, promoting feelings of identification with school, which in turn promotes ongoing participation. Dropping out is viewed as a gradual process of disengagement from schooling that includes impaired or reduced participation, less successful outcomes, and reduced belonging, culminating in the student’s early departure from school.

Two Types of At-Risk Variables

The focus of student engagement is on alterable variables. Finn (1993) organized factors that place a student at risk into two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Subtype</th>
<th>Observable Indicators</th>
<th>Facilitated by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Time on task, academic engaged time, and accrual of credits</td>
<td>Utilizing after-school programs (tutoring, homework help), increasing home support for learning, and implementing self-monitoring interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>Attendance, fewer suspensions, and classroom participation</td>
<td>Devising individualized approach to attendance and participation issues, implementing programs to address skills such as problem solving and anger management, and developing behavior contracts to address individual needs</td>
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</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>Internal Indicators</th>
<th>Facilitated by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Using problem-solving skills, setting realistic goals, and creating an active interest in learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Using problem-solving skills, setting realistic goals, and creating an active interest in learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
groups: status or alterable variables. Status predictor variables include factors that educators cannot change, such as the socioeconomic status of the community and family. Alterable predictor variables are those that can be readily influenced by educators, families, and students, such as suspensions, attendance, and homework completion.

Subtypes of Engagement
The engagement taxonomy that informs many dropout interventions includes multiple indicators of engagement within four subtypes (Christenson et al., 2008): academic, behavioral, cognitive, and affective (see Table 4.1). Academic and behavioral engagement are observable indicators, while cognitive and affective engagement are internal indicators, requiring understanding students’ personal meaning of experiences and performance. Both indicators and facilitators of student engagement are important. Indicators refer to students’ connection to school and learning such as behavior, attendance, and homework completion. Facilitators refer to contextual influences that promote student engagement. Engaging students requires not only a focus on academic achievement and attendance; but interventions must also support students’ cognitive and affective engagement.

Empirical findings support the connection among engagement, achievement, and school behavior across levels of economic and social advantage and disadvantage (Klem & Connell, 2004). Cognitive and affective engagement indicators are associated with positive learning outcomes, are related to motivation, and increase in response to specific teaching strategies (Christenson et al., 2008). Regardless of grade level, fully engaged students tend to earn higher grades, perform better on tests, report a sense of belonging, set or respond to personal goals, and persist on meaningful tasks. They make a personal investment in their learning that results not only in graduation but also readiness for postsecondary college or technical education.

Engagement is relevant for all students. Using data from the 2006 High School Survey of Student Engagement, Yazzie-Mintz (2007) found that 28% of students reported not being engaged. All schools have students who are uninvolved, apathetic, or discouraged learners—even without demographic-related risks.

PROMOTING SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL COMPLETION
Components of Programs to Improve School Completion
McPartland (1994) proposed four tenets for both examining the causes of dropout and alleviating it through school-wide prevention programs. These include:

- Students need to experience success at school
- A positive interpersonal climate is a crucial part of students’ school experiences
- Coursework should be relevant to students’ lives and future goals
- Students need help with serious personal problems in order to be successful as learners

The National Dropout Prevention Center advises that schools addressing dropout consider a combination of best practice universal interventions and/or an evidence-based program that aligns with their context and meets the needs of their students who are at risk. Fortunately, an emerging and promising intervention literature base exists for both universal and individualized interventions (Christenson et al., 2008; Levin, 2008). According to Levin, interventions designed to enhance school completion are worth the investment. Significant public benefit comes from higher earnings for the more educated through both tax revenues and reduction in reliance on public services. Levin also identified a direct, effective, cost-cutting strategy—targeted interventions for those students most likely to drop out.

Check & Connect
A targeted intervention, Check & Connect (http://ici.umn.edu/checkandconnect) consists of four defining features: (1) a mentor who works with students and families for a minimum of two years; (2) regularly checking on students’ school adjustment and educational progress; (3) intervening in a timely manner to re-establish and maintain students’ connection to school and learning; and to enhance students’ academic and social competencies; and (4) partnering with families. Two core elements of Check & Connect are:

- Relationship Building – mutual trust and open communication nurtured through a long-term commitment focused on students’ educational progress
- Routine Monitoring of Alterable Indicators – systematic checking of warning signs of disengagement (e.g., attendance, academic performance, behavior) that are readily available to school personnel and that can be altered through intervention

Check & Connect mentors focus on alterable risk factors to enhance timely, individualized intervention and to attend to high risks of dropout.

Student-mentor relationships are built through formal (systematic checking) and informal (e.g. stopping by at lunch) connections, by teaching the student problem-solving skills, and through a two-year commitment to coach and work with the student. Relationships are essential for students’ behavior change, commitment to learning, and academic progress in school.

A tenet of this targeted intervention is that students are often placed at risk of dropout due to demographic characteristics, family circumstances, and a lack of school and community resources. To promote school completion some students need persistent support, long-term commitment, and interventions that create a person-environment fit with a focus on skill acquisition to meet the demands of the school environment. As a targeted, individualized intervention, Check & Connect ideally is combined with universal prevention efforts, such as smaller learning communities or positive behavior supports. Check & Connect has been implemented in urban and suburban communities, and in elementary, middle, and high school settings. Two experimental
studies of Check & Connect (Sinclair et al., 1998, 2005) have met the evidence standards of the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/).

CONCLUSION

The Tracis and Roberts in our schools do not make instantaneous decisions to drop out. Rather they experience a gradual process of disengagement marked by individual challenges and experiences. We can identify these students by paying attention to critical predictors of dropping out, particularly at critical transition grades. Through the use of programs such as Check & Connect, we can provide targeted interventions. Working with a mentor helped Traci sort out personal problems and develop her unique talents to give her a sense of belonging in her high school.

Robert’s mentor addressed his poor attendance and pushed him to complete the courses he needed for graduation. Supporting and improving academic, behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagement can mitigate the risk of dropout, and through the implementation of both validated programs and effective universal strategies, educators can promote school completion for all students, even those who face more difficult, and often, multiple challenges.

References


Balfanz, R., & Herzog, L. (March 2005). Keeping Middle Grades Students on Track to Graduation: An Initial Analysis and Implications. Presentation given at the second Regional Middle Grades Symposium, Philadelphia, PA.


