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H.S. Dropouts Say Lack of Motivation Top Reason to Quit

By Catherine Gewertz

High school dropouts interviewed for a study released last week were far more likely to say they left school because they were unmotivated, not challenged enough, or overwhelmed by troubles outside of school than because they were failing academically.

Key changes could have boosted their chances of staying in school, said the former students, who were between the ages of 16 and 25 when interviewed for the study. The most commonly cited were teachers who expected more of them, schools that helped them more when they struggled, and classes that were more engaging.

"The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts" is posted by Civic Enterprises.

The report's authors emphasized that their aim was to explore young people's reasons for leaving school at a time of heightened interest in the issue, and to spark a national response that would help more such students finish high school.

"The very people most affected by this crisis, the young people, are telling us that this problem can be solved," said John M. Bridgeland, who directed the White House Domestic Policy Council under President Bush and is now the president and chief executive officer of Civic Enterprises, the Washington-based public-policy-development group that conducted the study.

Peter D. Hart Research Associates, an opinion-research company, conducted four focus groups with dropouts in Philadelphia and Baltimore last August. In the following two months, researchers interviewed 467 dropouts from 25 large cities, small towns, suburbs, and rural areas. The sample was not nationally representative.



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Only 35 percent of the former students interviewed cited academic failure as a major factor in dropping out. More than six in 10 said they had grades of C or better. Seven in 10 said they believed they could have graduated if they had tried hard enough.

The dropouts who reported the greatest academic struggles were the ones most likely to say that their schools hadn't done enough to help them with those difficulties, the report says.

Large proportions of all the former students interviewed, 70 percent to 80 percent, said they wanted better teachers and more interesting classes, including the opportunity for more "real world" learning opportunities.

Former students often cited a lack of motivation and of interesting classes as reasons they eventually disappeared from school. Sixty-nine percent said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard. Nearly half said their classes were not interesting. Two-thirds said they would have worked harder if they had been challenged to do so.

"They just let you pass, anything you got," said one focus-group participant.

Literacy Problems

Bob Wise, the former West Virginia governor who is now the president of the Washington-based Alliance for Excellent Education, which has studied the dropout problem, said he believes the complaints about boring classes mask the real issue: the need for work on teenagers' reading comprehension.

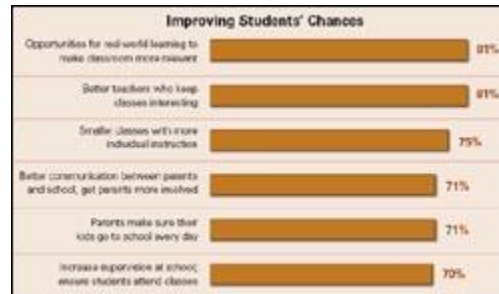


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Improving Students' Chances

Dropouts agree that a number of vital changes would help keep students in school.

*Click image to see the full chart.



SOURCE: Civic Enterprise

“Underneath the frustration of a lot of these kids is an adolescent-literacy issue,” he said. “Of course, class isn’t interesting if you can’t understand it.”

A separate new study by ACT Inc. supports the idea that a lack of reading proficiency is a widespread problem among high school students, even those aspiring to college. ("Graduates Can't Master College Text," March 1, 2006.)

For many students, life events contributed to dropping out, the Civic Enterprises report says. Large numbers said that having to work, becoming a parent, or having to care for family members contributed to their leaving school. Those respondents were the most likely to say that they would have worked harder if their schools had demanded more of them and offered support.

Nearly all the youths interviewed regretted dropping out, according to the report. Eight in 10 acknowledged that a diploma is critical to success in life, and three-quarters said they would stay in school to graduate if they had it to do over again. A similar proportion said they would enroll in a diploma program if it served students of their age group.



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Many also said they had needed more structure and discipline in school. More than 60 percent said schools should do more to enforce classroom discipline and to keep students from skipping school. Nearly 40 percent said they had had “too much freedom,” making it easy for them to slip away.

“In high school, if you don’t go to class there isn’t anybody who is going to get you,” said one young man from the Philadelphia focus groups. “You just do your own thing.”

Fewer than half of those interviewed said they or their parents got a phone call from school when they were absent or stopped showing up altogether.

Mr. Bridgeland and his co-authors contend that the young people’s experiences suggest that changes in public education could decrease the dropout rate, which some estimates peg at one-third nationally, and closer to half among Hispanic and African-American students. How best to calculate dropout rates is a topic of scholarly debate. (“The Exaggerated Dropout Crisis, *Commentary*, current issue.)

Civic Enterprises’ study was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which also has given a grant to Editorial Projects in Education, the publisher of *Education Week*, for an annual report on high school graduation rates and related issues.

Districts should try to make a wide variety of schools and teaching strategies available to meet students’ differing needs, the authors say, and find ways to keep parents informed of their children’s academic progress.

Noting that dropouts tend to start missing class more often in the one to three years before they leave school, the authors suggest schools adopt an “early-warning system” that could use attendance patterns as a trigger for assistance. Research by Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at Johns Hopkins University, has shown that students’ dropout risk can be traced to as early as 6th grade by their attendance, behavior, and course-failure patterns.



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“These alarm bells go off, and they are unnoticed, unheeded,” said Mr. Bridgeland.

He added that often, many services are available to help struggling students, but no connection is ever made. One of the recommendations in the report—an idea endorsed by some education groups—is to have adult advocates assigned to monitor students deemed to be at risk of dropping out and make sure they get the help they need.

More states should raise the age of compulsory schooling to 18, the authors argue. Currently, 24 states allow children to leave school at 16. States and districts also must compile more accurate data on dropouts. They pointed to the National Governors Association’s work to get states to agree on a common way of calculating the dropout rate as a good start.

Experts who have studied the dropout rate welcomed the students’ voices as an often-overlooked dimension of understanding the problem. But they cautioned that self-reported accounts can be misleading and easily misinterpreted.

Mr. Balfanz said schools could mistakenly respond to the former students’ complaints that too little was expected of them by simply piling on more work.

“What they’re really saying is they’re not engaged,” he said. “That’s different than saying I want three hours of homework each night.”

Jay P. Greene, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute who has studied graduation rates, said that many former students’ responses might have been colored by wanting to preserve their pride. They would be more likely to say, for instance, that they left school because they were bored than because their skills weren’t up to par. Other research shows that weak academic skills tend to correlate with dropping out, Mr. Greene said.

“Asking people why they do things and understanding why they do things are two separate things,” he said.