Dropping Out Is Not an Option

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Abstract

Not completing the equivalent of a high school education has significant economic and social implications in the U.S. and globally. When opportunity and information gaps between students are allowed to continue, the impact on dropout rates is considerable. School building leaders and school counselors can collaborate to encourage students' connection to their school community and education; lessening their likelihood of dropping out. This article explores evidence-based interventions delivered within a comprehensive school counseling program focused on engaging students in developing a career plan. A particular emphasis is on collaborative, proactive actions towards enhancing career development and reinforcing the message that "dropping out is not an option."

Keywords: drop-out prevention, career development, school counselors, and school administrators

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*We are guilty of many errors and many faults but our worst crime
is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life. Many of the
things we need can wait. The child cannot. Right now is the time his
bones are being formed, his blood is being made, and his senses are
being developed. To him we cannot answer 'Tomorrow.' His name is
'Today.'*

(Mistral, 1987, p. 19)

More than thirty years later, Mistral's words continue to ring true. Closing the achievement, information, and opportunity gaps persists as a daunting task, not only in the United States but also in every nation that desires to have an educated citizenry. Although 60 years have passed since the Supreme Court ruled school segregation unconstitutional in Brown v. Board of Education, too many children, particularly those from low-income families, those in large urban districts, and students of color, continue to lack equal access to a quality education and are trapped in schools isolated by poverty (Children's Defense Fund, 2017).

As reported by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which tracks education investment and performance of wealthier democracies (Business Insider, 2014), the United States college graduation rates rank 19th out of 28 countries regardless of the investment of more money per capita than any other developing nation. Despite historical attempts to equip underrepresented groups with greater skills that benefit economic performance (McKinsey, 2009), challenges persist. Children who live in constant poverty, who are homeless or in foster care, or attend schools that lack resources are often denied quality educational opportunities. These students are less likely to graduate from high school, move on to college or other post-secondary opportunities, obtain a well-paying job, or find themselves in the pipeline to prison (Children's Defense Fund, 2017).

*As both K-12 and higher education wrestle with how best to prepare
students for an ever-changing future, what is certain is that most
young people now need more than a high school diploma to secure
a more promising tomorrow (Balfanz, DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland,
2018, p. 13).*

Although significant progress has been made and continues to be made, reality persists. Dropping out of high school is associated with adverse life outcomes: youth will struggle with employment, poverty, be dependent on social services benefits, be more at risk for incarceration, and have poor physical and mental health with no insurance benefits. The economic consequences of dropping out have broad implications as society pays the price of loss on income and a drain and government and state services (Kidsdata, 2018)

As the dropout rate continues to lower and the graduation rate increases, Black and Hispanic/Latino youth continue to lag behind their Caucasian and Asian counterpart (NCES, 2018). From 2000 to 2016, the dropout rate for Black youth declined from 13.1 to 6.2% and from 27.8 to 8.6 % for Hispanic youth. Conversely, the graduation rate

improved to 73% for Black students and to 76 % for Hispanic students in the cohort completing high school in four years (including August graduates). This remains below the national rate reported at 82% for the cohort admitted in fall 2014 (NCES, 2018). Wide disparities remain within states especially in large urban areas. Major metropolitan areas, which have high concentrations of low-income students, continue to have overall graduation rates in the 60 and 70% (Balfanz, et al 2018).

There have always been students who did not complete high school, and in years past, many could succeed economically with a plethora of manufacturing jobs. Those days are long gone. Despite the improvement of the high school graduation rate, almost daily 7,000 students become dropouts translating to approximately 1 million students annually who will not graduate from high school with their peers. Lacking a high school diploma can doom a young adult to a life of periodical unemployment, on government assistance, or in and out of the prison system. Although the national high school graduation rate is at an all-time high, far too many high school students, especially students of color and students from low-income families, never make it to Graduation Day.

Data has revealed that dropouts are:
- more than twice as likely as high school graduates to slip into poverty in a single year and three times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed;
- more than eight times as likely to be in jail or in prison than are high school graduates;
- four times less likely to volunteer than are college graduates and half as likely to vote or participate in community projects; and,
- representative of only 3% of actively engaged citizens in the U.S. today (McFarland, Stark, & Cui, 2016).

What is the price we pay for schools that are failing our children and who pays it? McKinsey (2009) reported two kinds of costs: one paid by the individual students we leave behind and another price paid by our country. For individual children faced with unequal educational opportunities, McKinsey found that "avoidable shortfalls in academic achievement impose heavy and often tragic consequences, via lower earnings, poorer health and higher rates of incarceration" (p.5). Investigators also discovered that, sadly, it is possible to predict which children will bear this burden before they have even finished elementary school. For many students, poor achievement as early as fourth grade appears to predict future chances of graduating high school and college; resulting in low lifetime earnings. However, some children are at greater risk than others before they even enter their first classroom; especially children who are Black, Latino, or poor (Wright-Edelman, 2011). In fact, the likelihood of students' academic success and school completion is impacted by factors including poverty, mobility, stress, and malnutrition (Rothstein, 2010).

Dropping Out: A National Crisis

As the economic patterns globalize and the U.S. economy becomes embraces service and technology jobs, youth and young adults need to understand that that higher levels of educational attainment are critical to their ability to compete and thrive. Current statistics reveal that 95% of jobs created in the economic recovery require more than a high school

diploma but less than a 4-year college degree (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2018). Other students who do graduate may receive a diploma that does not prepare them for future success. Lacking a quality high school diploma, students are shutout of postsecondary education and training that is required for a good job in today's economy (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). Individuals are learning that higher levels of educational attainment are critical to their ability to compete and thrive.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), despite annual gains and improved graduation rates, there remain many youth who begin 9th grade in the United States educational system but do not complete their high school education in four years.

Table 1. National Graduation Rate by Selected States

National Graduation Rate	84.1%
New Jersey	90.1%
Tennessee	88.5%
Massachusetts	87.4%
Utah	85%
New York	80.4%
Florida	80.7%
South Carolina	80%
Oregon	74.8%
Nevada	73.6%

With a renewed emphasis on high school completion and the importance of postsecondary education, the call for a 90% graduation rate continues to be heard (McFarland, Stark & Cui 2016) and would ultimately result in 250,000 graduates with an economic earning capacity of 3.1 billion dollars (with a projected 5.7 billion dollar increase in economic growth) (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2017). Moving more students from dropout to graduate and presenting them with the opportunity to succeed in college and a career requires the collective effort of educators, families, business and community leaders and policymakers. If the goal is to prepare all students for some postsecondary education and career readiness, the first step is to close the gap between those who graduate and those who do not.

Consequences of Not Finishing High School

The data tells the story. Over the course of a lifetime, a high school dropout earns $260,000 less than a high school graduate and $1 million less than a college graduate does. Dropouts from the class of 2016 will cost the U.S. more than $17 billion in Medicaid and expenditures for uninsured health care over the course of their lifetimes. High school dropouts are 3½ times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested, and more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison while 68% of state prison inmates across the country do not have a high school diploma (Children's Defense Fund, 2017). The implications from dropping out of high school are enormous, including a higher risk of poverty and even an abbreviated life span. It is estimated approximately 1 in 6 students who enter 9th grade drop out of U.S. high schools every year (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2018).

Key Factors to Keep Students in School

If students perceive their high school experiences as meaningful to their future goals and employment prospects, it is more likely that they will be motivated to remain in school (Chappell, O'Connor, Withinton, & Steglin, 2015). *Can I get a Little Advice Here* (Public Agenda, 2010) though primarily focused on college aspiration, concluded that the current high school career and college counseling system is weak in terms of helping to increase planning for future careers. Too many disadvantaged students are not aware of their career and educational options, which may lead to non-completion of a high school diploma. The relationship between dropout and perceiving high school as being relevant to future goals is not surprising.

Student Engagement

The 2016 Gallup poll results shows that nearly half of U.S. students report that they are either not engaged or are actively disengaged from school. If school personnel intend to prepare students adequately for a changing economy that demands higher-level skills and knowledge, they need approaches that engage students in their learning. Regardless of cultural values and socio-economic development, how teachers teach and relate to their students is important for student engagement in school (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Classroom teachers are highly impactful when they engage students in social-emotional learning to compliment academic knowledge and skills (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger 2011). School leaders' efforts to improve instructional practices and garner support from teachers and parents will enhance student engagement. Social-emotional learning allows student voices to be heard and fosters connections to the classroom and school environment.

Collaborative School Leadership

School leaders play powerful roles in implementing change. Administrators establish goals and plans to improve student learning, initiate changes in organizational practices and processes, address school culture and school climate concerns, and monitor efforts to keep student growth and development on track (Farrell & Coburn, 2017; Hoyle, et al., 2005; Marzano & Waters, 2009). The Edwards and Edwards report, *The Principal's Role in Dropout Prevention: Seven Key Principles* (2007), addressed the role of high school principals in combating the dropout problem and identified seven principles fundamental to the success of programs targeting dropout rate reduction:

- early identification of factors leading to low academic and social performance.
- examine existing policies and practices.
- build strong community partnerships and personalize your school.
- reduce social isolation.
- manage student transitions.
- create options and implement creative interventions.
- build family and parent relationships.

Improvement of graduation rates cannot occur in isolation; leadership training for years has shifted from a management orientation to a creating a climate of positivity (MacNeil, Prater & Busch, 2009). No one factor can eliminate the many contributing factors that

lead to dropping out. Both school principals and school counselors have come to recognize the importance and value of collaboration for common goals.

The partnership of school leaders and school counselors around common goals and vision has continued to gain momentum since the late 1990's. The school counseling community has become an influential partner in school improvement with the expressed purpose to eliminate the barriers to educational opportunity (Dahir, 2004). Administrators may not possess the appreciation of the full scope of school counseling needed to provide effective, comprehensive supervision and support to the counselors assigned to their schools and school districts (Cinotti, 2014). On other hand, comprehensive collaboration between school counselors and principals can lead to significant improvements in students' lives. (Dimmitt, Militello, & Janson, 2009; Janson, Militello, & Kosine, 2008, Lambie & Williamson, 2004). School leaders can welcome an ally to raise student aspirations and help every student achieve, at a minimum, a high school diploma.

School counselors can no longer passively react to the challenges facing schools and youth; it is a critical time to take action and accept the challenge of contributing to the epidemic of non-school completion (Gysbers, & Henderson, 2002). School counselors are ethically bound to ensure that human relationships are nurtured, diversity is valued, and every student receives equitable, quality education (ASCA, 2016). When aligned with the educational enterprise, the school counseling program is data informed, proactive and preventive in focus, assists students in acquiring and applying life-long learning skills, and is delivered in a comprehensive and accountable manner (Stone & Dahir, 2016).

School counselors, by the very nature of their preparation, are trained to listen, hear, and act. School counselors are expertly prepared in critical skills of counseling, active listening social justice advocacy, career and academic advising; mediating, designing interventions, using data to inform practice, and helping students acquire the coping and resiliency skills necessary to survive in a highly competitive global environment (White & Donald, 2010). School leaders, utilizing the expertise and skills of school counselors, can collaboratively seek solutions to improve outcomes for all students, including those at- risk of not completing high school (Cisler & Brice, 2013).

Promising Practices

Utilizing Career Development K-12

Career development is one of three domains of student development in the American School Counselor Association National Model (ASCA, 2012) and school counselors identify strategies to: motivate student achievement and success, provide career awareness, open doors to opportunities, encourage self-awareness, foster interpersonal skills, and to help all students acquire skills for life. Career development activities include the employment of strategies to achieve future career success and job satisfaction, as well as fostering understanding of the relationship between personal qualities, education and training, and future career goals. As the national agenda is to ensure that every student graduates high school college- and career-ready, with administrative support, school counselors can ensure that every student, starting in the elementary grades, has acquired

awareness and an understanding of what it takes to achieve future goals through a comprehensive career development program.

Career and Technical Education

Research has begun to show that career and technical education has indeed made a difference in high school completion and progression to college (and other postsecondary advanced education venues) for students who typically either have dropped out of school or have performed poorly in traditional educational programs (Chappell, O'Connor, Withington, & Stegelin, 2015). The programs reviewed in the recent *National Dropout Prevention Center/Network's* meta-analysis of dropout prevention programs and strategies included several programs utilizing career and technical education. Career development and job training as a dropout prevention strategy had the largest effect size of any strategy analyzed impacting dropout rates. *America's Promise* has issued a series of "Grad Nation" reports from 2010 to the present that discuss necessary improvements to the raise graduation rates of U.S. students. The consistent recommendation is to include high quality career and technical education as well as work-based learning as strategies to address the dropout issue. (DePaoli, Balfanz, & Bridgeland, 2016; DePaoli, Balfanz, Bridgeland, Atwell, & Ingram, 2017).

Common Goals: Collaborative Solutions

School counselors are ethically bound (ASCA, 2016) to take an active role to identify and help secure what every student needs to succeed. Scheel and Gonzalez (2007) reported higher future career aspirations and higher academic goals of the students involved in school counseling activities and services. Elementary counselors work with a primary prevention mindset. Middle school counselors assist students with the transition between middle school and high school. Holcomb-McCoy (2007) found the transition to high school "increased stress levels, decreased self-esteem, deteriorated academic performance, and heightened risk for maladjustment" (p. 253). School counselors, at both the middle and high school levels, can initiate comprehensive programs to that assist with smoother transitions to high school and ensure strong beginnings in 9th grade leading to on time high school completion. Empirical evidence demonstrated that students considered at risk need specific programs on academic, personal/social skills, and career planning that will influence a positive change in their academic and affective behaviors (Johnson & Perkins, 2009).

Students leave school for a variety of reasons that range from financial, to boredom, to frustration, to lack of intervention supports. Chronic health and undetected mental health issues, failure, lack of engagements, absenteeism, behavioral disorders are all contributors. By collaboratively examining the risk factors of student failure in their individual buildings, school leaders can and school counselors can:
- assist with early identification of learning or emotional disabilities;
- analyze student - adult responsibilities such as a high number of work hours, assuming the role of caregiver or parenthood;
- observe students who belong to a peer group engaged in high-risk behavior;
- monitor low school achievement;

- identify resources to support students in need of tutoring, mentoring, and after school programs;
- maintain data on student retention in previous grade levels;
- work with students (and teachers) who have low educational expectations;
- explore reasons for students having low commitment to school;
- assist students who have little or no resources to support them; and,
- engage with families who lack interest in school.
  (Adapted from Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009)

Taking Proactive Action

The building administrator, in partnership with the school counselor, is key to the early identification of low achieving students, beginning in kindergarten. Early intervention can connect both the students and family members to the resources that will provide tailored and targeted support students through the elementary years. Strong finishes in pivotal transition grade levels leads to strong starts at the next level. This must continue through the middle school years and the high school experience. Children at risk of poor educational outcomes, no matter their racial and ethnic identify, or represent any underserved or underrepresented population are entitled to an appropriate education. Engaging family and community members at the onset in the process is essential. Moving the graduation rate to 90% benefits each student who chooses education over unemployment. Since 2010, the U.S. has added 11.6 million jobs, 99% require more than a high school diploma. High school graduation, at a minimum, now puts a student on track to an economically independent future.

By using early warning data systems school counselors can target strategies specific to the needs of at-risk students, including providing opportunities for career exploration and small-group counseling for developing academic and behavior skills, and promoting school connectedness (Gewertz, 2009). Collaboration among school leaders, counselors, teachers, and families, will result in the development of strong teacher-student relationships, improved student engagement, and community support networks all of which are critical to improving school completion.

Conclusion

Solutions exits; it is public knowledge as to who leaves school and the dropouts themselves have told us why. Lessons can be learned from international educational counterparts who have stepped up efforts to increase both high school completion and higher education. All school personnel, administrators and school counselors, teachers and support staff, civic minded community and business leaders, and parents and families hold a stake in the future of the U.S. and in the broader spectrum of a globally connected society.

All students, regardless of their home zip code or socioeconomic background need equitable access to resources and learning opportunities that will prepare them for success in college and a career (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2015). When school leaders and school counselors, together, commit to these basic necessities, only then can the readiness requirements of students for college, work, and careers improve (National

Education Association, 2008; Partnership for Twenty-first Century Skills, 2006). The 90% goal is no longer elusive and getting more students to graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college and a career is a critical national goal (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2017). This will require rigorous and relevant curricula that includes the development of academic, career and technical skills, interpersonal skills, social-emotional development and the commitment of school leaders and school counselors to ensure "dropping out is not an option". The answer to dropping out is to complete high school. We know the answers; we cannot wait for "tomorrow" to start with "today".

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