

Making School Matter:

Providing Support to At-Risk Students and
Reducing the Dropout Rate

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Distinguishing Between Symptoms and Causes

- High dropout rates are a symptom of larger systemic problems
- Many school reforms are not implemented with a clear focus on how they will solve the problems schools face
- Must understand why and how failure becomes normalized - Payne

Reducing Dropout Rates Requires a Change in How Schools Operate

- Challenge assumptions about kids who fail
 - Normalization of failure
- Need for early intervention systems
- Need to engage parents early
- Need for partnerships between schools and CBOs
- Need to personalize the learning environment - schools where students are known

Why Students Dropout:

- Source: The Silent Epidemic - Gates Foundation, Education Week, Pew Center on Public Policy
- 47% dropout because they are bored, unmotivated and disengaged
 - Poor teaching - heavy reliance on lecture, drill, test prep
 - Stuck in remedial courses - students treated as though they are dumb, no plan to connect students to more challenging academic program
 - Unchallenging curriculum - what they learn is not connected to their lives

Why Students Dropout:

- 43% drop out because they are behind in credits because they have missed too many days of school
- Why?
 - Stress in the household and lack of support at home
 - Lack of connection with adults at school
 - School has no plan to help students to catch up
 - Distracted by misguided peers - pull of the streets

Why Students Dropout:

- 35% were failing classes and unprepared for high school
- Why:
 - Weak literacy skills
 - Most high schools lack reading specialists
 - Lack of organization skills, time management
 - Low esteem due to lack of competence
 - Lack of clear future goals
- 65% were passing and on track to graduate

Why Students Dropout:

- 32% leave school to work - especially true for immigrant students
- Why?
 - Immigrant youth feel pressure to work to support themselves and their families
 - Kids in poverty are faced with tough choices related to supporting family and self

What Can be Done to Reduce the Dropout Rate

- Improve teaching - Move away from excessive reliance on lecture and test prep
 - Interactive strategies - project-based learning, Socratic seminars, experiential learning, simulations, presentations
 - Make class time work time - reduce reliance on homework, teachers must look for evidence of learning

Strategies for Reducing Dropout Rates

- Make curriculum more relevant to the lives of students
 - Career Academies - marketable skills that don't limit options
 - Socio-cultural relevance - build connections between what is learned and what is happening in their lives
 - Show how what is learned in school can help students to address real problems in their lives

Strategies for Reducing Dropout Rates

- Help students to develop concrete plans for the future early
 - Involve students in counseling about college early
 - Engage parents in advising
- Build stronger ties between adults and students
 - Effective use of extracurricular activities
 - Develop small learning communities
 - Pro-active mentoring
 - Utilize every teacher as an advisor
- Design systems to identify at-risk students and to intervene early
 - Target at-risk youth with mentors, jobs, and services
 - Utilize after-school and intensive summer school programs

Keep in Mind

- Changing school culture is the most important thing that can be done to keep students in school
 - Build community
 - Adopt rituals and practices that reinforce values and norms that promote achievement
 - Counter anti-intellectualism so that its “cool to be smart”
- We may need to adopt alternative pathways to diplomas for students who cannot fit into traditional school structures and schedules