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Confronting the
**SCHOOL
DROPOUT
CRISIS**

Insights and Interventions
From a Former Dropout

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Foreword by Jim Rex

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The Reasons Students Drop Out

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Many of today's dropouts have been overlooked and have fallen between the cracks. Sometimes school personnel miss the warning signs that could have been recognized and addressed much earlier. School staff often lack the time and/or the necessary supports needed to adequately address enough of the issues that lead to a student dropping out, and there may be insufficient funding available to hire more school support personnel.

Some of the reasons kids drop out are more obvious, while others are obscure and less often addressed by school personnel. The following is a summary of a review of the professional literature on why students drop out, including some of my own personal insights from my experiences. The reasons some students give for wanting to drop out may be surprising, so it's imperative for educators to hear each student's individual story.

Academic Challenges

These difficulties can range from learning disabilities, test anxiety, lack of basic study skills, retention, general anxiety, and feelings of failure. The pandemic has exacerbated these difficulties due to ongoing increased learning loss that is continuing to affect students (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). These perceptions often accumulate and eventually lead to a sense of hopelessness that prevents them from trying to succeed academically in school. Consequently, students shut down their efforts to try, which inevitably leads to even more failure and discouragement. Once a student falls further and further behind academically, it becomes easier to give up than try to catch up.

Disconnection and Disengagement

Disengagement can happen when students do not comprehend what is being taught, do not have others at school with whom they can

connect, or have a perception that school personnel do not appreciate or value them. What's the motivation to go to school if students feel disliked or disregarded, or if their school experiences are mostly discouraging? If school personnel cannot motivate these students to graduate, then who will? Sometimes services are available to help them, but many of these students are never connected with these supports (Gewertz, 2022).

Another factor in student disengagement from school comes from the increasingly easy access to the internet. Engaging online is often much easier and more appealing to students than sitting in a classroom listening to a lecture. It's difficult for educators and parents to compete for students' motivation to learn, with the engaging and sometimes addictive nature of online media. We need to work harder and smarter at reengaging our students so they feel invited to drop in instead of drop out. Educators should keep searching for and developing fresh ways to engage students in and outside of the classroom. Figure 3.1 shows a list of resources relating to student engagement.

Chronic Discipline Problems

Students who have a history of acting out in class and/or in other school activities can be labeled by school personnel and others as "troublemakers" or "frequent (discipline) flyers." These students are often unfairly singled-out and blamed for even minor infractions of rules and other expectations and eventually are suspended or expelled for their behavior. Unfortunately, these students may wind up in the criminal justice system instead of receiving the help they truly need. This form of unjust discipline only contributes to the "school-to-prison pipeline" problem that has hurt many of our students (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023).

Lack of School Resources and Supports

All students need help from time to time. If a student does not feel there is anyone at school they can talk with when they need help, they will likely go somewhere else. That help may come from another peer. Whether a student has basic living needs or academic, social, or emotional issues, they could benefit from a connection with at least one caring adult. Students need to feel comfortable going to a support person for help. When this kind of support is not readily available or difficult to find by an individual student, they will be left only to their own resources and experiences. This often does not end well for the student who needs help the most.

Figure 3.1**Student Engagement Resources**

Online Resources for Student Engagement
“How to Increase Student Engagement in the High-School Classroom,” by Andrea Banks. <i>Insights to Behavior</i> (2023). https://insightstobehavior.com/blog/how-to-increase-student-engagement-in-the-high-school-classroom/
“7 Strategies for Engaging High School Students,” by Matthew Whalen. <i>National Society of High School Scholars</i> (2023). https://www.nshss.org/resources/blog/blog-posts/how-to-engage-high-school-students-in-active-learning/
“6 Strategies to Engage and Motivate Teenaged Students,” by BusyTeacher.org. https://m.busyteacher.org/23290-teen-troubles-engage-motivate-6-strategies.html
“10 Teacher’s Tips for Making Teenage Students Excited in the Classroom,” by Devon “Fergy” Ferguson. <i>Teach With Fergy [blog]</i> (2018). https://teachwithfergy.com/10-teachers-tips-for-making-teenage-students-excited-in-the-classroom/
Books on Student Engagement
<i>Ideas Ideas Ideas: A Collection of Proven Ideas from Education’s Front Lines to Improve the Climate and Culture of Your School</i> , by Steven A. Bollar (Josten’s Renaissance, 2016).
<i>Motivating Students Who Don’t Care: Proven Strategies to Engage All Learners</i> (2nd ed.), by Allen Mendler (Solution Tree Press, 2021).
<i>Reimagining Student Engagement: From Disrupting to Driving</i> , by Amy Elizabeth Berry (Corwin, 2022).
<i>Confronting the Crisis of Engagement: Creating Focus and Resilience for Students, Staff, and Communities</i> , by Douglas B. Reeves, Nancy Frey, & Douglas Fisher (Corwin, 2022).

Technology and Social Media Interference

Today’s students are spending increased time entrenched on their digital devices rather than on schoolwork or face-to-face socializing, which can lead to a negative impact on their social and mental well-being. According to a report by the U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory, up to 95% of youth ages 13 to 17 use some form of social media (2023). And it’s not just that they are using this technology, it’s how they are using it and what they are missing when most of their time is consumed by it.

Technology dependency can inhibit a young person's journey to graduation when it becomes an addiction. With technology there is clearly a "too much." When social media becomes an addiction for some students, it is recommended that they participate in a "digital detox" to reduce the amount of time spent on these digital devices (Hilliard, 2024). Overindulgence in digital devices can distract students from their learning and can misguide them from knowing real facts.

History of Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy

Once students have missed too many days of school and fallen behind academically, they lose sight of any possibility to graduate. Chronic absenteeism can be a more accurate predictor of school failure and dropping out than test scores, especially when the truancy starts as early as sixth grade (Allison & Attisha, 2019). Missing days of academic instruction, the possibility of receiving mental health support, and the loss of connection with friends at school can cause students to increase their thoughts about giving up. Sometimes a student's excuses are authentic, but once it happens repeatedly it becomes a chronic problem that causes them to fall so far behind that they risk being held back. Students who are retained and do not receive individualized help are at a higher risk of dropping out (Giano et al., 2022).

Bullying and School Violence

Children and youth who are vulnerable or ostracized in society tend to be at higher risk for victimization and bullying by their peers, especially if they are one of the few minority students at a mostly white school (Bushnell, 2021). Sadly, bullying is an ongoing issue for many students in today's schools.

It's extremely difficult for a student to focus on their learning when they are being intimidated or threatened by other students at school. If the bullying is not dealt with effectively by school personnel, the students who are victims of bullying might start avoiding coming to school out of fear or anxiety. If nothing happens to stop the bullying, students may feel they need to deal with it themselves. This can lead to violence against others and/or self-harm or suicide. Often, the victims of bullying quietly endure the daily cruelty dealt to them. The impact on them often leads to further discouragement, disengagement, and hopelessness with school. Schools need to be safe and inviting places where our youth feel secure, accepted, encouraged, and helped.

Family Mental and/or Physical Health Issues

Parents play an incredibly important role in their child's life. When a parent or other family member has mental or physical health issues, it affects the entire family. Some everyday stress and anxiety are normal. But raising an adolescent can be an especially challenging task and can sometimes exhaust the coping skills of any parent.

During the pandemic, the challenges of living with teenagers became even more stressful because families were required to stay at home together for long periods of time. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that "adolescents aged 12 to 17 years accounted for the highest proportion of mental health-related emergency room visits in both 2019 and 2020" (Leeb et al., 2020). The disruptions and interruptions of a mental, emotional, or behavioral issue can make it nearly impossible for some students to stay on track academically (McCullough, 2021).

If a child grows up in a dysfunctional family and has experienced several adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), whether emotional or physical, it will increase their risk of developing mental health problems themselves (Gu et al., 2022). Past trauma, feelings of abandonment or hopelessness, and unresolved grief and loss can all contribute to a child's inability to focus on their education. A nurturing home atmosphere provides the foundation for a positive mental well-being (Mphaphuli, 2023; Radevska, 2021).

Young people have a better chance of staying and succeeding in school if they live with families that are functioning in a healthy way. But school personnel have little or no influence over what happens with these students once they are at home. Students who come from dysfunctional homes will need more support from significant others, including caring professionals at school who provide individualized, supportive relationships with these students.

Peer Influence

Peers have a strong influence on middle and high school-aged students. Some students encourage their peers to do well in school and help them work toward graduation. However, there are also peers who can have an adverse influence on students, such as convincing them to cut school, involving them in high-risk behaviors, or encouraging them to drop out. Peers can also develop into boyfriend or girlfriend relationships that become controlling or overbearing.

Some young people understand the issues that influence their peers to drop out. Encouraging these teens to help their peers can be mutually supportive.

Substance Abuse Issues

Developing a sense of belonging is one of our most basic needs and drives. When students feel they don't belong, they can experience enormous stress and/or depression and feelings of hopelessness. Young people are more likely to experience increased social pressure, especially on social media, to act or do things to feel accepted or popular, including using drugs and alcohol (Osbourne, 2023).

Teens who abuse alcohol or drugs tend to have lower grades, increased absences, and are more likely to drop out of school. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), high school dropout rates have risen as a result of substance abuse (2023). It's important to determine if substance abuse is a primary cause of a student's chronic absenteeism in order to intervene early and get them the help they need. Substance abuse prevention programs are especially important, and their implementation should start as early as possible.

Language, Racial, and Cultural Disparity

With our increasing population of immigrant students, bilingual education is extremely important if we want to help all students graduate. Schools are sometimes the only place these students can go to seek help, and if there is no program focusing on their unique needs, there is a chance these students will eventually become discouraged and drop out. Racial and cultural disparity continues to exist in public schools. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), "black students continue to receive harsher punishments than white students for the same infractions" (Abrams, 2023). This disparity can impact students' long-term learning and success (Bushnell, 2021). According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury (2023), "the key determinants of many of these disparities are factors outside students' control, including the socioeconomic status of their parents, the schools they attend, the neighborhoods in which they live, discrimination in disciplinary actions, and the race of the teacher to which they are assigned." This has been an ongoing problem that needs to be addressed to ensure that all students, regardless of race or color, receive substantial educational opportunities and possibilities that will increase their success in school.

Extreme Poverty

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 37.9 million people living in poverty in our country (Creamer et al., 2022). Socioeconomic status is a key indicator of a student's risk of dropping out (Barrington, 2023). The Annie E. Casey Foundation reports that nearly 24 million children live in a single-parent home, with most being mother-only households (2022). Single mothers are also more likely to experience poverty. The stress related to poverty is overwhelming and at times seems impossible to overcome.

Students who are raised in poverty face challenges beyond a lack of resources. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), students living in poverty experience mental and physical issues at a much higher rate than those living above the poverty line (APA, 2022). Growing up in poverty gives students a huge disadvantage since many live in low socioeconomic neighborhoods and deal with the day-to-day struggles to just survive, like inadequate housing, lack of nutrition, increased threat of violence, lack of resources, and more.

If poverty is a main contributing factor to students dropping out, school districts need to ensure adequate supports are in place to help these students and their families. I myself experienced what it was like to raise children while living in poverty. The constant emotional and mental strain is sometimes unbearable. Schools can provide parents with a list of community resources on their school's website and in the counseling office. Poverty is a vicious cycle, and the only way to break the cycle is through education and intervention. Our states need to do more to help those living in poverty find a way out.

Pregnancy

Teen pregnancy and teen parenting contribute greatly to high school dropout rates among girls.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL; 2018), 30% of teenage girls who drop out of high school cite pregnancy or parenthood as a primary reason. Among those who have a baby before age 18, about 40% finish high school. Unfortunately, the children of teen parents are at a higher risk of becoming teen parents themselves (Hendrick & Maslowsky, 2019).

Although there are not as many pregnant teens at school as there were a decade ago (Wildsmith et al., 2022), we still need to address this issue, since many of these girls are in need of additional help in

parenting skills, their own mental well-being, and furthering their education/career skills. Otherwise, they will continue to be dependent on government assistance and may never discover a way to break the cycle of poverty. I remember struggling with my own issues as a teen mom. It was difficult trying to live an adult life with family responsibilities while being a teenager and living on my own. Having access to a mentor, parenting classes, continued education, counseling, assistance from agencies that can help with housing—all these resources can help a young teen parent. There is a plethora of organizations today that can assist teen parents, and with the use of the internet, they are easier to access. Schools need to have this information readily available to teens who are either pregnant or who are already raising a child.

Lack of Grit and Fostering Resiliency and a Self-Encouraging Mindset

We have lost something valuable over the years that our children desperately need today. Our earlier generations taught their children, often through role modeling, the critical importance of grit and perseverance. When invited, today's elders enjoy sharing stories of how difficult it was "back then" and how families struggled to make ends meet during very difficult circumstances. Their resiliency enabled them and their families to survive and thrive through difficulties in their lives. Many of our children today have not been instilled with enough of this drive. They give up far too quickly when circumstances become frustrating, challenging, or boring.

In this fast-paced generation that we live in, many of our young people want instant results and do not see the value in working at long-term goals. Instant gratification rules their motivation. In her book *Grit*, Angela Duckworth researched passion and perseverance and suggested that the personal strength of grit, which she defines as perseverance and passion, might be the best predictor of academic success and a healthier emotional life (2016). She found many cases where people who had more of this characteristic achieved significantly greater personal successes in their lives. She includes a 12-item Grit Scale that students can take to measure their level of grit. Students learn grit and perseverance when they face difficulties or challenges and adults need to resist the urge to instantly intervene. If young people are always rescued from challenges, they will miss an opportunity to learn how to be resilient or the importance of perseverance. This can create a dependence on looking to others to be rescued every time there is an obstacle in their way.

Having an encouraging mindset can be a problem for those students who easily give up on school and themselves. Instilling an encouraging mindset starts early in childhood and needs to be refreshed throughout a person's life span. When children constantly see themselves as failures or disappointments, they set themselves up for failure and are prone to not see a way forward when facing difficulties. Students can learn how to reframe their self-doubt and negative thinking into more positive growth mindset statements. They can focus on "I can" statements rather than "I can't" and learn how to be mindful of their emotions and thoughts. This mindset shift can turn around a student who has only experienced failure in their life.

Desire for More Personal Freedom

A desire for freedom is not mentioned in any of my research I found on why students drop out. Nevertheless, it seems to be an important reason to consider here. Part of normal development of teenagers is to strive for greater independence. "I just want to be free!" is a reason some students give for dropping out of school. If it wasn't present, some teens would want to live at home with their parents indefinitely. This need for freedom may be driven by a teen's personal life and what they are currently dealing with at home that makes attending school difficult for them. For me, I left home because of the strain of living with a parent who suffered from mental illness and having a difficult time getting along with my mother. Some teens have to endure physical or emotional abuse while trying to attend school. Maybe there is such a financial strain on the family that the teen needs to work a job to help pay the bills while going to school. These reasons are not in the student's control. They drop out to be free from the stress and fear of living at home or the burden of having to care for family members. Some will end up joining gangs to find a sense of belonging for what they believe is love and acceptance. Although they can't see a way out, there are other options for them—with the right kind of help.

There are youngsters, however, who just want to be free from the rules and authority of home and school. Some teens are able to resist this drive or at least hang in there until they graduate. Other students, in particular those with issues that discourage them from staying in school and entice them to leave school, eventually become driven with an overwhelming motivation to "just get out of this place" (school). Without carefully considering the likely long-term consequences, they impulsively drop out. Unfortunately, once they drop out of school, the personal freedom they are seeking is often short-lived. They eventually discover that the freedom they were seeking becomes difficult to maintain. Life eventually

brings new responsibilities and stresses. Without at least a high school diploma, they will likely discover that coping and dealing with personal life challenges will be even more difficult.

My Personal Story

My reasons for dropping out of school had to do with so many risk factors. First, I had a learning disability since elementary school that caused me to struggle academically. I was also dealing with many mental health issues at home. My dad was in and out of mental institutions and my sister, just a few years older than me, almost died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. I took my stress and insecurities out on my mother and became very defiant. I started sneaking out of my home at night and became incorrigible.

I did not feel connected to anything or anyone and started skipping school in fourth grade. I was never asked by anyone at school why I left home in the first place, whether I missed going to school, or why I stopped seeing my friends. I was experiencing very low self-worth and self-confidence. At times, I wanted to be free from the stress of my home life. I lacked the grit to be assertive in my relationship with my boyfriend, but at the same time I didn't know how to express my feelings of sadness and confusion. This caused me to place all my trust in a mentally unstable boyfriend, which led to a lifelong decision—dropping out—for which I was not prepared.

Remember, these are just some of the reasons students have for dropping out of school. There are many more underlying factors to consider than just focusing on one or two reasons. This means schools need to have a comprehensive approach to dropout prevention that takes into account each individual student and that particular student's needs. This list of common reasons can be used to gain support from stakeholders in your community. There is also much we can learn from the students themselves, especially those who have dropped out. Their stories need to be heard and considered when confronting the dropout crisis.