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ABSTRACT

In 1989 the Knox County (Tennessee) Schools opened The Center School as an answer to the dropout problem. The Center School was to feature open entry and exit, self-paced work schedules, flexible scheduling, a school-to-work component, on-site counselors and social workers, and individually designed graduation programs through which dropouts aged 17 to 19 could earn a regular high school diploma. In the first 3 years, approximately one-third of the students dropped out, but no appreciable differences could be seen between these students and those who continued when background, credits, success, and skill levels were compared. A 2-item survey was developed to study student perceptions of the school and the values they put on the diploma, as well as future plans and their views of beneficial program components. Ninety-one graduates returned the survey and 52 dropouts responded. Results indicate that both leavers and graduates had pleasant experiences at The Center School. The only difference in perceptions was that graduates, who appeared to hold better jobs, perceived that they had a future with their present employers and could work long-term for them. In general, the factors that caused students to leave were beyond the control of the school. Seven tables present study findings. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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THE CENTER SCHOOL: AN ALTERNATIVE FOR THE DROPOUT

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) "

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THE CENTER SCHOOL: AN ALTERNATIVE FOR THE DROPOUT

The high school dropout has become an issue of major concern for the nation's public school system (Zeller, 1966; DeBlois, 1988). The nation can ill afford the loss in human or economic costs (Schreiber, 1967; Bienstock, 1966; Hartnagel and Krahn, 1989) and, particularly for these reasons, business and community leaders have become increasingly more negative in their comments about the quality of public schooling (DeBlois, 1988; Hartnagel and Krahn, 1989). The correlation between individuals who leave school early without a diploma and individuals who are incarcerated is clear (Hahn, 1967; Grossnickle, 1986; and Bickel and Papagiannis, 1988). This too puts additional pressure on school systems to decrease their dropout rates.

In response to the growing concern about what is perceived to be "the dropout problem," school systems across the country have begun special programs to retain and/or recover early school leavers. Research over the past 40 years has identified numerous characteristics associated with the "typical" dropout: low socio-economic status, a one-parent family, parents without high school diplomas, grade failure, a devaluing of the diploma, and two or more grade levels behind peers in mathematics and/or reading skills acquisition (DeBlois,

1988; Bearden, Spencer, and Morocco, 1989; Schreiber, 1964; Cervantes, 1965; Zeller, 1966; and Dentler, 1965).

As a focus for their intervention strategies, most school systems have tended to concentrate on two of these identifiers, the devaluing of the diploma and/or the below grade-level skill acquisition.

In the 1980's new programs aimed at lowering the numbers of early school leavers began to appear in school systems across the country. Although they took a variety of forms, most were similar in that they focused on the low skill levels and the devaluing of the diploma (as defined as not being motivated to remain and to graduate). These programs were generally remedial in nature, had low-level curricula, and contained a component that provided some tangible reward for remaining in school (a guaranteed job, money, coupons which could be exchanged for desired goods, etc.).

In the fall of 1989 Knox County Schools opened The Center School, its answer to the dropout problem. This school was modeled after a similar school in the Jefferson County School System, Louisville, Kentucky which had been operational since the fall of 1988.

The Center School was to feature open entrance, a self-paced work schedule, flexible scheduling, a school-to-work component, on-site counselor and social workers, and individually designed graduation programs. All of the coursework was to come from workbooks, each covering a semester's work in any given subject. All state and county course requirements and ten electives were offered. The curriculum books were purchased from the Jefferson County School System.

The school was expected to provide a means by which high school dropouts, ages 17 to 19, could earn a regular high school diploma. The students were expected to be representative of the dropout population and were therefore expected to have low reading and/or mathematics skill levels (the Kentucky school system's curriculum books were designed for students with low skill levels).

The materials received for The Center School were primarily low-level in an effort to accommodate the expected population. During the first year of operation it became clear that the population of The Center School was not low-level and did not need additional motivation to either remain or to earn a diploma. They were all over the mandated age for required schooling and had chosen to enroll at The Center School. Their mathematics and reading scores

were not below grade level, and their I.Q.'s were in the average to above-average range. The reading scores and the mathematics scores of all students appear in Tables 1 and 2. The I.Q. scores appear in Table 3.

These students were not suited for regular high school for reasons other than skill-level acquisition or a devaluing of the diploma (defined as a lack of motivation), and The Center School appeared to meet their needs. A perception survey given to all students during the first two years of operation revealed that students perceived The Center School to be a pleasant place where they were well-received and comfortable. The perceptions of all students as reported by this word-selection survey appear in Table 4.

In the first three years of operation approximately one-third of the students dropped out from The Center School. When looking at these students in terms of background, progress, credits needed for graduation, success, and skill levels; there were no appreciable differences between those students who chose to remain and those who chose to leave. As these students did not fit the traditional characteristics of the dropout, and they did not leave because of a lack of success or an inability to complete the work, why had they left? What differences were there between those students who remained and those who chose to leave? The records held by The Center School offered no answers.

Table 1. Scores of Center School Students in the Area of Reading As Reported on the Test for Adult Basic Education (n = 164)

Score	Percent	Score	Percent
12.9+	38	11.1	1
12.9	5	11.0	
12.8	4	10.9	1
12.7		10.8	5
12.6		10.7	
12.5	4	10.6	4
12.4	1	10.5	
12.3		10.4	3
12.2		10.3	
12.1	2	10.2	3
12.0		10.1	
11.9		10.0	1
11.8		9.5-9.9	6
11.7	3	9.0-9.4	10
11.6		8.5-8.9	2
11.5		8.0-8.4	1
11.4	2	7.5-7.9	1
11.3		7.0-7.4	
11.2	3	6.5-6.9	

Table 2. Scores of Center School Students in the Area of Mathematics As Reported on the Test for Adult Basic Education (n = 164)

Score	Percent	Score	Percent
12.9+	35	11.1	2
12.9	7	11.0	
12.8		10.9	7
12.7	2	10.8	
12.6		10.7	
12.5		10.6	5
12.4		10.5	
12.3		10.4	
12.2	6	10.3	
12.1		10.2	3
12.0		10.1	3
11.9	2	10.0	
11.8		9.5-9.9	3
11.7	5	9.0-9.4	6
11.6		8.5-8.9	3
11.5		8.0-8.4	4
11.4	3	7.5-7.9	1
11.3		7.0-7.4	2
11.2		6.5-6.9	1

**Table 3. I.Q. Scores of Center School Students
Reported by Score and Percent**

I.Q. Score	Percent	I.Q. Score	Percent
86-88	9	110-112	2
89-91	4	113-115	2
92-94	4	116-118	9
95-97	8.5	119-121	18
98-100	10	122-124	4
101-103	1.5	125-127	2
104-106	13.5	128-130	4
107-109	7	131-133	1.5

Table 4. Descriptive Words Selected by Students, Reported by Percent, in Response to the Question of How The Students Saw The Center School

Word	Percent	Word	Percent	Word	Percent
alien	0	hateful	0	serious	33
angry	0	helpful	66	silly	6
anxious	30	hurtful	0	smart	47
bad	0	important	60	stale	0
boring	0	industrious	7	stupid	0
caring	93	informed	20	tense	0
cold	0	interesting	60	thought-provoking	0
concerned	66	invisible	0	tiring	0
democratic	7	kind	60	uncaring	0
dictatorial	0	lazy	0	uncomfortable	0
difficult	0	like	12	unfair	0
dislike	0	meaningless	0	unhappy	0
easy	47	pleasant	60	unimportant	0
embarrassing	0	reasonable	60	uninformed	0
exciting	40	refreshing	0	uninteresting	0
fair	40	relaxed	53	unpleasant	0
flexible	73	right	33	unreasonable	0
friendly	66	rigid	0	visible	7
fun	60	risky	0	warm	40
good	66	sad	0	wrong	0
happy	60	safe	33		
harmful	0	senseless	0		

To help answer the question of why some able students chose to earn a diploma and others chose to leave The Center School rather than stay and earn a diploma, an instrument consisting of 20 items was developed to secure 1) student perceptions of The Center School and of the schools from which they came, 2) the value they placed on the diploma, 3) future plans, 4) and beneficial program components. The instrument also asked those who chose to leave the program to enumerate the reason(s) for their leaving prior to receiving a diploma. Responses to 15 of the items were reported on a five-point Likert scale and the other eight were questions requiring individual responses. The last item was reserved exclusively for those who chose to leave prior to securing a diploma. The instrument appears in Appendix A.

The instrument was sent to all graduates (n=118) and all dropouts (n=94) of The Center School during its first three years of operation. In any given year, about 40% of all students graduated, 30% left without graduating, and another 30% continued their studies the following year. From the graduates there were four instruments returned as undeliverable and from the early-leavers there were seven returned as undeliverable. There was a return rate of 80% (n=91) from the remaining graduates and a 60% (n= 52) return from the remaining dropouts. The graduates were divided into two groups: those who graduated during the first two years and those who graduated the third year. This was

done because the third year graduates were given the instrument the day of their graduation. Their responses might have been influenced by this fact.

The data were analyzed using several statistical procedures: summing, averaging percents and totals, t-tests, factor analysis, and analysis of variance. A factor analysis was used in order to group responses to better compare the results from the graduates and from the early-leavers. Results from this procedure allowed the grouping of questions one and two (importance); questions four through six (employment); questions seven through nine (future); and questions ten through fifteen (perceptions). The responses to question three were not used for group comparison as the question was applicable to only the graduates.

T-tests were run comparing responses of the graduates and those of the early-leavers on all four (importance, employment, future, and perceptions) of the grouped questions. The results of these tests resulted in no statistical difference in the responses on three of the question categories (importance, future, and perceptions.) Both graduates and early-leavers believed a diploma and doing well were important. Both groups reported that they had definite plans for their futures, they were working toward their futures, and they did not need any help with what to do next.

The results of the t-tests on the employment category indicated that the differences were statistically significant at the .05 level. The graduates were more pleased with their employment than were the early-leavers. They believed that they could work for their employers long-term and that they had a future there.

The responses of the three groups (graduates during the first two years, graduates during the third year, and early-leavers) were analyzed for the four question categories using an analysis of variance. There were no statistically significant differences between any of the groups on the questions of importance, future, and perception. On the question of employment, there was a statistically significant difference at the .01 level between the early-leavers and the students who had graduated during the first two years.

Ninety-eight percent of the graduates responded with a five on the Likert scale. The other two percent responded with a four. The average scores of the three groups to the other questions, one through fifteen, are listed in Table 5.

In response to question 16, both groups, graduates and early-leavers, had similar responses. The percentages of students listing the value of the

Table 5. Averages of Student Responses to Questions by Group

Question	Graduates During The First Two Years	Graduates The Third Year	Early-Leavers
A high school diploma is important to me	4.9	5.0	4.7
Doing Well is important to me	4.8	4.8	4.7
I could not have my current job without my diploma	4.4	4.2	
I feel successful in my current employment and/or schooling	4.7	4.5	4.0
There is a good future with my present employer	4.6	4.3	3.9
I can see myself working for this employer long-term	4.4	4.2	3.4
I have a definite plan for my future	4.5	4.4	4.6
I am currently taking steps toward my planned future	4.5	4.4	4.5
I need some help about what I need to do next	2.1	2.3	2.0
The Center School was helpful to me in realizing my career goals	4.7	4.6	4.2
Regular high school was helpful to me in realizing my career goals	2.6	2.5	2.4
The Center School was a good experience for me	4.9	4.9	4.7
Regular high school was a good experience for me	2.5	2.4	2.6
Regular high school met my needs	2.1	2.1	2.1
The Center School met my needs	4.7	4.8	4.1

various program components appear in Table 6.

The responses of all students to questions 17 and 18 were again almost identical. Both groups responded that they would recommend The Center School to others and that they had gotten what they wanted from The Center School. Of the graduates, 99% (90 of 91) said they would recommend The Center School to others as compared to 96% (50 of 52) of the early-leavers. Ninety-eight percent (89 of 91) of the graduates got what they wanted from The Center School and ninety-six percent (50 of 52) of early-leavers got what they wanted. Question 19 was valid for only the graduates and 99% (90 of 91) said that they had a better feeling of success since they had left The Center School.

When listing the reasons for their leaving prior to graduation and responding to question 20, the early-leavers listed reasons not connected with The Center School or its program. The percentage responses to each question are listed in Table 7.

The results of this study indicate that both the early-leavers and the graduates had a pleasant experience at The Center School and that they valued the program. The only differences in perceptions between the groups were those

Table 6. Percentages of Students Responding To Those Features of The Center School Program That Helped Students The Most

Feature	Graduate	Early-Leaver
flexible hours	96	82
small classes	93	93
completion of courses at your own pace	100	93
employment preparation and career counseling	52	48
computer-assisted instruction	54	61
individual plan for graduation	74	50
brown-bag programs	30	28
women's/men's/A&D/etc. groups	32	39
individual sessions with the social worker	40	42

Table 7. Reasons for Leaving The Center School Before Receiving A Diploma Reported by Percent of Response

schedule problems	7	child care	31
number of credits needed	19	needed to work	46
time to complete courses too long	30	personal problems	65
cannot regularly attend enough to make progress	50	transportation	25
level of courses too difficult	7	problems with school or staff	3
period of time to graduate too long	30	self-paced work a problem	3
work too boring/cannot maintain interest	7	problems with other students	7

related to employment - the quality of the job and the likelihood of continuation. The graduates appeared to hold better jobs and they also perceived that they had a future with their present employers and could work long-term for them.

This study also provides information as to the reasons why some chose to leave early and points to some questions that could be raised prior to enrollment.

These questions are ones whose answers might lead to different courses of action by perspective Center School students. The school appears to be doing a reasonable job and it is factors beyond its control that are responsible for students leaving prior to graduation.

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REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A

Respond to each of the following statements on the scale to the right. Place an X on the line between the 1 and the 5. Put your X where it reflects your answer to the statement.

strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

1.A high school diploma is important.

2.Doing well is important to me.

3.I could not have my current job without my diploma.

4.I feel successful in my current employment.

5.There is a good future with my present employer.

6.I can see myself working for this employer long-term.

7.I have a definite plan for my future.

8.I am currently taking steps toward my planned future.

9.I need some help about what I need to do next.

10.The Center School was helpful to me in realizing my career goals.

11.Regular high school was helpful to me in realizing my career goals.

12.The Center School was a good experience for me.

13.Regular high school was a good experience for me.

14.Regular high school met my needs.

15.The Center School met my needs.

16. What features of The Center School program helped you the most? (check all that apply)

flexible hours____
small classes____
completion of courses at your own pace____
employment preparation and career counseling____
computer-assisted instruction____
individual plan for graduation____
brown-bag programs____
women's/men's/A&D/etc. groups____
individual sessions with the social worker____
other_____

17. Would you recommend The Center School to your friends? Yes___ No___

18. Did you get what you wanted from The Center School? Yes___ No___

19. Has there been a change in your feeling of success since you left The Center School? Yes___ No___ If so, is it better_____or worse_____.

20. If you left The Center School before receiving your diploma, please check all of the following factors that tell why you left.

schedule problems____	child care____
number of credits needed____	needed to work____
time to complete courses too long____	personal problems____
cannot regularly attend enough to make progress____	transportation____
level of courses too difficult____	problems with school or staff____
period of time to graduate too long____	self-paced work a problem____
work too boring/cannot maintain interest____	problems with other students____