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Putting a Stop to High School Dropouts in America

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Abstract

The issue of high school dropouts in America is both serious and important. Statistics, socioeconomic factors that most dropouts may face, preventative methods, and alternative forms of education that can help students still receive an education will be discussed. Dropping out of high school can lead a student to a more likely future of hardships and low functioning in a more educated and fast passed society. I feel that the legal dropout age should be 18 and teachers and administrators should work hard in helping prevent students from dropping out of school with the help of preventative methods and programs.

“Kids who quit school don’t just suddenly drop out; it’s more of a slow fade. Typically it begins in the ninth grade if not earlier, often when life hits a particularly nasty patch and racking up credits in class no longer seems especially compelling or plausible” (Wallis, 2007). From working in the school system as a mental health counselor, I have seen this take place many times and I have seen students fail numerous classes and begin to slowly drown in the sea of credits. Often times students become so behind in credits they cannot catch up but a trend takes place when this occurs. These students usually dislike school, have difficulty understanding or comprehending class material, or there are behavioral problems occurring. Usually, students do not quit school out the blue. There are usually precipitating factors that usually go unnoticed or if noticed, it is often times too late. There are preventative measures in place but are they working or being implemented to help ensure that every student receives and completes their education?

High school dropout rates are a serious issue in America. The economic and social consequences of dropping out of school are great. Incarceration, poverty, unemployment, healthcare, and welfare are issues that seem to exist in the lives of high school dropouts (Martin, N., Halerin, S., 2006). When research and statistics show that a person will most often experience an economic or social hardship due to dropping out, why is more not being done and more effort being put into educational reform and improving standards for graduation? I feel that every school district in America should have early prevention programs to help prevent dropouts. I feel that every student that is more than one year behind in credits should be put into a program and assisted with

educational improvement, and referred to community resources. I have seen firsthand many students that do not function behaviorally or academically in large public schools, but function very well in alternative, vocational, or smaller schools. In 2007, I had a 17 year old client that was sent to Innerchange, an alternative school that incorporates behavioral and mental health. He was at the school because he was expelled from public school due to a fight. Although this student had difficulty functioning in public school, he was very personable, responsible, and intelligent. After the teacher had received his credits, surprisingly to all he only had four credits. This student thought he would be graduating high school in one year. He knew he had failed but did not think he was so far behind. Due to this, the student decided to quit school, but the treatment team understood his feelings because he would be 21 when he graduated high school. He was referred to a local GED program. He ended up moving to a town about an hour way and because of his motivation and our belief in him he was referred to a GED program in his new town. I received a call three months later from this student and he was so excited to tell me he had received his GED. Although this story had a happy ending, this is happening far too much in America's schools and more should be done to ensure that students receive and complete their education.

The status dropout rate measures the percentage of teens and young adults aged 16-24 who have not obtained a high school diploma or an equivalency certificate. According to "Fact sheet: Ending the silent epidemic" (2007), governors of all 50 states signed the National Governor's Association Graduation Counts Compact in 2005. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation was instrumental in the governors meeting and signing the compact (Wallis, 2007). This compact commits states to a common method

for calculating each state's high school graduation rate. Although there is a commitment to calculate the rates of high school drop outs, is there enough preventative work being done in each state to combat the issue of youth not completing high school. In the state of West Virginia where I work with youth, students are permitted to drop out of school at the age of 16 with parental consent as long as the student is not on probation or in state's custody. This baffles me because I see it done so often. A piece of paper is signed and the student is taken out of the system that quick and that easy. In my opinion, students should then be referred to a social worker to provide them with other educational options (GED program, vocational program, home schooling) if quitting is a must. The District of Columbia, along with 17 states requires students to be enrolled in school through the age of 18. Seven states raised the age to 17 and other states are following suit ("Fact sheet: Ending the silent epidemic," 2007). One cannot legally buy cigarettes until 18, cannot fight a war until 18, cannot buy liquor until age 21, but one is permitted to quit school only adding to America's other issues of poverty, unemployment and public assistance. I feel that students should not be allowed to drop out until the age of 18 and a parent should not be allowed to sign their child out of school prior to this age.

According to Wallis (2007), 1 in 3 high school students quit school. Blacks and Hispanics are more likely than Whites to quit school. Asian youth have the lowest drop out rate among all racial and ethnic groups. Eleven percent of males compared to 8% of females quit school in 2005. The 2007-2008 average graduation rate for public schools was 74.4%, which is an increase from the 1990's ("High school dropout rates," 2003). According to Wallis (2007), 11% of males compared to 8% of females quit school in 2005. Although research shows that males are more likely to quit

school than females, Laird, 2008 discusses that in 2006, “there was no measurable difference in the 2006 event dropout rates for males and females, a pattern generally found over the last 30 years.” Females are catching up with males and are now basically even with males when it comes to dropping out of school. This could be due to many socioeconomic reasons.

Wallis (2007) discusses a research study conducted in New York City by Parthenon Group, a consulting firm to look into graduation data. The study was focused on students that were two or more years behind in credits. These students seemed to make up a great percentage of students that were dropping out. Also, the study discussed how students in newer and smaller high schools tended to stay on track for graduation more so than students in larger schools in the district. This is why I believe there should be more preventative methods in place. Helping these students early may prevent them from becoming more behind and possibly dropping out of school.

Different regions of the United States have different dropout rates according to region. In 2006, the south had a high dropout rate than the northeast. 11.7% to 6.5% respectively. The Midwest dropout rate was 6.1%. Students in the south and west had lower graduation rates than other regions of the United States. In 2006, 87.8% of 18-24 year olds had received a high school diploma or an equivalent. Graduation rates have improved since 1980. It is believed that 81.7% of this group holds a regular diploma and the rest hold an equivalent (Laird, 2008).

Race is also an issue in America’s drop out rate statistics. Between October 2005 and October 2006, Hispanic students were more likely to drop out of school than White and Black students. The drop out rate for Hispanics was 7% percent, Whites was 2.9 %

and Blacks, 3.8 %. Hispanics experienced no significant change in dropouts from 1972 through 1990 and from 1990 through 1995. There was a decline in dropout rates for Hispanics between the years of 1995 through 2006. Income is also connected to drop out rates in America. In 2006, the dropout rates of students that lived in low income families were higher than students who lived in high income families. Low income students were four and one-half times greater to drop out. But, low, middle and high income families experience and decline in drop outs between the mid 1970's through 2006 (Laird, 2008).

Many socioeconomic factors come into play with dropout rates. Persons that drop out of high school are more likely to rely on public assistance and dropouts are 3 times more likely to be incarcerated than graduates. It is discussed how federal costs for food stamps, housing assistance, and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) would decrease if more students would graduate from high schools or receive some type of equivalent education (Martin, N., Halperin, S., 2006).

The School Dropout Prevention Program offered through the U.S. Department of Education appropriated zero funds for the Fiscal Year 2007 and Fiscal Year 2008. \$4,851,000 was appropriated for the Fiscal Year 2006. If funds are not given every fiscal year, the problems of high schools dropouts in America will not decrease (“Guide to U.S. Department of Education Programs, 2008”).

Lobbying, writing to government officials, and contacting local school personnel is necessary so that more schools will receive funding to include these programs in the schools. Teachers and counselors could begin by looking at the students that are failing and behind in credits and catch the problem early. I feel that dropout prevention programs should begin in middle schools through fun programs including goal

development, and appreciation for education taught in school. Parents should be called and a referral for tutoring should be made. More attention should be given to this issue so that all students can succeed educationally.

Anyone that is age 16 or older and is out of school without a high school diploma can register and take the GED test. Over the past 25 years, about 17 million people took the GED and about 10 million received a high school equivalency based on the GED (“Dropout rates in the United States,” 1996). Some question whether GED’s or general educational development programs are an escape for struggling students. Also, an escape for schools because the school will not be penalized by the state. “Many students saw it as an easy option. But, for a few teens it really is the best choice (Hughes, 2003). I have witnessed students fail many classes and become so behind in high school that dropping out and taking the GED is the best option and choice. I recently had a past client phone and say he passed his GED and is applying to college. I am an advocate for drop out prevention programs so that more of these situations can be prevented. But, sometimes students have much difficulty functioning in public school and the GED can be an option as a last resort.

The issue of whether to offer alternative forms of education and receiving a high school equivalent is debatable because some feel it helps to drive students to drop out of school and take the GED. I feel it is a positive form of education but should only be for certain situations and as last resorts. Whether a high school diploma or a high school equivalency, I want all students of America to complete their education. So many students are quitting and then doing nothing. If they are adamant about quitting, there should be an automatic referral to a GED program in the community. Helping students by

motivating, educating and providing resources will help a student better succeed educationally, behaviorally, and will help provide for a more promising future. This should be the aim of all schools. An education is important and I feel that if it is found necessary and as a last resort, the GED is a good option to help students gain an education.

Schools of today have the challenge of not only improving curriculum to strengthen knowledge of students but also helping students successfully complete a high school program. School systems are challenged and pressured to help motivate students. Because of this more interest is placed on alternative education and different ways to complete high school. Most students take the General Educational Development (GED) and can earn a high school equivalency credential (“Dropout rates in the United States,” 1996). Some believe that GED programs cause students to want to quit school but I believe that it is better than nothing at all. At least students will have a high school equivalency and can then go to college, trade schools, or other programs.

Although school drop out rates are continuing to decline it is still a major issue in America. Youth who quit school will not have the skills or education to function in today’s fast-paced world. A high school diploma is necessary to obtain for most jobs today, thus if a student does not have a diploma, unemployment becomes an issue. Research shows that persons with low education and minimal skills are more likely to live in poverty and be on government assistance (“High school dropout rates,” 2003).

There are many recommendations, policies and foundations offered by the federal government and other agencies to help decrease high school drop out rate in America such as providing improved tracking of student’s progress, incentive programs, increases

funding, student support programs, improving state laws and research. The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2002*, “aims to make sure that all children achieve academic proficiency and gain the educational skills necessary to succeed later in life.” This Act makes sure that all children are academically proficient, but is there a serious attempt to make sure that these students are completing their education (“Fact sheet: Ending the silent epidemic,” 2007). I feel that this Act is necessary but should include the fact that all educators will work to help all of America’s students complete school.

I feel that a child’s education is priceless and will offer them a more positive future. I feel that every middle and high school in America should have some type of preventative effort to help keep youth focused and dedicated in a fun, hands on environment so that they are not tempted to quit, or lose focus due to being so behind in credits. If a student does want to quit one should take this seriously and look at options for this student so that they are not just forced into the world with minimal skills and understanding of how an education can help them. As a future administrator, I hope that I can be help to decrease drop out rates in some way and work to ensure that every youth is educated and is provided with resources to do so.

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