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"Girls Tend to Stop Going; Boys Get Told Not to Come Back"

A Report on Gender and the Dropout Problem in Colorado Schools



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COLORADO
CHILDREN'S
CAMPAIGN

Laurie J. Bennett, JD, PhD
National Center for School Engagement

Martha Abele Mac Iver
The Center for Social Organization of Schools
Johns Hopkins University

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THE WOMEN'S
FOUNDATION
OF COLORADO

*Give the money
to spread the knowledge
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to alter the future
for women and girls
in Colorado.*

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Introduction

Dropping out of school – and the concomitant failure to graduate with a high school diploma – form a “silent epidemic” in the United States today. “Nationally, research puts the graduation rate between 68 and 71 percent, which means that almost one-third of all public high school students in America fail to graduate” or drop out (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006, p. 1).

The state of Colorado is no exception. A 2004 study by the Urban Institute Educational Policy Center pegs the national graduation rate at 68%; Colorado’s graduation rate comes in at 69% (Swanson, 2004b, pp. 38, 48). Both nationally and in Colorado, the differences between the graduation rates for young women and young men are also similar: nationally, 72% of girls graduate, as opposed to 64% of boys, while in Colorado, the female graduation rate is 72.9% as compared to a 65.1% for male students (Swanson, 2004, pp. 38, 48).

The purpose of this exploratory study is to begin to probe what might be called almost half of the dropout problem in Colorado. What makes girls drop out? Conversely, what might work to keep them going to school?



Background

Researchers in the area of dropout and graduation have generally reached a consensus: the rate of dropout for girls, however measured,¹ is lower than for boys (REFT Inst., 2009, p. 1; Swanson, 2004a, p. 14). As noted above, this is the case nationally, and is true in Colorado as well (Swanson, 2004b, pp. 38, 48). Dropout rates in Colorado, as calculated by the Colorado Department of Education (see Table 1),² after increasing from 2003-2004 to 2005-2006, have been declining over the last three years. The past three reporting periods (2005-2006 to 2007-2008) show a decline in rates from 4.5% to 3.8% (Total), 4.8% to 4.0% (Boys), 4.0% to 3.5% (Girls). Whether the rates increase or decline, girls consistently have lower dropout rates than boys.

¹ There are many different measures of graduation rates and dropout rates, often making a true understanding of the extent of the dropout problem difficult at best. Swanson (2004b) uses what he calls the “Cumulative Promotion Index” (CPI), a complex equation attempting to capture “the probability that a student entering the 9th grade will complete high school on time with a regular diploma” (p. 7). It is worth noting that this method is different from the current official method for calculating graduation rates in Colorado. For the purposes of making cross-state comparisons, a nationally comparable method such as that used by Swanson, is more appropriate. Others have defined the “dropout rate” in three different ways: “event, status, and cohort” – which “have variations that present differences in the magnitude of the dropout problem and in the size of the dropout population.” “Event” dropout rates “reflect the proportion of students within an age range who leave grades 9 through 12 at a school within a given year without graduating.” “Status” dropout rates “provide a view of the cumulative number and proportion of dropouts within a given age range.” “Cohort” dropout rates “reflect the characteristics of a group of dropouts over time and are, therefore, characteristically longitudinal compared with other rates, statistics, and measures.” (Harrison, 2004, pp. 3-4). For the purposes of this study, however, the precise manner of measurement of the dropout or graduation rate is less important than the fact that researchers agree that, regardless of the measure, girls drop out at a lower rate than do boys.

² The Colorado dropout rate, as calculated by the Colorado Department of Education, is an annual rate, reflecting the percentage of all students enrolled in grades 7-12 who leave school during a single school year without subsequently attending another school or educational program. It is calculated by dividing the number of dropouts by a membership base which includes all students who were in membership any time during the year. In accordance with a 1993 legislative mandate, beginning with the 1993-94 school year, the dropout rate calculation excludes expelled students.

Table 1. Colorado Dropout Rates³

School Year	Total number of students	Total Dropout Rate	Number of male students	Male Dropout Rate	Number of Female Students	Female Dropout Rate
2003-2004	14,795	3.8	8,318	4.2	6,477	3.4
2004-2005	16,757	4.2	9,333	4.6	7,424	3.8
2005-2006	18,031	4.5	10,058	4.8	7,973	4.0
2006-2007	18,027	4.4	9,975	4.7	8,052	4.0
2007-2008	15,524	3.8	8,432	4.0	7,092	3.5

There is not a tremendous amount of research or analysis in the literature, however, as to why this variance between male and female dropout rates exists or what factors might explain it. For the most part, research studies on dropout and graduation rates do not disaggregate data by gender, and accordingly, the extent to which the factors tending to influence girls and boys to stay or leave school might differ is not very clear (REFT Inst., 2009, p. 16).

One practical result of the generally accepted precept that boys drop out more than girls is that dropout prevention efforts tend to focus on boys (REFT Inst., 2009, p. 1). This focus ignores the fact that, even if more girls graduate, quite a few do not – just shy of 30%. The costs to society, and to the girls themselves, of their failing to obtain that high school diploma are substantial, in terms of lack of employment, low earnings, higher health risks and teenage pregnancy rates, increased welfare program spending, etc. (National Women’s Law Center, 2007, pp. 7-12).

The question becomes not only how one might explain why more girls graduate than boys, but rather, and more importantly, are there factors peculiar to girls that signal or predict their dropping out of school? Do they differ from what might predict boys’ failure to graduate? Conversely, what are the factors that keep girls attending through graduation, and do they differ from what might keep boys in school? Isolating what affects girls’ continued school attendance is important for crafting intervention and dropout prevention efforts that might effectively forestall their dropping out.

A couple of conceptual frameworks in the research literature help illuminate what might be going on in the world of a dropout, whether male or female. Stearns and Glennie (2006) distinguish between “pullout” and “pushout” theories of dropout patterns. “Pullout” theories view adolescents in the non-school contexts in which they subsist: “out-of-school employment or family responsibilities, for example, might serve to pull these adolescents out of school” (Stearns & Glennie, 2006, p. 31). Pullout factors include employment, pregnancy/family caregiving, family disruption, and safety concerns (REFT Inst., 2009). “Pushout” theories, on the other hand, concentrate on the school factors that discourage students from continuing with their education, such as disciplinary policies, conflicts with teachers and staff, etc. (Stearns & Glennie, 2006, p. 31). Pushout factors include student behavior and the school’s reaction thereto (discipline); academic achievement and attendance; and in-school bullying, harassment, and other safety issues (REFT Inst., 2009). Rumberger (2004) divides the conceptual pie somewhat differently, focusing on “individual” (students’ “values, attitudes, behaviors”) and “institutional” perspectives (contextual factors found in families, schools, communities, peers) (p. 133). Individual predictors of dropping out include poor academic achievement, student disengagement, absenteeism, student mobility, high school employment, and teen pregnancy; institutional factors include the level of family involvement in the child’s school life, and school factors such as student composition, school resources, structural characteristics of the school, and school policies and practices (pp. 135-144).

³ 2003-2004 was the first year the Colorado Department of Education collected Student End of Year data for each individual student using State Assigned Student Identifiers (SASIDs). Tracking students individually rather than in aggregate allows a more accurate accounting of students’ progress through the public education system than was possible under the old data collection method. The Colorado Department of Education expects these dropout rates to remain at a higher level in the coming years.

Even within these frameworks, meager data has been published on how these categorized factors might or might not affect boys and girls differentially. Other than the obvious – that teen pregnancy more directly affects girls’ staying in school than boys (Rumberger, 2004, p. 136) – there is little research indicating what impacts girls more than boys in their decisions to drop out or stay in school (REFT Inst., p. 16).⁴ Moreover, even if the predictors explored in the literature affect both girls and boys, whether that impact is the same for both genders has not been studied; “factors that affect both boys and girls may affect girls in different ways from – and in some cases, to a greater extent than – their male peers” (National Women’s Law Center, 2007, p. 13). The limited research that has been done on gender and dropout – most notably the Stearns and Glennie (2006) study in North Carolina – “suggests that gender does matter in assessing both the reasons that students drop out and the interventions that will be most effective in keeping them in school (National Women’s Law Center 2007, p. 13).

The purpose of this study is, for students in Colorado, to disaggregate the data for girls and boys to try to pin down (a) what may be the reasons for the differences between the male and female dropout rates, and (b) what factors may affect or are associated predictively with girls’ decisions to leave or to stay in school.

To that end, this report divides into two parts:

1. **Urban/suburban quantitative study:** the data from a quantitative study of the Colorado dropout problem in five urban/suburban districts⁵ have been disaggregated by gender, and the gender differences in dropout outcomes and dropout predictors are identified. The resulting findings show that, while the early warning signals and behaviors useful for predicting dropout outcomes for boys are operative for girls as well, such predictors do not appear to work as well for female dropouts as for males. Other as yet unidentified factors likely trigger dropout outcomes for girls at a higher rate than for boys.
2. **Exploratory qualitative study:** In an effort to try to explain the apparent male/female dropout rate differences, and the inference from the quantitative study that other, as yet unidentified factors may be at work for girls, a series of interviews were conducted with intervention specialists who have worked intensively with hundreds of dropouts and students at risk of dropping out in urban Colorado schools. These interviews inquired as to specialists’ perceptions of the differences between boys and girls in their pathways to staying in school, dropping out, and/or resuming their high school educations after having dropped out. From those interviews, a number of factors potentially affecting boys and girls differentially emerge that merit further exploration.

Arising from the findings of qualitative study is a recommendation that additional, in-depth qualitative studies with young women dropouts themselves be undertaken to (a) learn more, from their perspectives, about what has caused them to leave school, and (b) what would have kept them there.

⁴ For example, in a recent extensive compendium of 13 studies exploring the whys and wherefores of the dropout crisis (Orfield, 2004), there were a total of nine index entries under “gender.” Seven of them were references to the differing dropout rates between boys and girls. Of the remaining two, one noted that outside employment affects both boys and girls, and the other observed that girls get pregnant. No further discussion or analysis of issues relating to girls’ dropout or graduation issues was included in any of the studies.

⁵ This larger study was conducted by Martha Abele Mac Iver of The Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Mac Iver kindly agreed to disaggregate her data by gender, and provided this author with a report of her findings, which is included as Part I of this paper. An additional study of 86 Colorado rural school districts, using data from the Colorado Department of Education, was also undertaken by Dr. Martin Tombari, of the Partnership for Families and Children. For that study, the dropout data for three school years (2005-6, 2006-7, 2007-8) were disaggregated to try to determine whether males or females were more likely to drop out (as indicated by higher dropout rates). A paired samples t-test was used for each school year. For these rural districts, no significant results were found, indicating that neither gender has had a higher instance of dropping out in rural Colorado during these school years.

Part I: Gender Findings from a Dropout Study of Five Colorado Urban/Suburban Districts

Background

This analysis of gender and dropout outcomes was conducted as part of a larger study of dropouts in five of the Colorado districts having large number of dropouts (which were urban, suburban, or medium sized cities).⁶ The study was theory-driven, building on the theoretical construct of student engagement in schooling (e.g., Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) that has guided much of the research on dropping out. Engagement has emotional, behavioral, and cognitive components and is influenced by individual student background, as well as by the institutions (family and community, as well as the school itself) within which the individual student is placed (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). While many of the factors leading to student disengagement are not school-related, the behavioral indicators of student disengagement leading to a dropout outcome, such as attendance and course failure, manifest themselves directly at school. Low levels of attendance are a strong predictor of course failure, and course failure in ninth grade is a strong predictor of dropping out (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Finn, 1989; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Lee & Burkham, 2003; Neild & Balfanz, 2006a, 2006b; Neild, 2009a, 2009b; Roderick & Camburn, 1999; Schargel & Smink, 2001). Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver (2007) have shown that these behaviors manifested in sixth grade (attendance, a record of misbehavior, or course failure in English or mathematics) predict roughly half of eventual dropouts.

Dropping out is also strongly associated with certain school characteristics (which this study was not able to address directly). Even after controlling for the effects of demographic composition (particularly ethnicity and poverty), attendance, and school resources, dropout rates are higher in schools that are large, located in urban centers, and public (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Dropout rates are lower at schools with more personal relationships between teacher and students and less differentiation in curriculum among students (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Lee & Burkham, 2003). Findings from Chicago have indicated that student course performance is related to relationships with teachers, the relevance of classroom instruction to the future, teachers' sense of joint responsibility for student success, and the degree of "coherence in instructional programming" across the school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007, p. 33).

While there is also a considerable body of research focused on the family background and psychological variables (see review in Hammond et al., 2007) that influence disengagement from school, this study sought to help the districts identify early warning signals already available in district-collected data that could guide potential interventions aimed at dropout prevention. The goal was to provide data for state-level and district-level decision-making as well as recommendations for targeting interventions to increase the high school graduation rate and reduce the dropout rate.

The five-district study was based completely on individual level administrative records available from the districts, and so there are certain limitations that must be recognized. Prior years' records were not always available from all of the districts. The study could not at this time be supplemented by survey or focus group data that would shed more light on reasons for a dropout outcome.

Because district policymakers are often interested in the characteristics of all dropouts in a particular year, this study focused primarily on dropouts from the 2006-07 school year (as outcome data for 2007-08 were not finalized). Findings could have been unique in this year, though the correspondence of findings from this study to findings in other districts gives us considerable confidence in their reliability. The "backwards" or "retrospective" analysis approach used in this study complements the "forward cohort" approach used in previous studies (e.g., Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Mac Iver et al., 2008; Allensworth & Easton, 2007). The forward cohort approach provides a better estimate of the impact of certain variables on student outcomes (graduation vs. dropout), and we were also able to conduct this type of analysis in three of the five districts (following all the 2003-04 ninth graders through their on-time graduation year of 2007). On the other hand, the retrospective analysis was able to capture students new to the district, who would not be included in the forward cohort.

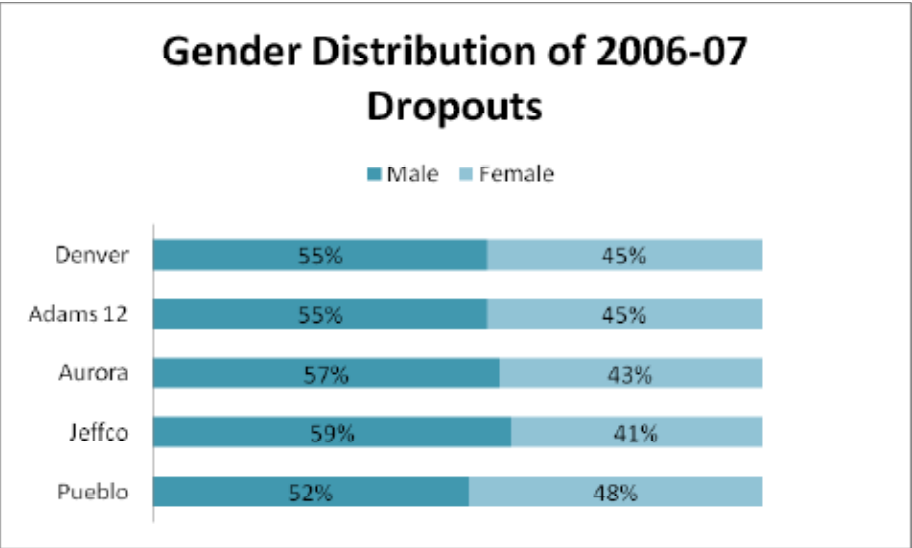
This report focuses on the gender differences in dropout outcomes and dropout predictors identified in this five-district study.

⁶ See M. Mac Iver, R. Balfanz, & V. Byrnes (2009), Advancing the "Colorado Graduates" Agenda: Understanding the Dropout Problem and Mobilizing to Meet the Graduation Challenge. Denver, CO: Colorado Children's Campaign.

Descriptive Gender Differences in Dropout Outcomes

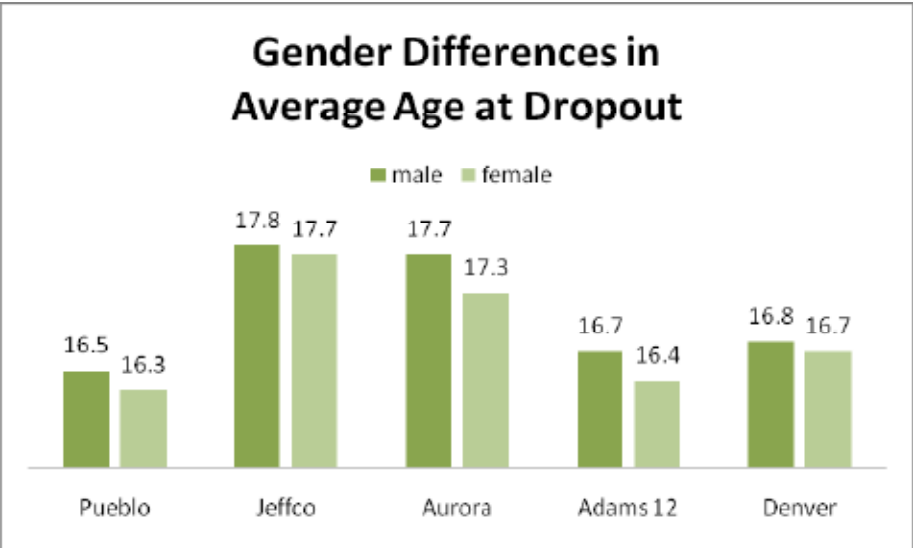
Gender and ethnicity patterns in dropout outcomes in these Colorado districts matched the national research findings. Our first set of analyses examined all dropouts in 2006-07. Overall, the proportion of male dropouts was higher than females in each of the five districts (ranging from 52% to 59%), though in one of the districts, the proportion of males matched the overall high school population proportion. At the same time, more than 40% of dropouts were female in all five districts (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Female dropouts tended to be somewhat younger than male dropouts in most districts. At the same time, female dropouts did not differ significantly from male dropouts in grade level at dropout or number of credits short of graduation. This finding is related to the fact that males are more likely than females (among the overall high school population as well as among dropouts) to be overage for grade.

Figure 2



The fact that females tend to have lower rates of suspension and ninth grade course failure (two of the key predictors of a dropout outcome) helps to explain why there tend to be more male than female dropouts. But even among dropouts, males still tend to have more failures and more suspensions (Figures 3 and 4). Analyses of the predictors of ninth grade course failure also found that females still had significantly fewer course failures even controlling for ninth grade attendance and eighth grade test scores (the most important predictors of ninth grade course failure).

Figure 3

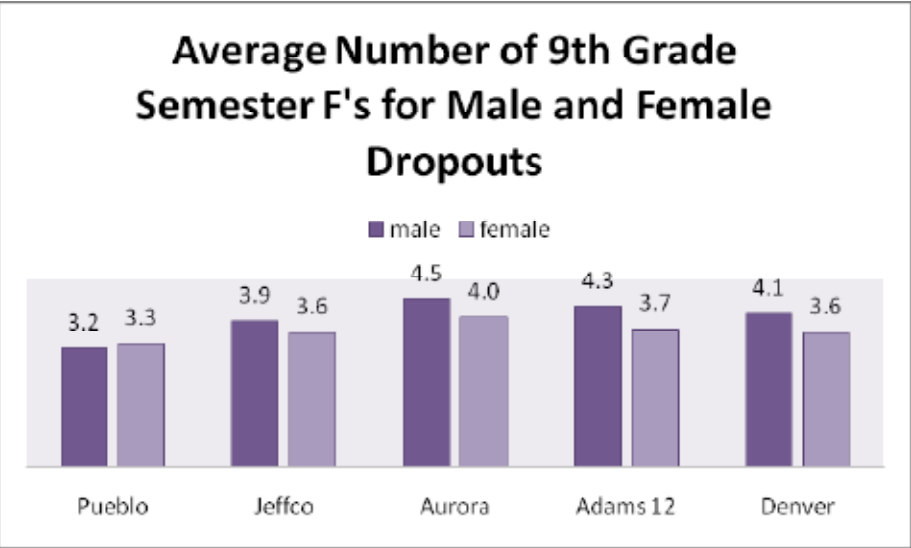
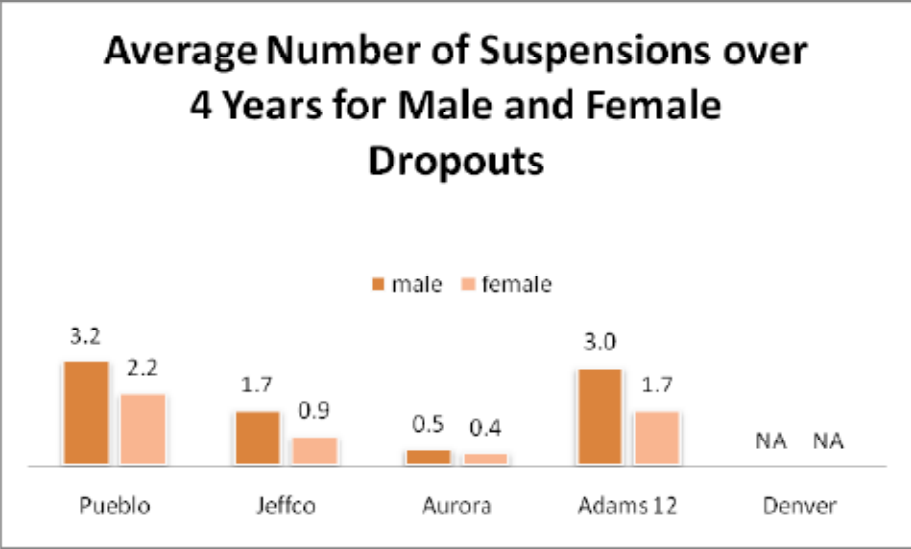


Figure 4



We conducted a separate forward-cohort analysis of the 2003-04 ninth grade class (the class of 2007) in the three districts in which data were available. This analysis captured outcomes for all ninth grade students by the spring of their on-time graduation year (2007). Table 2 summarizes gender differences in outcomes. Females were significantly more likely to graduate and less likely to drop out than were males in each of the three districts. There were also significant gender differences in behavioral variables that predict dropout outcomes: ninth grade semester course failure and ninth grade suspensions. Data on ninth grade attendance from 2003-04 were unfortunately not available from the districts.

Table 2. Gender Differences in Class of 2007 Outcomes

	Jeffco		Aurora		Denver	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
% Graduating	69.9%	78.8%	41.3%	58.9%	47.5%	60.1%
% Dropouts	10.1%	7.6%	29.9%	24.4%	22.7%	19.1%
% Still in School	12.5%	8.3%	21.3%	15.0%	21.7%	14.8%
% Other non-graduation	7.5%	5.3%	7.5%	1.7%	8.1%	6.0%
Average number of 9th grade semester failures	1.24	0.87	3.08	2.11	2.70	2.18
Average number of 9th grade suspensions	.23	.13	.48	.23	NA	NA

Modeling Graduation, Non-graduation, and Dropout Outcomes

We used binary logistic regression to model differences⁷ in dropout outcomes for Class of 2007 students in these three districts. Table 3a summarizes results of comparable models that predicted⁸ dropping out vs. graduating for students in each of the three districts. These models were limited to variables available from all three districts. The first set of models included just gender and ethnicity, while the second set of models added number of ninth grade semester failures. The third set of models used a dichotomous measure of ninth grade failure (failed at least one semester course vs. no failures) to provide a common metric for comparing the demographic variables with the behavioral variable (failure).

The models using demographic variables alone predicted between 63% and 89% of dropout outcomes correctly, with Nagelkerke R square values of .08 to .12 (loosely interpretable as explaining 8% to 12% of the variance in student outcomes). As expected, the demographic models indicated a significantly higher odds of dropout outcome for minority students and a lower odds for females. When number of ninth grade semester failures is added as a predictor of dropout outcome (Table 3b), the range of Nagelkerke R square values increased dramatically (ranging from .41 to .47). The percentage of correctly predicted outcomes increased to between 79% and 92% (a particularly notable increase in Aurora and Denver).

As Table 3c indicates, the odds ratio for ninth grade semester failure (when measured dichotomously) was much higher than for gender or ethnicity (also measured dichotomously), indicating a much stronger predictive relationship. At the same time, gender and ethnic identity were still significant predictors of a dropout outcome, even when ninth grade failure was controlled. Females were still less likely than males to drop out, even when they had the same rate of ninth grade failure.

Table 4 summarizes results of different binary logistic models that separately predicted dropping out vs. graduating, graduating vs. dropping out (the converse), and graduating vs. not graduating on time in each of three districts (adding additional non-graduation outcomes to dropout, while excluding students who transferred out of district). The number of ninth grade suspensions was also a significant predictor of student outcome in those districts where sufficient data were available for analysis. In addition, overage for grade status and special education status were also significant predictors in districts where data were available, even controlling for ninth grade failures and suspensions. English as a Second Language (ESL) status was a significant predictor of student outcome even controlling for ethnic identity in one district, but not in the other district where this analysis was possible. In districts where it was possible to control for the number of ninth grade suspensions, gender dropped out as a significant predictor of dropout/graduation outcome, though it was still significant as a predictor of graduation vs. all non-graduation outcomes.

⁷ Estimating models with dichotomous dependent variables statistically requires using a log-odds [$\ln(p/1-p)$] metric which is difficult to interpret substantively. Log odds were converted to odds ratios for ease of interpretation. For example, to compare an odd-ratio of 0.32 to an odds-ratio of 1.00 for regular attending students: The first odds ratio is 32% of the latter, or put another way 68% less ($1.00 - 0.32 = 0.68$ or 68%). If the odds ratio for “chronically absent” is .32, one can then say that students who are chronically absent are only 32% as likely to graduate on time as others, or conversely, they are 68% less likely to graduate on-time.

⁸ These models technically predicted the “log-odds” of graduation or dropout.

Table 5 summarizes analyses for males and females separately. The models for each gender group are generally similar (particularly in the impact of ninth grade failure, Hispanic identity, and being overage for grade). Differences between models for males and females tend to vary by district with no discernable common pattern. In one district, the impact of ninth grade suspensions on outcome is significant for females but not males, while in the other district it is the reverse. This may reflect complex interaction effects related to how variables are distributed in each district and within a particular year. The Nagelkerke R square values (loosely interpretable as percentage of the variance in student outcomes explained by the model) were somewhat higher for males than for females in each district. This would suggest that factors such as number of ninth grade failures and suspensions explain more of the variation in dropout outcomes for boys than for girls, and that perhaps life events unrelated to course failures and suspensions have more of an impact on dropout outcomes for girls than boys.

Conclusions to Part I

Fewer girls than boys dropped out in these large Colorado districts, which is related to the fact that girls are less likely to display the behaviors (particularly course failure and misbehavior resulting in suspension) closely linked to dropout outcomes. At the same time, there continue to be large numbers of girls leaving high school without a diploma, and the early warning signs for girls are much the same as for boys. Both boys and girls with poor attendance, misbehavior, and course failure need to receive timely, effective interventions to help them turn around and do the things required to successfully complete high school. Data analyses do indicate that these early warning signals will not identify all dropouts (and particularly, not all female dropouts), and it is likely that life events (including pregnancy or other family-related caregiving issues) trigger dropout outcomes for girls at a higher rate than boys. School officials need to be pro-active in responding to life events as well as to the early warning indicators. The importance of early intervention by school personnel to help both girls and boys get back on track to high school graduation cannot be overemphasized.

Table 3. Comparison of Common Binary Logistic Model of Dropping out for Three Colorado Districts

a) Binary Logistic Model I for Colorado Class of 2007 Outcomes (Dropout vs. Graduate)

	Jeffco		Aurora		Denver	
R-Square	.083		.122		.094	
Percent Correctly Predicted	88.5		63.4		69.8	
	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value
Female	.664	.000*	.495	.000*	.633	.000*
Native	4.011	.000*	2.595	.188	5.545	.000*
Asian	.809	.454	.806	.493	1.363	.205
Black	3.752	.000*	1.607	.000*	2.079	.000*
Hispanic	4.283	.000*	3.547	.000*	3.920	.000*

Comparison group: white males

b) Binary Logistic Model 2 for Colorado Class of 2007 Outcomes (Dropout vs. Graduate)

Effects of Gender, Ethnicity, and Number of Ninth Grade Semester Failures

	Jeffco		Aurora		Denver	
R-Square	.471		.453		.405	
Percent Correctly Predicted	92.4		79.1		82.1	
	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value
Female	.789	.040*	.699	.006*	.679	.000*
Native	3.256	.005*	3.510	.156	2.571	.011*
Asian	1.119	.737	1.118	.770	1.493	.154
Black	3.154	.001*	.877	.481	1.341	.059
Hispanic	2.431	.000*	2.741	.000*	2.108	.000*
# of ninth grade failures	2.069	.000*	1.641	.000*	1.543	.000*

Comparison group: white males with no failures

c) Binary Logistic Model 3 for Colorado Class of 2007 Outcomes (Dropout vs. Graduate)

Effects of Gender, Ethnicity, and One or More Ninth Grade Semester Failures

	Jeffco		Aurora		Denver	
R-Square	.370		.347		.276	
Percent Correctly Predicted	89.2		74.2		75.2	
	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value
Female	.795	.024*	.616	.000*	.708	.000*
Native	2.554	.017*	2.098	.460	2.222	.018*
Asian	1.137	.682	.996	.991	1.617	.076
Black	1.807	.067	.951	.761	1.296	.076
Hispanic	2.602	.000*	2.564	.000*	2.300	.000*
1 or more ninth grade failures	18.282	.000*	9.486	.000*	6.848	.000*

Comparison group: white males with no failures

Table 4a. Binary Logistic Model for District 2 Class of 2007 Outcomes

	Dropouts (1) vs. Graduates (0)		Graduates (1) vs. Dropouts (0)		Graduates (1) vs. Non-Graduates (0)	
R-Square	.481		.481		.409	
Percent Correctly Predicted	93.1		93.1		83.5	
	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value
Female	.791	.057	1.264	.057	1.381	.000*
Native	3.918	.002*	.255	.002*	.417	.006*
Asian	1.121	.748	.892	.748	.992	.967
Black	2.861	.004*	.349	.004*	.555	.029*
Hispanic	2.136	.000*	.468	.000*	.520	.000*
# of ninth grade suspensions	1.406	.001*	.711	.001*	.649	.000*
# of ninth grade failures	2.046	.000*	.489	.000*	.522	.000*

Table 4b. Binary Logistic Model for District 3 Class of 2007 Outcomes

	Dropouts (1) vs. Graduates (0)		Graduates (1) vs. Dropouts (0)		Graduates (1) vs. Non-Graduates (0)	
R-Square	.491		.491		.450	
Percent Correctly Predicted	80.4		80.4		76.2	
	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value
Female	.800	.099	1.250	.099	1.546	.000*
Native	3.042	.218	.329	.218	.277	.067
Asian	1.128	.779	.886	.779	.685	.219
Black	.769	.188	1.300	.188	1.013	.933
Hispanic	2.391	.000*	.418	.000*	.463	.000*
ESL	1.060	.785	.944	.785	.766	.124
Spec. Ed.	1.663	.043*	.601	.043*	.377	.000*
Overage	3.277	.000*	.305	.000*	.433	.000*
FRL	1.085	.592	.921	.592	.952	.689
# of ninth grade suspensions	1.248	.015*	.801	.015*	.826	.011*
# of ninth grade failures	1.623	.000*	.616	.000*	.636	.000*

Table 4c. Binary Logistic Model for District 5 Class of 2007 Outcomes

	Dropouts (1) vs. Graduates (0)		Graduates (1) vs. Dropouts (0)		Graduates (1) vs. Non-Graduates (0)	
R-Square	.432		.432		.413	
Percent Correctly Predicted	81.8		81.8		75.9	
	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value
Female	.710	.001*	1.409	.001*	1.615	.000*
Native	2.531	.013*	.395	.013*	.498	.024*
Asian	1.280	.392	.781	.392	.898	.606
Black	1.345	.060	.744	.060	.812	.062
Hispanic	1.758	.000*	.569	.000*	.712	.001*
ESL	1.991	.000*	.502	.000*	.518	.000*
Overage	2.574	.000*	.388	.000*	.374	.000*
# of ninth grade failures	1.552	.000*	.644	.000*	.632	.000*

Table 5. Comparison of Binary Logistic Models of Dropping Out for Males and Females in Three Colorado Districts

Female

	Jeffco		Aurora		Denver	
R-Square	.475		.462		.398	
Percent Correctly Predicted	94.4		81.4		83.6	
	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value
Native	1.388	.725	†	†	2.687	.071
Asian	1.008	.988	2.903	.066	.962	.934
Black	2.008	.245	.672	.162	1.449	.105
Hispanic	1.849	.009*	3.065	.000*	1.515	.047*
ESL			.704	.231	1.949	.001*
Spec. Ed.			1.035	.929		
Overage			5.012	.000*	2.549	.000*
FRL			1.148	.512		
# of ninth grade suspensions	1.010	.951	1.444	.026*		
# of ninth grade failures	2.220	.000*	1.610	.000*	1.531	.000*

† N too small to report

Male

	Jeffco		Aurora		Denver	
R-Square	.488		.517		.454	
Percent Correctly Predicted	91.8		80.1		80.0	
	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value	Odds Ratio	P-Value
Native	6.547	.000*	12.730	.044*	2.318	.096
Asian	1.235	.655	.459	.227	1.571	.227
Black	3.652	.006*	.817	.479	1.202	.401
Hispanic	2.435	.000*	1.831	.060	1.987	.000*
ESL			1.628	.118	2.049	.000*
Spec. Ed.			2.523	.007*		
Overage			2.386	.000*	2.643	.000*
FRL			1.004	.985		
# of ninth grade suspensions	1.674	.000*	1.140	.219		
# of ninth grade Failures	1.953	.000*	1.644	.000*	1.583	.000*

Part 2: Findings from Interviews of Intervention Specialists Working with Dropouts and Students At-Risk of Dropping Out

Background: Colorado Youth for a Change.

To probe more deeply into the potential reasons why girls drop out – reasons that more quantitatively focused studies reported above appear not to have unearthed – aid was enlisted from an organization deeply involved in the dropout epidemic in Colorado: Colorado Youth for a Change (CYC). According to its mission statement,

CYC works collaboratively with school districts throughout the state of Colorado to create dropout outreach and recovery programs to bring high school dropouts back to school, dropout intervention programs to prevent high schoolers from dropping out, and new school programs that fit the needs of out-of-school youth.

In the four years since its founding in 2005, CYC has worked with hundreds of students from a number of Colorado school districts – obtaining lists of dropouts from the districts, learning of other dropouts through the kids themselves, contacting the young people and their families, and, using data obtained from the “Infinite Campus” student data bases⁹ managed by the districts and information obtained from face-to-face contacts with the students, matching those dropouts to “seats” in appropriate school programs with one goal: to get the dropouts back in school until they get a diploma. Along the way, CYC intervention and outreach specialists spend focused, one-on-one time with the students served, to help identify programs appropriate to their particular needs and to support them as they transition back into a school setting. In 2008, CYC specialists contacted over 900 out-of-school youth, and helped 175 re-enroll in high school educational programs. Many of the programs are in “alternative” schools or even in the community college system.

Unfortunately, CYC has found that there are simply not enough appropriate “seats” in educational programs that fit the particular needs of the dropout population. To try to alleviate that shortage, CYC is working to design schools and programs in cooperating districts that meet the particular needs of this youth population. CYC has also recently initiated a program in an urban Denver high school to work with 9th graders identified as in danger of ultimately dropping out; a full-time specialist has been given an office in the school, manages volunteer math tutors from the community for the students, and monitors students individually and closely to keep them on the path to graduation.

The types of youth served by CYC are, at this point, mostly urban or inner suburban, Latino, and low socio-economic status. One specialist is devoted specifically to homeless kids. The founder of CYC (Steven Dobo) and his outreach specialists, based upon their intensive, day-to-day contact with hundreds of youth, have a wealth of untapped knowledge about the specific needs of young people who drop out or who are in danger of not graduating, and about the factors at work at home, in school, and in the kids themselves affecting their decisions to stay in or leave school.

The Interviews

In an attempt to learn more about what drives girls to drop out of school, we decided to tap that knowledge. Interviews were conducted with CYC’s founder, its program director, and three of its specialists (the senior educational outreach specialist; the homeless educational outreach specialist; and the educational intervention specialist). The interviews were unstructured, and loosely followed a protocol asking, first, generally about the reasons for or predictors of dropping out, and if there were any differences between boys and girls; second, about specific pullout¹⁰ or pushout¹¹ factors influencing dropout decisions (using the factors enumerated in REFT Inst., 2009, pp. 6-15), and whether they differed for boys and girls; and third, about whether their remedial or intervention approach differed depending upon the gender of the youth. The interviews lasted from 1 to 1½ hours long, and were recorded and thematically coded.

⁹ The over 20 variables of data obtained from Infinite Campus include age, grade, home address, school district and school, special education status, ESL, standardized test score history, GPA, number of credits earned and attempted, attendance, and behavior events. Generally, CYC finds that the most important data for finding a workable placement for a youth who has dropped out are (a) age, (b) geography, and (c) number of credits needed to graduate.

¹⁰ Need to earn money, getting married/becoming a parent, family caregiving responsibilities, family disruption, family mobility, safety concerns, and criminal justice system involvement.

¹¹ Student’s school behavior events record (discipline, suspensions, expulsions); academic performance factors (failure grades, lack of credits); absenteeism; academic preparedness; safety (bullying, sexual harassment in school).

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Interestingly, while the interviewees' initial "gut feels" were that, generally, there really are not significant gender differences in the predictors for dropping out or in the actions needed to be taken to get a youth to return to school – one noted that age and credits were probably more important, that there were more commonalities between pregnant women and gang members with the same age and credits, than between two pregnant girls of different ages or with a different credit level – as the specialists talked more about specific factors and instances, gender differences began to emerge. For example, some pushout or pullout factors affect both boys and girls, but in different ways, or to different extents (see National Women's Law Center, 2007, p. 13). In addition, three issues or themes kept cropping up that cut across the specific factors – behavioral tendencies, the influence of relationships, and feelings of responsibility – which seem to manifest themselves differently for girls and boys. Set out below are findings from the interviews, organized into pullout and pushout factors, the three broader themes, and remedial/intervention issues. A discussion of the implications of the findings then follows, along with some recommended next steps.

Interview Findings

The Pullout Factors covered in the interviews include (a) employment, (b) caregiving, (c) pregnancy and parenting, (d) other family factors (mobility, disruptions), (e) safety concerns and (f) criminal justice system involvement.

Employment. Both young men and young women get pulled away from school by the draw of outside employment. It appears to affect them somewhat differently, however, in the views of the specialists. For boys, the need to work and to earn is part and parcel of the pressure to "man up" to support self and family, to pay rent and buy food. This is an important driver particularly for homeless boys; they need to earn money to get into housing, whereas homeless girls (especially those with children of their own) seem to have more access to social service programs and family support to foot the housing bill. Boys are also more likely to drop out to start what they think of as "a career" – "I'm going to be a mechanic, and for that, I don't need to go back to school."

Girls also get pulled from school for outside jobs, but seemingly to a lesser extent. They work so as to earn spending money. In order to do so, they tend to take "whatever job – they don't use the concept of a career as a reason not to go back to school." Young women also are less likely than young men to be drawn into the role of having to bring home money to put food on the table and pay the rent; a girl is more likely to be asked to take care of house and home while her mother is working one or more jobs to support the family.

Caregiving. The need to stay away from school to care for family during difficult times manifests itself differently for girls than for boys. Girls are frequently asked by their parents to stay home to cook and clean and care for siblings and elderly relatives. The specialists are full of stories of girls pulled away from school for family needs: the one who is consistently tardy because the high school day begins very early, and she has to walk her younger siblings to their later-starting elementary school; the young lady whose mother is incapacitated with cancer, who has to cook daily for and clean up after the dozen or so relatives living in their apartment, provide transportation for her mother's medical appointments, look after her younger siblings – and who misses so many days of school, is exhausted and inattentive when she does attend, and ultimately stops going at all; the girls who ditch school so they can babysit for older siblings' children or infirm grandparents while the healthy adults in the family leave for work. Boys, on the other hand, rarely are expected by their families to stay home to care for immature or ailing family members, or to cook and clean. Instead, their family caregiving obligations force them away from school and out into the workplace – to be "providers" for the benefit of the family, rather than home-bound "caregivers" per se. As the program manager observes

The expectations on girls are ridiculous. They are expected to baby sit, give care. They get no support to stay in school. There is a general tolerance for it. Nobody's expecting young men to babysit their older sister's kid. The oldest daughter is the assistant mom.... While boys are free to do whatever.

Pregnancy/parenting. Everyone agrees that, for girls, pregnancy is a big factor pulling them away from the school setting. One of the interviewees described the typical data profile of a girl who drops out because of pregnancy: she has decent grades and scores in the early years of high school, is on track with all her credits and has a good attendance record – and then does “a 180,” with attendance and grades plummeting. That is a clear pattern indicating pregnancy, for a girl. (That kind of abrupt shift for a boy, on the other hand, could be any number of things – involvement with gangs, the criminal justice system, etc.) Teen pregnancy and its predictable aftermath (that is, the need to parent a child), create a host of issues that require “personalized support” if the young lady is going to be able to stay in school. She has health issues; housing issues (with the girl often going to live with the child’s father’s parents who may not be particularly supportive of or interested in her continued school attendance). Obtaining that kind of personalized support is a tall order in the larger high school setting. Once the child is born, the responsibilities for that child – both in terms of caring for the baby and working to pay bills – do appear disproportionately to fall on the mother, leaving little time or space available for school in her life.

Other Family Factors. Family disruptions – such as divorce, fighting, financial difficulties, illness or deaths, and abuse or neglect – and family mobility – frequent household moves – appear more or less equally to affect male and female students, according to the specialists interviewed. Not surprisingly, these factors are seen to depress attendance rates and increase the likelihood that the student living through them will stop coming to school. As discussed above, the way in which these family issues impact the lives of boys and girls may differ; they may impel the boys to seek outside employment to help support the family, whereas the girls might be drawn closer into the family circle to provide caregiving services during the family’s time of need; in either case, the upshot is that school ceases to be a priority in the face of family difficulties.

The homeless specialist also notes that family homelessness and mobility often affects boys and girls differently. “A throwaway youth with nowhere to go is usually male; a throwaway youth with someone to stay with – other family, friends, boyfriend’s kin, etc. – is usually a girl.” Having a place to stay may make it marginally easier for the “throwaway” girl to keep going to school than it is for her male counterpart.

Even when family disruptions and mobility do not figure into the picture, a family factor seen by the specialists as important is the level of parents’ involvement in their children’s school experience. One interviewee notes as a prime reason for student problems with academic performance the absence of “parental expectations” of academic success and the lack of parental involvement in their child’s schooling. Parents are often “nonchalant about their kids’ education,” reports one of the specialists. Without parental involvement, a student who has been suspended, for example, may not be able to reenroll, since a parental visit or signature may first be required. The support systems at home to encourage a student to engage in school are often just not there. Again, however, this gap appears to disservice boys and girls more or less equally.

Safety Concerns. When the specialists were first asked if safety concerns – such as gang issues, bullying or sexual harassment, crime in the home or school neighborhood – might cause a family to keep their teenagers at home and away from school out concern for their well-being – their first reaction was in the negative. The boys do not take personal safety into account as a reason to attend or not attend school; they will not avoid a fight, they will show up to school to save face. The girls might be subject to what the specialists see as sexual harassment at school, but the girls do not see it that way; to them, it is how boys and girls pervasively treat each other, nothing out of the ordinary. And the consensus is that bullying is simply not a factor.

Upon further discussion, however, some of the specialists note that, with Latina girls especially, the family may be more likely to keep a girl at home to protect her from dangers, real or imagined, that might arise in the school setting. If they hear of a fight, they will keep the girl home; if they fear for what might happen to their daughter with the boys at school, they will keep her at home. Moreover, as one specialist observes, “parents enable girls not to go to school if they feel unsafe.” This does not appear to happen with the boys. The family support systems operate to tender support to young women in the face of safety concerns by encouraging school ditching, rather than through engaging with the school to try to allay the concerns and facilitate school attendance.

Criminal Justice System Involvement. There is consensus that the boys go to corrections, and the girls do not, as a rule. While there are, of course, exceptions, generally criminal justice system involvement affects boys more than girls, with the boys more often being unable to graduate because, while incarcerated, they were unable to get the necessary core credits. This happens less frequently with girls. Boys and girls also, when both are engaged in the criminal justice system, have different types of records. The girls may get arrested for petty theft, domestic disturbances, even truancy, which are more likely to trigger involvement with social services or truancy court than the juvenile justice system. Ankle monitors, says one specialist, often result in better school attendance; incarceration, obviously, does not. The boys, on the other hand, do get incarcerated for “real” crimes (drugs, stealing cars, gang violence, etc.), and often have both societal and school reentry problems thereafter

The **Pushout Factors** covered in the interviews include (a) academics and credits, (b) discipline issues (suspensions, expulsions), (c) safety, and (d) overall attendance issues.

Academics and credits. Both boys and girls often dwell in a state of blissful ignorance as to the status of their earned credits. They get to be 18 and believe themselves to be seniors – but, from a credit standpoint, they are not, and their ability to graduate at the end of what they believe to be their senior year will be frustrated. If timely graduation appears impossible, dropping out seems to many to be the only sensible course of action.

The specialists report that the boys and girls sometimes differ in their approach the issue of credit sufficiency. The boys do not ask about whether they have enough credits, and are completely taken by surprise when, late in the year, they discover that they will not have enough. The girls, on the other hand, “are more willing to seek out the information about credits,” and when they find it out, make an initial effort to remedy the problem. Male and female behavioral reactions to their lack of credits seem to differ as well. Boys, when the problem seems insurmountable, may act out in class to the point of being asked to leave. Girls, on the other hand, may make a genuine initial effort to talk to teachers or counselors to schedule classes to enable them to graduate; when, however, it appears that the effort will not bear fruit (because there are too many classes to make up, or the information necessary to figure out scheduling problems is not forthcoming, or getting a responsible adult’s attention to help fix problems proves too difficult), the girls tend to give up, drift away, and just stop attending class.

The story with boys’ and girls’ academic struggles is similar. While both do not like to admit that they are behind in their work or that they do not understand what is going on in class – it is, after all, embarrassing to do so – the boys are more likely to “get in teachers’ faces about it,” often in inappropriate ways, and get kicked out (suspended, expelled) for their troubles. Or, rather than swallowing their pride and asking for help, they avoid school. The girls, on the other hand, might ask for help or silently try to understand – and when they still do not “get it,” feeling that they are just too far behind to ever catch up, then they stop coming to school. As one specialist puts it

Boys won’t seek out help if they’re behind, and they’ll drop out early. Girls don’t ditch for that, they’ll ask for help, they’re more vocal about getting help. But – if the help doesn’t help, if they still don’t understand, they’ll drop out later.

Discipline. It is clear that boys get suspended and/or expelled for disciplinary reasons more frequently and regularly than do girls. Fights, gangs, drugs in school, in-school behavioral irregularities, all affect boys’ school records more than girls’ records. Suspensions lead to further school disengagement if a suspended boy’s parents are not engaged – if they work many jobs, or if they are unaware of what is happening in the boy’s school life, so that they cannot or do not know that they are supposed to show up at school to get him reinstated post-suspension – then it is likely that the boy will not be able to be timely reinstated/reenrolled in school. More school is missed, the student falls further behind, and more damage is done.

For girls, while there are fairly vigorous “girl fights” from time to time, fewer girls tend to act out in class or are involved in gang activities or drugs within the school walls, such that, overall, fewer girls are suspended or expelled. As one specialist notes, “boys get kicked out for acting up in class and fights, girls for fighting outside of class, not for acting up in class, and not that often.” Another observes

Expulsions and suspensions are much bigger triggers for dropout for boys than girls. It has to do with the manner in which they act out. Boys are more volatile. Boys and girls share the same stories, but are disciplined differently – with boys, there is the fear that it will get out of hand.

Safety. Safety concerns seem to be more of a pullout than a pushout factor, according to the specialists. While, at first blush, it would make sense that school settings that are unsafe (because of gangs, bullying, drugs, or harassment) would drive students away, in point of fact it is family pressure or encouragement to stay home in the face of such dangers, rather than student avoidance, that draws students – mostly girls – away from unsafe schools.

Attendance. Both boys and girls ditch. The interviewees do not see a lot of gender differences associated with school absenteeism – “it’s pretty equal, everyone ditches.”¹² And for both boys and girls, a poor attendance record in 9th grade is a good indicator that there might be graduation problems later on. The reasons for skipping school, however, may differ as between girls and boys. Girls ditch for family responsibilities or because of pregnancy-related issues, while boys ditch for work. Girls “are more willing to ditch because of a boy or friends – peer pressure – or serious issues to handle outside of school, usually involving peers.”

It is one specialist’s view that girls more often get “dropped” from school for nothing more than poor attendance (and the truancy courts are ineffective, due to resource constraints); with boys, the school pushes them out for other behavioral reasons as well.

Three Themes. From the interviews, three areas, though not directly asked about, kept coming up again and again as overarching themes distinguishing girls from boys: (a) behavior; (b) relationships; and (c) responsibility for others and for self.

Behavior. All of the interviewees share anecdotes about boys’ and girls’ differing behavioral approaches towards school life. For boys, it is all about pride and “manning up” and “acting out” and “getting in your face.” The boys are “more volatile.” They “disrupt.” If they get frustrated for whatever reason – being behind in class, not understanding what is happening academically, feeling disrespected in some way – they do not sit and sulk; they “act up.” Their behavior forces the school adults (teachers, counselors, administrators) to interact with them, for fear that any disruption will “get out of hand.” While boys are “overt” about themselves and their issues and compel those in authority to interact with them, the girls tend to be “non-overt.” As one specialist puts it, “if girls are disengaged, if they feel not valued, they’ll drift off.” The young women rarely assert themselves; they “sneak out, quieter, go unrecognized.” They can be gone from class for three or four days, and nobody notices or takes any action; whereas young men seek out notice, and their self-assertiveness is recognized.

The intervention specialist relates a telling anecdote about one girl under her purview. At the start of the 9th grade year, the girl has A’s and B’s and good attendance. Then, she stops showing up, or when she attends, she falls asleep in class. It turns out that her mother has cancer, and the girl is expected to take her mother to appointments, cook dinner for 15 every night, and tend to the younger siblings. Her teachers “think she just doesn’t care – and she never thinks they care enough to tell them what is going on.” When the specialist finds out, she tells the teachers – and they then are more than willing to make accommodations for this girl’s circumstances. “But they had no way of knowing – and if it had been a boy, he’d have been in everyone’s face about it, and to avoid or explain the disruption, the teacher would have inquired and found out. But the girl just drifts away.”

¹² The intervention specialist dealing with at-risk 9th graders somewhat disagrees. Her experience is that girls are absent a lot more than boys, and that their greater absenteeism often relates to academic performance problems: “they get behind, it becomes embarrassing to ask questions, they don’t come anymore.”

This is the context for the specialist's quote that is in the title of this report: "girls tend to stop going; boys get told not to come back." Girls drift away from the school setting, and, since they do not make trouble or assert themselves, no one notices. Boys act out their frustrations, and are then attended to, but often in ill-conceived ways, resulting in their being disciplined (suspensions and expulsions) and ultimately pushed out of school altogether.

Relationships. For girls, more than boys, their relationships appear to be the driving force in whether they go to school, stay at home, or go to the mall. Girls are immersed in their relationships with their peers; all the specialists talk about the "girl dramas," the intensity of the interaction among the girls that can dictate whether school is attended or not, the passion of the ups and downs of boyfriends that can as easily draw a girl away from school as to it. Girls are also pulled in the direction of deep and abiding family relationships, full of expectations and need and responsibility. In the face of the strong attraction of the myriad relationships in a teenage girl's life, the countervailing pull of school – with its often dry academics, and with teachers whose time is devoted to delivering curriculum rather than getting to know their students often in crowded classrooms – seems pretty weak. The intervention specialist notes that a relationship with a teacher or counselor – or with peers who attend school and are attentive in class – can be the driver of a girl's continued attendance. She finds that "girls lack a sense of self, and are easily swayed. Strong in-school friendships draw girls into school. Relationships with adults would, if there were adults available to them." When a girl is gone from school for a time – due to suspensions, family issues, or any other reason – she will not come back without relationships in the school: "if they don't have a relationship to come back to, why come back?" As a result, she notes

You can't just expect [the girls] to show up. You have to outreach to them. Kids are just supposed to come – that's their job. But if [the girls] are disengaged, feel not valued, they'll drift off. You have to constantly reach out to them to engage them. Constantly reach them.

Responsibility for Others and for Self. For girls, one "hook" that helps "reach them" is their overhanging sense of responsibility. Their lives are fraught with expectations that they care for and support their family members, their community, and their peers. They tend to have a "sobriety" about them; they are "more aware of responsibilities [and] realistic about what they need to do." With boys, "you have to be sensitive to egos, delusions of grandeur; they think they've accomplished more than they have." As the program manager observes, "girls have a maturity about them, more realistic – [you can] have more of a professional relationship with them. More sober. Boys think they'll join the Broncos."

What is more difficult for girls – mired as they are in the context of myriad relationships for which they have extensive responsibilities that sometimes threaten to overwhelm – is to learn to take responsibility for themselves as autonomous beings. The intervention specialist believes that "girls don't have a voice for themselves – not represented." She thinks they "lack a sense of self" and therefore have difficulty overtly asking for the help that they need. In their lives, they may have had few female role models to show them what it means to advocate for oneself. "Advocacy for self is a form of caring for self. Sometimes the girls don't know how to act like they care." The program manager asserts that the young women who "come back [to school] and are successful acknowledge their autonomy, do it for themselves, and [understand it's] ok to concentrate on self and develop self. Otherwise, [they're] hopelessly pulled back into the 'web' of other people's demands. To be successful, have to put yourself first." For a girl, this is not an easy lesson to learn; she has to overcome years of automatically putting others before herself. She may be made to feel that completing her education is a selfish act, in the face of other more pressing and immediate responsibilities clamoring for her attention. But she can come to learn that such "selfishness" may be the most straight-forward and realistic route to afford her the ultimate wherewithal to care for and support the others in her life (especially her own children, if and when she has them).

Remedial Action/Interventions. The intervention and remediation needs highlighted by the specialists divide into three interrelated categories: (a) flexibility, (b) fit, and (c) framing.

Flexibility. All of the interviewees agree upon the crying demand for dropout programs to meet the needs for flexibility of these young people, be they male or female. The reasons for boys and girls needing flexibility in their educational programs may differ. Boys need to be able to participate in school and work at the same time. Girls need to be able to carry out their family caregiving responsibilities and fit in school at unorthodox times. Girls who are pregnant need to be able to attend to their health issues and still attend school as well. Thus, while both girls and boys may need flexible schedules to allow them to complete their schooling, the type of flexibility required may differ depending upon the reason therefor.

Fit. Flexibility is one part of the overall need for “fit” between the programs serving youth who are out-of-school or are in danger of dropping out, and the particular issues these youths might have. The CYC founder decries the paucity of appropriate or fitting “seats” in educational programs for these young people. Large public schools tend to be “like factories – you don’t fit.” Matching students with all their different variables with programs (often alternative ones) that best serve them is the most likely route to get them to that diploma. “Brokering fits” is CYC’s focus throughout.

One element of that “fit” of particular importance to young women involves the important place of relationships in their lives, as discussed above. To be effective, interventions for girls must focus in on the inexorable draw that relationships have for them; while active adult mentors and role-models can be a key factor in getting both boys and girls back to school, for girls they are, without question, crucial. A “well-fitting” program for girls (and probably most boys, too) would “have an adult for each [one] to follow her progress, keep her on track, and care about her well-being.”

Framing. Part of the need for mentoring and role-modeling arises from the need for persuasion: how does one best persuade a young person for whom school has been found lacking that education is important to him or her – that getting a diploma is a worthwhile thing to do? To do that persuading, an adult needs to know the young person individually, and that youth needs to feel that the adult understands and cares about him or her. The specialists focus on “framing” the need for education for the youths whom they serve. Some believe that the need to continue education is best framed differently for boys than for girls. One says that for boys, “you need to boost their confidence – this is how you support your family, through education.” For girls, they must hear that “you can take care of your baby, your family is better with a diploma – this is how you take care of them.” Another’s experience tells him that with boys, you “kind of have to trick them into going. Talk them down” to give them a realistic picture of what education can accomplish for them, and where they will be without that diploma. With girls, he appeals to their sense of sobriety and responsibility, tells them what they can and should do to develop themselves through education so that they can meet the expectations of others and themselves. But, as the homeless specialist puts it, regardless of whether the dropout (or near dropout) is male or female, “you have to frame education differently for each individual – get them to the point of saying ‘I see the value in this education for me’ rather than being told that it is something they should want.”



Part 3: Discussion and Implications

What is the Pathway to Dropping Out for Girls?

What Can Be Done to Drive in a Different Direction?

“Girls tend to stop going; boys get told not to come back.”

In a nutshell, this very perceptive quote, from one who works intensively with out-of-school youth, captures what may be the essence of the difference between boys’ and girls’ pathways to dropping out. The quantitative data described in Part I of this study indicate that girls drop out less frequently than do boys in large Colorado districts, and associates this difference with course failures and discipline differences. The data highlights, however, the fact that, still, many girls leave school without diplomas; that both boys and girls need “timely and effective interventions to help them turn around and do the things required to successfully complete high school;” but that some of the early warning signals for male dropouts do not effectively identify many female dropouts. That being the case – how do we know or find out when to intervene in girls’ pathway to dropping out, so that we can “help them turn around” and be successful in school?

Why, indeed, do girls “stop going?” The interviews, described in Part 2, with those who have committed themselves to serve hundreds of youth who have dropped out or are in danger of doing so, provide some preliminary findings to help answer this question. Factors that may be triggering school-leaving for many girls do not seem to be reflected in easily accessible school records or statistics. Such pullout and pushout factors appear to include:

- Caregiving responsibilities at home
- The draw of the “drama” in one’s peer group
- Lack of relationships with adults or peers within the school setting
- Lack of appreciation for the value of education in one’s life
- Reluctance or inability to advocate for self in or outside of school

The confluence of all these variables make it exceedingly difficult for a girl who gets behind in her work to ever catch up; ditching school, in the wake of such embarrassment, becomes an increasingly compelling option, or the path of least resistance; attending school holds little or no attraction for the young lady. At home and in her community of peers, she receives positive reinforcement, a sense of welcome, and a feeling of being capable at something; at school, she is virtually ignored. Without making a fuss, and therefore, without being noticed by harried teachers who respond to altercations but not to apparent apathy, she simply drifts away.

The conceptual framework described by Rumberger (2004) of “individual” vs. “institutional” perspectives may provide a helpful lens through which to see female dropout issues. As the specialists report, girls seem to have difficulty advocating for their own interests, or even understanding that they have interests to advance apart from web of family and friendships in which they are enmeshed. Forging an autonomous path and using education to advance their individual fortunes seem inappropriate or “selfish;” all the institutional pressures of school, family, and community seem to conspire to push them or pull them away from the educational enterprise; and there is little reinforcement or support of the girl’s strength of self to counterbalance these powerful forces. Where can a girl find the support and skills to allow her to care for herself, as well as the many others making demands upon them, so that her path to a diploma can be successfully pursued?

The literature talks of “pushout” factors from schools, and “pullout” factors from home and community (REFT Inst., 2009; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). What might schools do to create another set of factors – perhaps we might call them “pull-in” variables – that operate to attract and retain girls in school and to counteract the forces focused on pushing and pulling them out? What might schools, communities, and other well-meaning programs and people do to build “push-in” factors, to frame school-going and graduation as something of value to young people in danger of dropping out and to persuade them that their communities and families are better served by staying in? How can pull-in and push-in efforts be crafted in ways most effective for counterbalancing the power of pullout and pushout forces for girls?

Based upon this exploratory study, we do not have enough information fully to answer these questions for girls. As said before, the statistics from school records and surveys about credits, course failures, suspensions, etc., do not explain the whole story for girl dropouts and do not give clear cues as to how best to intervene or remediate for them. Further large-scale survey work needs to be done, inquiring about such factors as the effect of relationships in and out of school, the complexities of non-school responsibilities, and the impact of “life events” such as pregnancy and parenting.

But we do not completely know the universe of what might be influencing these silent, largely passive, drifting away female dropouts. To ensure that any large-scale quantitative research effort for Colorado girls is as helpful as possible, we recommend that, first, a series of focus groups be conducted, along the lines of what Grobe (2005) accomplished in the Boston area. While that effort neither focused on girls nor disaggregated its results for gender, its overall process provides a model to be followed.

Thirteen focus groups containing 118 youth were conducted. The focus groups represented both in-school and out-of-school youth, middle- and high-school aged youth, schools (which students attended and from which they had dropped out) ranging from alternative schools to comprehensive high schools, young people involved in the criminal justice system, youth involved in community-based remedial programs, and a broad and wide demographics of age (13-24) and ethnicity. Recruitment of youth for the focus groups was done through schools and community organizations and colleagues, and the groups were facilitated by trained college students. As Grobe (2005, p. 2) reports,

An important purpose of the focus groups was to hear from young people about their education experiences. We wanted to learn more about these specific questions:

- What helps youth stay in school and what causes them to drop out?
- Do young people feel there is enough support for them if they start to have trouble in school?
- Once students drop out, is it easy or difficult to connect with community resources and get back into an educational program?
- How do young people hear about and get connected to outside education and training programs?
- What characteristics of community-based programs enable young people experience success after they have left public high school?
- Do young people have clear and realistic career interests?
- Do they have career plans that will help them reach their goals?

In order to learn more about these and other types of questions as they particularly pertain to Colorado girls, we recommend that a similar focus group effort for girls be conducted here in this state. The conducting of 10+ focus groups of girls from differing demographics and school circumstances would allow us to hear their unique voices (without the noise of their “in your face” male peers) describe the forces pulling them and pushing them out of school, and let us learn directly from them what might be effective to push or pull them back in. What works for them in school? What does not? How can family and community help them to stay in school? What communications and support are present? Are lacking?

What we have learned thus far is that many girls do not or cannot assert themselves to obtain the benefits a diploma has to offer. They are, it seems, the quietest part of “The Silent Epidemic.” Young women need an opportunity to speak out loud about what are the causes and concerns of their leaving or staying in school. Today, as one of the specialists observes, it is often the case that “Girls don’t have a voice for themselves – [they aren’t] represented.” We recommend an avenue here to give them voice, to provide a platform for their views and positions to be represented, and ultimately to incorporate their input into intervention proposals that might effectively get girls in Colorado to graduate.

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