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High School Graduation Rates: A Concern for Everyone

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Abstract

Earning a high school diploma is a valuable achievement, but it is a challenging goal to achieve for a growing number of at-risk youths. It has become clear how important high school graduation is to the individuals and the community where they live when considering the consequences of graduating versus dropping out. The steps needed to achieve graduation are a culmination of many factors working together, such as improving attendance, course completion, and social emotional skills development. Solutions such as engaging parents in school-based decisions, connecting students to their school, and implementing social-emotional learning programs have proven effective in increasing graduation rates, especially for at-risk and all transitioning grade nine students. Improving high school graduation rates is not just a concern for the youth in school today, but for all members of society for years to come.

Graduating from high school is a significant accomplishment, but it is a challenging goal for an increasing number of at-risk youths. When comparing the effects of graduating versus dropping out, it is evident how important high school graduation is to everyone. A high school diploma provides young people with more opportunities to pursue post-secondary education and to achieve financial autonomy, while dropping out of high school tends to lead to a higher unemployment rate and a higher incidence of involvement in illicit activities (Zaff et al., 2016). Steps have been taken to increase graduation rates by addressing predictors such as chronic absenteeism. In grade nine alone, midterm attendance and academic data can predict three-quarters of future dropouts (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). There are many reasons why students struggle to attend high school, but emotional regulation plays a significant role. Studies have shown that engaging parents in students' academics, promoting school connections (Zaff et al., 2016), and implementing social-emotional learning programs (Gayl, 2018) results in students attending school more regularly and demonstrating improvements in their ability to use emotion regulating strategies. Transitioning to high school in grade nine is a crucial time to address these issues (Hughes et al., 2018). Improving high school graduation rates is a concern not just for the youth in school today, but for all members of society.

Factors Affecting Graduation Rates

Students with poor attendance and the inability to emotionally regulate, especially in grade nine, are less likely to graduate from high school. According to Statistics Canada, 8.5% of men and 5.4% of women aged 25 to 34 had less than a high school education in 2016, equating to 340,000 young Canadians who did not earn a high school diploma in 2016 (Uppal, 2017, "Overview" section). During their lifetime, the typical high school dropout in the United States burdens the economy by approximately $272,000 in reduced tax payments, higher dependency on healthcare, higher crime rates, and greater welfare dependence than individuals who complete high school (McFarland et al., 2019, p. 1). Through the early 1980s, there were plenty of lucrative jobs available for a high school dropout, but these jobs are rare today and pay far less than they did in the past (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). In 2016, Canadians aged 25 to 34 with less than a high school education were employed at a rate of 67% for men and 41% for women, compared to 1990, when employment rates for men and women in the same educational group were 75% and 50% (Uppal, 2017, "Overview" section). On average, American high school graduates receive $8,000 more per year and are much less likely to be regularly unemployed

compared to high school dropouts (Hughes et al., 2018). There is ample evidence to support the importance of obtaining a high school diploma versus dropping out, for individuals and for society at large.

A main predictor for forecasting high school dropouts is school engagement, including attendance and work completion (Zaff et al., 2016). Poor attendance, low grades, and at-risk behaviour are predictors of not earning a diploma (Strompolis et al., 2012). Attendance is a more important predictor than test scores or upbringing (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Other factors include a student's community, school, and peer group (Zaff et al., 2016). It is impossible to identify a single factor, but schools should continue looking at high school graduation predictors, specifically attendance, as they strive to boost graduation rates.

Low attendance and poor academic success in grade nine can have a ripple effect through the next three years of high school, and are a predictor of eventually dropping out. A good predictor of course failure is poor attendance, and course failure in grade nine puts a student off track to graduate (Mac Iver, 2011). In ninth grade, whether students are on track is far more prognostic of future graduation than their eighth-grade test scores (Allensworth, 2013). Test scores are perhaps the most widely used predictor of graduation, but are not as convincing as students being on track after their grade nine year. The lasting effect of bad attendance and course failure in grade nine predicts dropout.

To be able to learn, develop, and connect with themselves and others, students must first be able to emotionally regulate. Remaining composed in a stressful situation is a foundational skill for interacting with others and the environment in a positive way (Carrington, 2020). Students with high social-emotional needs such as weak communication skills, inability to connect with school, and poor self-regulation techniques often struggle with grades, attendance, and behaviour (Tan et al., 2018), especially in grade nine when students receive less support from teachers and other resource staff. When grade nine students' social-emotional needs and attendance issues are not addressed, they are at a greater risk of failing to graduate (Strompolis et al., 2012).

Rationale for Improvement

The benefits of youth graduating from high school versus dropping out are polar opposites and have lasting effects, not only on the individual youth, but also on society at large. High school graduation correlates with a variety of favourable effects for youth, including good health, better income, and an increased chance of pursuing post-secondary education (Strompolis et al., 2012). By graduating, youth expand their possibilities for a successful future and contribute to their families' well-being and the communities where they reside. Earning a high school diploma prepares at-risk youth for meaningful work, to make positive contributions to their community, to be effective role models in their families, and to become contributing members of society (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). Increasing the graduation rate provides our youth with more opportunities to succeed in the future. It enhances the overall safety, health and economic security, and general well-being of all members of society (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). All societies benefit from communities that are committed to working toward helping their youth succeed.

Strategies for Success

Because low attendance is a significant predictor for dropping out of high school (Ingul et al., 2011), increasing student attendance is the primary key to increasing graduation rates. Schools can improve student attendance by engaging parents and improving student connections to school, by implementing social-emotional programs, and by supporting students in their transition to grade nine. Strategies aimed at increasing parents' influence on school-based decision-making, parent engagement, and developing a positive parent-teacher

relationship will likely raise enrolment rates over time. Research has shown that linking a parent to a single school contact and doing regular at home check-ins can increase student attendance (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Along with engaging parents early and often, building social connections and peer groups at school can improve students' well-being and desire to attend more regularly (Zaff et al., 2016). Attention to both the parents' and students' individual needs will facilitate meaningful engagement (Genao, 2013). Improving attendance by implementing positive interventions such as parent involvement and school connection can decrease dropout rates.

Students need to learn skill sets to persist through obstacles, understand and sympathize with others, problem-solve, and make healthy decisions to succeed in school (Gayl, 2018). Such skills come from learning how to emotionally regulate and can be taught through social-emotional learning programs at school. These programs encourage healthy attitudes in youth about themselves and school, and reduce challenging and dangerous habits, leading eventually to positive academic performance and connection to the school (Tan et al., 2018). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning has identified standards that group skills into five areas: self-management, self-control, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and skills in relationships. Inspiring students to abandon old behaviours by building relationships with school staff and a sense of belonging and attachment at school is crucial (Main & Whatman, 2016). Teaching students how to emotionally regulate will help them to connect better with their teachers, peers, and schools, which will in turn improve their attendance and academics, and increase their potential to graduate.

Transitioning to high school has become a significant challenge for today's youth, and it has a major effect on graduation rates (Genao, 2013). Identifying and addressing incoming grade nine students' attendance and social-emotional needs early put them on a positive track toward graduation (Tan et al., 2018). Providing an opportunity for feeder schools to have transition meetings with high schools is a crucial first step in an effective transition. Transition meetings inform teachers, resource staff, guidance staff, and administrators from both schools about the incoming grade nine students and potential concerns. Also, providing opportunities for the incoming grade nine students and parents to tour the school, attend a class, and have an information evening helps to build connections and relationships before starting school. Some districts contact the incoming at-risk grade nine students over the summer, and even offer a summer transition program intended to ease the transition to high school (Allensworth, 2013). Entering high school is not an easy task. Facilitating a positive transition into grade nine, engaging parents on school-based decisions, and supporting students' social-emotional needs are crucial first steps on the road to high school success.

Conclusion

High school graduation is important, but it is a formidable goal for many at-risk youth. The difference between graduating and dropping out has a significant effect on the individuals and the communities where they live. Chronic absenteeism and emotional dysregulation highly correlate with failure to graduate. Solutions such as engaging parents, connecting students to their school, and implementing social-emotional learning programs should be included in school planning, especially for at-risk and all transitioning grade nine students. It will be essential to continue to research the various risk factors and how they act on each other, because collective risk factors are a more significant predictor of dropout than any single factor (Zaff et al., 2016). It will take the efforts of not only the school system to improve graduation rates, but of everyone to keep today's youth on the right track to graduation.

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