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# The Voices of High School Dropouts: implications for research and practice

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Originally developed in 1942, the General Educational Development (GED) exam was designed to help veterans who had left high school before graduation in order to join the armed services. This certificate allowed them to pursue college degrees without having to go back to high school (Brown, 2000). Over the years, people from all walks of life have earned the GED diploma, among them United States Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado; comedian Bill Cosby; actor Michael J Fox; and musicians Waylon Jennings and John Michael Montgomery.

Despite the fact that research on the validity of the GED is often inconsistent and contradictory (Dynarsky and Gleason, 2002; Chaplin, 1999), many states began establishing in-school GED programs during the 1990s in an effort to decrease the high school dropout rate. These high school equivalency programs (HSEP) were designed to help dropouts or potential dropouts prepare for the GED exam (Cummings, 1991) and have succeeded in helping thousands of students earn their certificates. Most educators agree that a GED is not as good as a high school diploma, but it is far superior to having nothing at all (Hewitt, 2002). Some believe that the presence of high school equivalency programs actually increases the dropout rate (Chaplin, 1999). Others have accused schools of pushing minority students out of high school and in to GED programs (Hardy, 2002).

Recent legislation in the State of Texas has severely limited the eligibility opportunities for high school aged students. Adult education systems do not offer the same opportunities for high school aged students as the HSEPs do (Hewitt, 2002).

## Methodology

In light of the problem described above, this study attempts to answer the following research question: What are the factors that prevent students from completing high school?

The participants in this study included 228 current and recent students from GED programs across the

state of Texas. In an effort to gain a clearer picture of circumstances faced by current high school students, only responses from participants in their teens or twenties were considered for the research concerning dropout factors. There were 158 respondents in this category. Ninety-three of these respondents were female (58%) and 64 were male (42%). Ethnically, 67 of these respondents were White (42%), 52 were Hispanic (33%), 18 were Black (12%), two were Asian (1%) and 19 did not indicate specific ethnicity (12%). All of the current and recent student participants were high school dropouts. Their reasons for leaving high school were varied and are described in detail in this paper. Most of these students were participating in GED preparation programs although some had already earned the GED certificate. These participants represent urban, suburban and rural areas of the entire state of Texas. A listing and map of the participating programs is provided.

Data for this qualitative study were collected by means of surveys containing open-ended questions, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. All of the 158 participants completed surveys for this research. In addition individual interviews and small focus group discussions were conducted with 13 current students and 13 GED graduates. Student participants were given a short survey that asked them to list factors which prevented them from completing high school. Those still in preparation programs were also asked to detail their career and education plans and how they felt the GED certificate might affect those plans. Those students who recently completed preparation programs were asked how the GED certificate had affected their career and educational pursuits.

Respondents were given the open ended question, 'What factors prevented you from completing high school?' There was no list or selection of choices made available; respondents could provide one or more reasons. The respondents listed 17 separate factors. These responses are ranked in order with the number in parenthesis indicating the frequency of that reply. A graphic of the top ten responses is also presented.

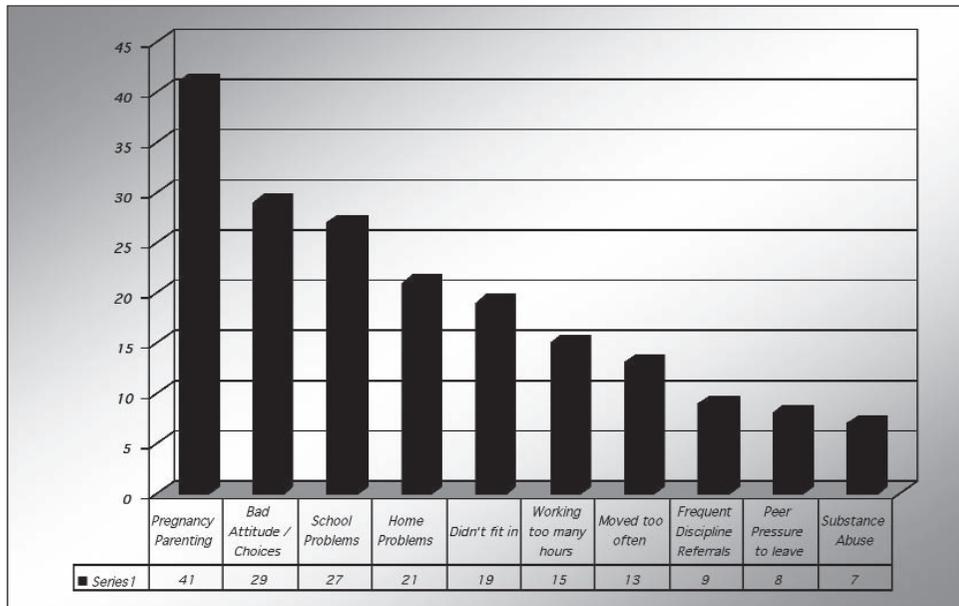
1. Pregnancy/parenting a child (41)
  2. Bad attitude/poor choices (29)
  3. Dysfunctional school/conflict with teachers (27)
  4. Dysfunctional home (21)
  5. Did not fit in (19)
  6. Working too many hours (15)
  7. Moved too often to earn credits (13)
  8. Frequent discipline referrals (9)
  9. Peer pressure to leave (8)
  10. Substance abuse (7)
  11. Family illness/death (6)
  12. Legal trouble (5)
  13. Lacking credits (4)
  14. Completed high school in a foreign country (3)
  15. Language barrier (1)
- Home schooled (1)
- Could not pass exit exam (1)

### **Description of Findings**

Scanlon and Mellard (2002) detailed factors that push students out of school in contrast to those that pull students out. Push factors are those that are within the school, whereas pull factors are beyond the school's control. The factors listed by the respondents in this study are predominately pull factors. Factors number three (dysfunctional school/conflict with teachers), five (did not fit in), eight (frequent discipline referrals), and thirteen (lacking credits) could be considered push factors. The great majority of factors reported by participants in this research were beyond the school's traditional realm of influence and are thus deemed pull factors.

### **Pregnancy and Parenting**

Forty-one of the 158 participants, more than one quarter, listed pregnancy and/or parenting a child as a factor that prevented them from completing high school: the most frequently reported reply. Nineteen of these participants were white, 18 were Hispanic, and two were Black. Two respondents did not indicate specific ethnicity. Of the 41, only seven were male; the remaining 34 were female.



Some of the respondents gave very short, blunt answers to this question such as one 23-year-old white female who wrote, 'haveing kids [sic].' A Hispanic female age 17 wrote, 'Taking care of my child alone.' Another white female, age 29, replied, 'I got pregnant at the age of 16.' 'I found out I was going to be a father,' replied a 21-year-old white male.

Other participants gave slightly more detailed replies to describe their situation. A 29 year-old white female said, 'The one factor that prevented me from completing high school is that I got pregnant in high school and my school counciler [sic] told me I would never graduate.' Another white female, age 25, wrote the following:

*I was 15 yrs old and had my first child. I was in the ninth grade and did not attend school every day. I missed to [sic] many days and had to return to 9th grade again, so I quit and got a job.*

An 18 year-old Black female responded, 'I had two kids and I had to take care of them. I was trying [to] juggle being a student and a parent and it didn't work out.' A Hispanic female age 19 addressed her pregnancy as well as her appreciation of the GED program, stating, 'I have a baby on the way so it gives me time to get my GED and have a better job so I can help my boyfriend raise me and my baby.' [sic] Another Hispanic female, age 23, stated, 'Had my child and moved out on my own, didn't have

nobody [sic] to push me into school.' Another Hispanic female, age 22, stated, 'I got pregnant and I was gong to have a miscarriage.' A 29 year old Hispanic female said, 'I was in 10th grade when I became pregnant. I had to drop out of school.'

Several respondents referred to the responsibilities of parenthood. 'I had a child that was hospitalized to [sic] much,' wrote a 17-year-old Hispanic female. Another 17 year-old Hispanic female replied, 'I had a baby and I had problems with daycare. I wanted to finish high school but by court I had to get my GED.' A 20-year-old White female stated, 'Had a baby that has Amstha [sic] and could not go (to school), had to take care of him.' A White female, age 27, wrote the following:

*I was 14 when I got pregnet [sic] with my little girl and I went to school. But the stress of comeing [sic] home and takeing [sic] care of a home, husband, and a baby and doing homework and cooking was to [sic] much stress on me so I drop [sic] out. Now I feel so dum [sic] for doing that. I wish I would have stayed in school!*

Frequently respondents indicated that pregnancy/parenting was only one of several factors that prevented them from completing high school. One 26 year-old white female wrote, 'I had my son Robert. I did not have enough guidance.' A Hispanic female, age 17, replied, 'Having a baby and not understanding subjects.' A 25-year-old white

female said, 'Pregnancy mixed with gang activity in the school, teachers spent more time on discipline than teaching.' One 23-year-old White female said, 'I had a child when I was 17 years old. I was a senior in school and I knew I wasn't going to graduate with my class because of math grades. So I dropped out after the Christmas holiday.' Another White female age 17 cited peer problems related to her pregnancy. 'I got pregnant, and I couldn't deal with the people after they found out,' she said. A 21-year-old white male listed several factors. 'My girlfriend got pregnant and we had a lot of family problems and money problems, and it all got in the way of school.' Two respondents wrote about how moving frequently from school to school along with their pregnancy prevented them from graduating. 'I did not complete high school because I moved a lot and had a baby at a young age and they kept holding me back,' wrote a 23-year-old white female. An 18-year-old Hispanic female wrote the following:

*A few reasons prevented me from finishing high school. The 1st was that I move [sic] from NYC to Texas, and the other because I was pregnant. And because I was new in this town I don't [sic] know where to go or what to do to get Medicaid and all that stuff for my pregnancy.*

Cheryl, a white 17-year-old, explained why it was difficult for her to complete high school:

*I got pregnant, but even before that it was hard for me to fit in. I just minded my own business until I got pregnant. Then I got a lot of bad attention. People made it hard for me. People are so evil, I mean even though I wasn't the only girl that was pregnant, all of the bad focus was on me.*

Diane, white and 29, stated that she became pregnant when she was 16. When asked if there were programs in her school to help her, she replied, 'No, when I was in high school there were maybe only one or two other girls that were pregnant. I think they went to alternative schools, but that wasn't an option for me, I needed to go to work.' Karen, a white 23 year-old, said:

*I was a teenage mom. It made it really hard to go to school while having a baby. Also I moved here from Albuquerque and some of my credits didn't transfer. That put me further behind. It was too much and I quit.*

### **Bad Attitudes/Poor Choices**

Twenty-nine of the 158 participants replied that it was their own poor choices or attitudes that prevented them from graduating high school. It is noteworthy that a much greater percentage of former students provided this reply than did current students. Of these 29 respondents, 15 were male and 14 were female. Fifteen were white, eight were Black and four were Hispanic. Two respondents did not indicate specific ethnicity.

Truancy or skipping school was one of the poor choices frequently mentioned by participants. Sometimes this was the sole reason, but for others it was one of several listed. 'I just never went,' replied a 17-year-old female. 'Didn't go to school the required number of days that I was supposed to,' stated a Black male, age 17. 'Missed too many days of school,' said an 18-year-old Hispanic male. One white male, age 20, wrote, 'Did not want to go to school. I had so many absences and didn't care.' 'Excessive slacking off and skipping school,' stated a 23-year-old white male. An 18 year old Hispanic female wrote the following:

*I was kicked out for missing too much school. I wasn't going to school because school just wasn't for me. I was always uninterested in what was being taught. So that caused me to become bored so I blew it off completely [sic].*

One 27-year-old white female wrote, 'A Bad [sic] attitude towards school. I met a guy and he was out of school and I was spending more time with him and not on school.' Another white female, age 25, said, 'I didn't think I needed to go, I would rather be in the streets.' An 18-year-old white female stated, 'I got involved with the wrong crowd. I was a huge drug addict. I didn't like authority at that time in my life.' Another white female, age 25, said, 'Not focused. Hanging out with the wrong crowd.' A 21 year-old Hispanic female replied, 'At a young age I all way [sic] thinking that high School [sic] is for other people.' Finally, one 16 year-old white male wrote, 'It [school] was far away and I didn't have a ride. I also already had an attendance [sic] problem.'

To explore the area of attitudes and choices further, the issue was raised in the focus group discussions. Rod, an 18-year-old white male replied, 'I just didn't like school. I tried home-schooling, but both of my

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parents work and so I tried to do it myself, but it didn't go too well.' Steve, a white male, age 17, stated, 'Just the basic routine of going to the same classes everyday just got to me after a while. I couldn't deal with it anymore.' Garrett, 18 and white, echoed Steve's attitude:

*For me it was the constant routine as well. Getting up every day and doing the same thing every day, I mean regular high school is just so boring. The same routine over and over again, I just got tired of that. Also I started getting into drugs and truancy and all of that. It just made it difficult to cope with school.*

Paul, a white 16 year-old said, 'I always had trouble keeping my mouth shut in class. I would always have to talk. I would always have to be saying something. I was always getting in trouble for that kind of stuff.' Angela, a white 18 year-old added, 'I was a third year freshman. I hardly ever went. I also got into a lot of fights.' Jennifer, age 17, said: 'I would go to school, but not to class. I would just stay in the halls and talk to my friends.'

Participants from the group of former students demonstrated varying degrees of insight into the problems they encountered during high school. Tim, age 21, stated, 'I thought I knew everything and nobody else did. I thought I had better things to do than go to school. School was just for social time.' Marty, a 32-year-old Hispanic male agreed, 'Yeah, it was hard to concentrate when you would rather be hanging out with your friends.' Marianne, age 22, said that moving from out of state fueled her rebellious attitude toward school:

*I was an outsider. I moved from Arkansas and I just didn't fit in. I lost credit moving in from out of state. I didn't take to moving very well. I missed all of my friends and I just didn't want to go. When I got here I got pretty wild and skipped school all the time. I was going to the [alternative school] and the principal encouraged me to do GED because I was so far behind and had lots of problems.*

Nancy, age 27, recalled the following:

*I had a bad attitude. I met my boyfriend who is now my husband. He was two years older than me. He didn't go to school. He was out working every day. I was spending time with him skipping school. I just was in love and wanted to be with him. He wasn't at school so I didn't take it seriously.*

As indicated by these responses, these individual's choices and attitudes toward school played a major role in their inability to obtain a high school diploma. As the next section details, however, the school itself often played a role in forming those attitudes.

### **Dysfunctional School/Conflict with Teachers**

Of the 158 students included in this section, 27 responded that the school and/or teachers played a major part in preventing them from obtaining a high school diploma. This represents slightly more than one sixth of the respondents. Of these 27 students, 17 were female and ten were male. Seventeen of these students were white, six were Hispanic, one was Black, one was Asian, and two did not indicate specific ethnicity.

Inflexible school policies and lack of support from teachers were noted in a Florida study as factors that prevented Hispanic students from staying in school (Nessman, Barobs-Gahr, and Medrano, 2001). Black (2002) also noted that a perceived lack of caring on the part of school officials was a contributing factor to the problem of dropouts. Those findings appear to be corroborated by the responses from students in this study.

Some participants in this survey gave very short blunt answers when asked the factors that prevented them from completing high school. One 18-year-old female Hispanic simply wrote, 'Teachers were rude.' Another Hispanic female, age 21, replied, 'Teachers were not willing to teach.' A 16-year-old white male simply said, 'The teachers.' Another white male, age 17, stated, 'I hated the teachers and I hated school.' A 23-year-old white male put it like this: 'Judgement was assessed upon me by teachers and other staff.' Four points were listed by an 18-year-old white female: 'Rude students, impatient teachers, dress codes, structured life.' For a 22-year-old white male it was put this way: 'The mind [main] [sic] thing that prevented me from completing high school was a lot to do with the teachers.'

Often students combined their teacher problems with other factors. 'Getting in trouble, not getting alot [sic] of teacher attention,' wrote one 17-year-old white male. An 18-year-old male replied, 'Fighting with other students and not cooperative

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with all the teachers.’ A 19-year-old Black male stated, ‘Princable [sic] harassment and my short temper.’

Other participants offered more details concerning their problems with teachers and schools. One 18-year-old white male stated, ‘Teachers would target me out for being a troublemaker and [I] was expected to get in trouble.’ A female, age 20, wrote, ‘pushy [sic] teachers and lack of understanding from faculty, Abrasive drug tactics.’ [sic] A white female, age 25, said, ‘Not get the help I needed. I needed someone who was willing to work one-on-one with me. I had trouble with Math and needed someone to work through the problems with me until I understood them.’ A 21-year-old Hispanic male wrote, ‘I didn’t like the school or the learning environment and I just didn’t want to be there.’ A 17-year-old Asian female stated, ‘High school just wasn’t me. I didn’t like to go. I couldn’t stand teachers, and students, and it just wasn’t me. I felt like it was a waste of time.’ One 18-year-old white male said, ‘The immaturity of all the kids in the classes, didn’t get along with the teachers, didn’t like the teaching methods the teachers used.’ This theme of immaturity of other students came up frequently in the focus group discussions. A 17-year-old Hispanic female detailed the following:

*My teacher and I had a conflict and she didn't want me to come back to class. When I would come back she would kick me out. And the same thing happen [sic] with another teacher. So they kicked me out. But I wanted to finish school.*

A 22-year-old white female listed several problems she had with her school:

*For one thing the teachers (and) principles [sic] in [North Texas Community] High School cannot make our schedules right. They don't let people who are not rich get the electives they have chosen. I quit high school for not abling [sic] to get art.*

A 29-year-old Hispanic female listed several problems she experienced with teachers:

*I felt at the time I was being treated unfairly by the teachers. They never encouraged me to stay in school. They would always write the assignment on the board but they would never encourage the class to ask*

*questions. When I finally dropped out, my counsler [sic] didn't even ask me why I was dropping out.*

The 23-year-old Hispanic female quoted below credited her GED program for saving her from a bad school situation. Interestingly, this respondent now has her GED certificate and is currently working at her old high school as a special education teacher’s aid. She wrote the following:

*I felt I didn't have the support I needed and I didn't feel like I would ever succeed in the environment I was in. If I had not had the support from the G.E.D. program and my teacher, I would have probably dropped out of school and become unsuccessful.*

The topic of participants’ problems with teachers and schools came up frequently in the focus group discussions. Three students, Rod, age 17, as well as Bill and Sam, both age 18, indicated that they were already a year behind others their age when they entered high school. Rod said:

*I was in classes with younger kids. I don't think the teachers liked me much. They didn't want me in there. It seems like they expected me to always get in trouble and stuff.*

Bill’s experience was similar:

*I was a freshman for two years. I was 17 years old and in the 9th grade. I couldn't handle being in the class with a bunch of 14 and 15 year olds. Also I didn't like the teachers' teaching methods. The immaturity of all of the students, I just couldn't handle it anymore.*

Another 18 year-old male named David echoed these comments:

*I just couldn't stand it, the kids were so immature and the teachers didn't like me. They wouldn't focus on me and what I needed. They just wanted everyone to go at the same pace all the time. I didn't get the help I needed.*

Jim, a 23 year-old, said:

*I slacked off a bunch in high school, not doing my homework and stuff. But also I got labeled a lot, even though I was an honor student. My assistant principal told me that I wasn't high school material and I needed to drop out. I only had one teacher in high school honors classes that got through to me and*

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*believed in me. All the other teachers wanted me to fail. So I acted out in class and stuff like that. I just really felt that I was labeled by the teachers and staff.*

Seventeen year-old Cheryl stated,

*Teaching methods were horrible. When kids got good grades, they would help them. But most of all they would overlook me. If you didn't understand the first time, too bad!*

Kelly, 20, agreed. She contrasted her high school experience with that of her GED program in the following statement:

*It is so good that they have a program to help you get your GED. People don't understand how high school is now. The drama and dilemma of so many students, and so many drugs coming in now. [Parents] would probably understand more from our point of view if they would go back and spend some time in high school. I'm so thankful for having the GED program. If it weren't for the GED program I would be on the streets.*

The other participants in this focus group agreed. 'Yeah, that is right. I was out there [on the streets] for a while, I know,' said Donna, age 17. 'Yeah, my boyfriend right now is a drop-out. I'm trying to get him to come to this program,' replied Cheryl.

For these students, conflict with school personnel and policies became major barriers that prevented them from graduating. Many of these same participants also indicated that they had problems at home.

### **Dysfunctional Home**

Twenty-one of the 158 respondents indicated that dysfunctional home and family life impacted on their ability to complete high school. Fourteen of these students were female and seven were male. Eight of these participants were white, five Hispanic, three Black, and five did not indicate specific ethnicity.

Some of these students recorded family situations as the primary reason for not graduating. A Hispanic female, age 22, responded, 'I did get married when I was only 15 years old, and by then the last thing I could be thinking it [sic] was the school.' A 29-year-old white female simply stated,

'Lack of supervision at home.' 'I had a lot of family problems, I was forced to quit high school,' said a 26-year-old female. 'My parents began to home school me and then realized they weren't up to the task,' stated an 18-year-old Hispanic female. A 27-year-old white female wrote, 'My mother pulled me out of high school so that she could finish her beautishen [sic] license.'

Others indicated that family issues were only part of a larger constellation of problems that got in the way of graduation. One 21-year-old white male reported that he quit school and went to work because his parents needed help. Another 21-year-old white male quoted in a previous section noted family problems in addition to his girlfriend's pregnancy. A 27-year-old white female detailed the stress of taking care of a home and husband while trying to study for school. Two students quoted in the section on moving noted the stress that their parents' divorce had placed on them.

Other respondents went into further detail. One 19-year-old Hispanic female wrote the following:

*My sister had a child and I help her. I watch her child for her sometimes. Then I decided to take Home Schooling. They told me I could take my time and I did, but still it took forever. So now I just want to just get my GED and continue my education.*

Another Hispanic female, age 29, recalled her situation:

*[I was] running away from home because I had an abusive dad that would constantly drink. Then I meet a guy in high school and I thought, that would be a good thing to escape my family. This guy promised me I could go back to school. I dropped [sic] out from 9th grade and got pregnant. So I had my baby and my boyfriend left me. So I had no choice but to work two jobs to support my child.*

In contrast to the respondents quoted above, the participants in the focus group discussions did not indicate that home situations played a role in their not completing school, with the exception of Donna, age 17. She reported that problems with her stepfather, in addition to moving frequently, made completing school difficult for her.

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### ***Not Fitting In***

Nineteen out of the 158 participants replied to the first survey question with answers that indicated that they felt like they didn't fit in with the high school crowd. Thirteen of these respondents were female and six were male. Twelve were white, five were Hispanic, and two were Black.

Many of these responses also indicated other factors alongside not fitting in. For example, Cheryl, the white 17-year old mentioned in the section on pregnancy/parenting, indicated that before she became pregnant she had trouble fitting in. After she became pregnant the problem grew even worse. Several participants quoted in the previous section stated that they were older than their classmates and that they couldn't handle the maturity level of the younger students. Consequently, they didn't feel that they belonged.

Others had different reasons. 'I moved to Texas in the 10th grade and I didn't fit in here,' stated a 22-year-old white female. A 17-year-old Hispanic male simply said, 'Because I did not get along with people.' Another white female, age 19, said, 'I was getting picked on in school about my weight so my Mom took me out and I never finished.'

In the focus group sessions, participants picked up on the theme of feeling out of place. Rod, age 17, stated, 'The only thing I liked was my tennis team, but that wasn't enough of a hook to keep me in school.' Shelly, age 20, added, 'It just wasn't me. I wasn't a big school person. I just didn't get in to all of the football games and stuff. It just wasn't me.' Angela, age 18 stated, 'The other students, they can't keep their mouth shut. They like to talk about people and things that they don't know about.' Andrea, age 25 added, 'I just wasn't into high school at all. I wasn't into the pep rallies and all that. I just didn't enjoy it, I don't know why.'

### ***Working Too Many Hours***

Fifteen of the 158 respondents indicated that working too many hours was a factor that prevented them from completing high school. Nine of these students were male and six were female. Eight of these respondents were Hispanic, five were White, and two were Black.

The respondents in this survey indicated that financial problems in the home and family made it

necessary for them to go to work. One 18-year-old Hispanic stated, 'Financial problems at home, needed to get a job to help out.' A 21-year-old white male stated, 'I quite [sic] school because my parents needed help, I had limited job opportunities when I was in school.' 'Needed to work at early age,' wrote a 22-year-old Hispanic male. Another Hispanic male said, 'Well, I would say that my economic situation was the rason [sic]. One white male, age 27, presented a typical dilemma: 'When I was in high school, I ended up getting a really good job at the age of sixteen. School and my job began to clash, so I had to choose between one or the other,' he said. A 21-year-old Black female wrote, 'I had to get out of school to help with my family.' One white male, age 20, wrote, 'I need [sic] to get a job to support my family.' A 28-year-old Hispanic female wrote, 'I had to work two jobs.' Another Hispanic female, age 19, said, 'My work would prevented [sic] me from completing high school. I would stay asleep in my classes.' A 28-year-old white female stated, 'I had to quite [sic] high school because of work.' Finally, one Hispanic female, age 27 recalls her situation: 'To start with, I was in tenth grade when I drop [sic] out of school. I had a lot of problem [sic] with my family, had to work, pay bills etc. and I was only 15 years old.'

Participants in the focus group discussions did not indicate that working was a factor that prevented them from graduation. They discussed the type of jobs that they had both before and after receiving the GED certificate; this is detailed in the section covering the third research question; Benefits of the GED.

### ***Moving too frequently to earn credits***

Thirteen participants indicated that moving from one school to another prevented them from earning credits. Sometimes this involved moving from out of state and not having credits transfer. Two respondents moved from different countries. For some, it the adjustment of changing to a new school was too difficult to overcome. Seven of these respondents were female and six were male. Five were white, three Hispanic, three Black and two did not indicate specific ethnicity.

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These respondents frequently cited other factors in addition to moving that prevented them from graduation. One 17 year-old female wrote, 'Too far behind and not financially stable enough to stay in one school, so it was harder to learn having to move so much.' A 23 year-old white female stated, 'I did not complete high school because I moved a lot and had a baby at a young age.' Another white female, age 20, reported, 'I moved around entirely to [sic] much. My stepfather and myself didn't get along which cause [sic] me to move out at an early age of 14. Then it was difficult for me to attend high school.' A 24-year-old Black male stated, 'My parents divorced and that kept me moving place to place. I lost interest in education and got hooked on bad habits.' A Black male, age 22, wrote, 'Well, I was in foster care and I move [sic] around a lot so I couldn't stay in one place to complete school.' An 18-year-old male said, 'Getting behind in school from moving.' A white female, age 17, simply wrote, 'Traveling, Moving.'

Often when students move from state to state their entire stock of earned credits cannot be transferred. One 18-year-old Hispanic female mentioned that she lost credits when she moved to Texas from New York City. A 17-year-old Black female stated the following:

*The factors that prevented me from completing high school was [sic] me moving back and forth from California back here. When I went to go enroll back into [my hometown high school] they tried to hold me back [a year] for the difference of credits.*

A 28-year-old Hispanic male wrote, 'Because the educational system is different in Mexico.' Finally, a 22-year-old Hispanic male stated:

*The factor prevented [sic] me to complete my high school, because I am from another country. I am from Guatemala and I completed my 6th grade. But here is totally different. So that's the only reason I did not go to school in USA.*

Some participants in the focus group discussions also had experienced difficulty in school due to moving. Steve, age 17, reported the following:

*Yeah, I moved from out of state. It's not always the same. Some of my credits didn't work here. Plus I moved so often that I missed out on a lot. There were*

*so many different teaching methods and all that, I couldn't keep up as I moved.*

Karen, age 23, moved to Texas from New Mexico, and Marianne, age 22, moved from Arkansas. Both reported losing credits when they moved in from out of state. Donna, age 17, added, 'My Dad was a welder. We moved around a lot and that made it really hard for me to stay with it. Home situations with my stepfather made it more difficult.' Like Donna, many of these students indicated that problems at home compounded the difficulties associated with moving from one place to another, and together prevented them from graduating.

### **Discipline Referrals**

Nine of the 158 students indicated that frequent discipline referrals played a role in preventing them from graduation. Many of these same students admitted that part of the reason for this was their own behavior choices. Some of these were detailed in an earlier section. Six of these students were male and three were female. Three of these participants were white, three were Black and three did not indicate specific ethnicity.

One 18-year-old male admitted, 'Staying in trouble and hanging around with the wrong people' prevented him from completing high school. A 21-year-old white male simply said, 'Fighting.' Three other students reported this same response. 'Fighting with other students and not cooperating with all the teachers,' stated one 18-year-old male. 'I got kicked out of school for fighting too many times,' replied a Black female, age 17. One white male, age 18, stated, 'Problems with other students, fighting.' A 19-year-old male simply wrote, 'I was kicked out of [my school district].'

Some students indicated that other types of discipline problems got in their way of graduation. 'Getting in trouble, not getting alot [sic] of teacher attention,' stated one 17-year-old white male. One Black male, age 24, plainly wrote, 'I got in a lot of trouble.' Finally, a 16-year-old Black female detailed the situation that caused her to be removed from high school:

*I got kicked out of school Because [sic] of a stupid common mistake. I was in school minding my own business and I asked to go to the restroom and left my*

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*purse on the desk and when [I] came back, my purse was emptied out on the desk and the previous night before I had dropped a knife in my purse because we have child molesters [sic] in the area. She [the teacher] turned me in and I got kicked out.*

The subject of discipline problems also surfaced during the focus group discussions. Paul, age 16, stated that he always had trouble keeping quiet in class. 'I was always getting in trouble for that kind of stuff,' he says. Angela, age 18, admitted that fighting was a problem for her.

One participant named Donny, age 31, elaborated on the discipline struggles that he overcame. He was interviewed along with the GED program director, Ms. Hunter, who had also been Donny's teacher in junior high school. Ms. Hunter stated, 'Donny taught me everything I know about gangs and criminals in the area. When he was young, he was known on the streets as the OG, which I later learned stands for Original Gangster.' She then asked, 'Donny, what happened when you got to high school?' Donny replied, 'I was in a lot of trouble in just the first six months. Lots of drugs, violence and gang stuff.' Ms. Hunter then related how Donny is now living a very straight life as a family man and coaching little league. She stated:

*He is well respected in this community, has developed this good reputation over the past nine years. But before that, things were pretty rough. He is a legend in our community of having a lot of gang related background, then he went to Huntsville Prison, but has really turned his life around.*

She and Donny further detailed how he came to her GED program after being sent to boot camp for discipline problems in his high school. He was sent to prison soon after receiving his GED. 'When he came back from Huntsville in 1996 he was really discouraged because no one would hire a felon, but the GED was something he was able to hold on to,' said Ms. Hunter. Donny adds: 'Ms. Hunter wrote a reference letter that helped me get hired by a local swimming pool company. I am now a sales office manager for them.'

### **Other Factors**

Respondents reported a variety other factors, though in lesser frequency to those listed above. Eight students indicated that peer pressure played a role in encouraging them to drop out. 'I got involved with the wrong crowd,' admitted an 18-year-old white female. 'Hanging out with the wrong crowd,' stated another white female, age 25. 'I met a guy and he was out of school and I was spending more time with him and not on school,' stated a 27-year-old white female. One 23-year-old Hispanic male simply stated, 'Someone asked me to [drop out].'

Substance abuse was also mentioned by several respondents as playing a major role in preventing them from completing high school. One white male, age 17, stated, 'I got into drugs and was locked up or in rehab for a long time.' 'I was a huge drug addict,' stated an 18-year-old Black female. A 22-year-old Hispanic male stated, 'I guess being around the wrong crowds, messing with drugs, and trying to be better than every one else.' 'I dropped out because, at the time drugs were more important,' wrote a 21-year-old white female.

Jo Ann, age 18, says that she never actually made it to high school, but was kicked out in junior high. She made the following statement:

*I was involved in drugs a lot, in the bad crowd and I couldn't focus at all on school. I got into a lot of trouble and got kicked out. So I just quit after that and I didn't even try to come back. Some of my teachers were very helpful, in fact one of them paid for me to go to rehab when I was 13. But in rehab I got worse. I'm clean now though.*

It should be noted that Jo Ann is now working in her former school district as a teacher's assistant and she also volunteers at the GED program. 'I wanted to give back to what they have given me,' she says.

Substance abuse was also mentioned by some of the focus group participants. Garrett, age 18, admitted that drugs and truancy made it difficult to focus on school. Jo Ann, age 18, stated that drugs and being in rehab caused her to get in trouble at school. Donny, age 31, reported that drugs and gang

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activity caused him trouble at school as well as legal trouble.

Some participants reported that a family illness or a death in the family necessitated their leaving high school. 'Family illness, death of my stepmother,' stated a 23-year-old white female. Another, age 19, wrote, 'My dad and nephew was [sic] in the hospital and a teacher said I was missing too much school and I did not need to miss that much school.'

Problems with law enforcement and other legal problems were mentioned by some respondents. An 18-year-old Hispanic male wrote:

*The factor that prevented me from completing high school was court. Court made me withdraw from school and get my GED. I don't know why GED is still good, but a diploma would of [sic] been better.*

A 17-year-old Asian male stated, 'I was court ordered GED.' One 19-year-old male simply wrote, 'An arrest.' Finally, a 17-year-old white male carefully wrote in Gothic script, 'I went to jail for a month and I was already court ordered to school. Then they court ordered me to get my GED.'

Some factors were noted by only a few respondents. A 27 year-old Hispanic female stated, 'Did not pass my math TAAS test with one point and went [sic] and try again and still did not pass.' One Black male wrote, 'I have my education in Africa before coming to U.S.A.' A 21-year-old Hispanic male gave a similar response, 'I got my high school, but it isn't from here and if I want to continue with my education, I have to have a GED.' One female respondent, age 20, noted that home schooling played a role in preventing her from completing high school:

*I was home schooled for a few years, 8th, 9th, and 10th grades. My mom only home schooled us for about a year out of that. When I went back to high school, I just didn't know enough for it to work.*

Home schooling was also mentioned by two of the participants in the focus group discussions. Rod, age 17, and Sam, age 18, both stated that they tried home schooling, but because both of their parents worked, it did not work out for them.

### **Summary of Results**

The problem of students dropping out of school before graduation has been a major concern for many years with these young people, facing, among other things, an increasingly bleak future due to limited economic opportunities. The significant findings of this study are summarized below:

1. More than a quarter of the 158 participants in this study reported that pregnancy and parenting prevented them from graduating high school.
2. More than one-sixth reported that conflicts with school personnel as well as overall school dysfunction played a major part in preventing them from graduating high school. A disproportionately large percentage of these respondents were white.
3. Fifteen indicated that working too many hours prevented them from graduation. Eight of these were Hispanic males.
4. Many participants reported that losing high school credits due to moving from state to state was a significant factor preventing them from graduation.

### **Implications**

The nature of qualitative research is such that results may not necessarily apply to broader areas. However, given the fact that the 27 participants in this research who have earned the GED all reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with this alternative diploma, it may be assumed that some spillover effect can be expected in the general population of GED graduates. Furthermore, the programs that helped these students earn the GED were viewed with great fondness by these participants, much more so than their high school experiences. The loss of these programs may have a profound effect on school districts and their ability to help at-risk students. The disturbing discovery that some schools may be hiding their at-risk students in the Continued High School category indicates that future opportunities for these students may be even more limited.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The issue of students dropping out of school will continue to be an important area of research for the foreseeable future. Some specific areas related to findings in this study include the following:

1. Pregnancy and parenting were listed as the number one reason that prevented students in this study from completing high school. Further research needs to be applied to identify pregnancy prevention methods that work. A possible study might compare pregnancy rates of school districts utilizing different strategies to help determine which methods are most effective.
2. The second most listed response indicated that bad attitudes and poor choices prevented students from graduation. Research concerning methods that help students understand the long term consequences of their choices may be of great benefit. Given that a disproportionately large percentage of Black participants gave this response, research directed toward helping Black students with decision-making may be of particularly beneficial use.
3. Research concerning the economic benefits of earning a high school diploma for Hispanic males could help support counselors and administrators in their efforts to prevent these students from dropping out.
4. Are schools actually hiding dropout students by placing them in the Continued High School category? A research study tracking these students to find out how many of them actually graduate would shed light on this grey area.
5. Legally the GED carries the same weight as a high school diploma. But what is the value of the GED in practice? Research could be conducted to examine the value of the GED certificate as perceived by employers and institutions of higher learning.

### **Conclusion**

In the early 1990s schools began to develop High School Equivalency Programs in order to help their dropout students prepare for the GED Examination. While these programs were successful in helping many students, they also became controversial. The current trend is to remove these programs from schools. It remains to be seen whether or not this is a wise move. The GED has been a great benefit to many people who were unable to obtain a high school diploma. It is the hope of the authors of this report that the winds of change will blow again at some future time and GED programs will once again be accepted as an appropriate means to assist at-risk students.

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**APPENDIX**  
**Research Locations**

Research was conducted in conjunction with the following programs:

1. Abilene Adult Education – Abilene, Texas
2. Adult Education Program – Carthage, Texas
3. Amarillo College – Amarillo, Texas
4. Birdville I.S.D. – Haltom City, Texas
5. Boerne Academy – Boerne, Texas
6. Brazosport College – Lake Jackson, Texas
7. Caldwell Adult Education – Caldwell, Texas
8. Channelview I.S.D. – Channelview, Texas
9. Ft. Bend I.S.D. – Missouri City, Texas
10. Ft. Worth I.S.D. GED Program – Ft. Worth, Texas
11. Harlingen Consolidated I.S.D. – Harlingen, Texas
12. Hays Consolidated I.S.D. – Buda, Texas
13. Kilgore Junior College – Tyler, Texas
14. Laredo Community College – Laredo, Texas
15. Leander I.S.D. – Leander, Texas
16. Lone Star Adult Education – Lone Star, Texas
17. McClennon Community College – Waco, Texas
18. Mt. Pleasant Adult Education – Mt. Pleasant, Texas
19. Navasota I.S.D. – Navasota, Texas
20. Odessa College Adult Basic Education – Odessa, Texas
21. Paris Junior College – Sulphur Springs, Texas
22. Pine Tree I.S.D. – Longview, Texas
23. Reach Across Houston Adult Education – Houston, Texas
24. South Dallas Adult Education – Dallas, Texas
25. Weatherford I.S.D. – Weatherford, Texas
26. Workforce Training Adult Education – Brownwood, Texas

