Parent Brief

Promoting effective parent involvement in secondary education and transition.

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The Role of Parents in Dropout Prevention: *Strategies that Promote Graduation and School Achievement*

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Students who drop out of school face a difficult future. They are more likely to be unemployed, incarcerated, and/or impoverished. For students with disabilities, the risks are intensified. Their dropout rate is about 40 percent—more than twice that of their peers without disabilities. However, families can play an important role in making sure their student with or without disabilities graduates. Staying involved in your teen's life during middle school and high school is critical. This Brief provides information and practical tips to help you do this.

Students who do not earn a high school diploma are more likely to:

- face unemployment;
- live in poverty;
- be incarcerated;
- earn half as much annual income as a high school graduate;
- have children at an early age;
- use illicit drugs, tobacco, or both; and
- be overweight.

Source: Hair, Ling, & Cochran, 2003

Risk Factors for Dropping Out

Identifying students who are most likely to drop out is not a precise process. Some students with no risk factors leave school, and some with many risk factors complete school.

Although risk factors are not precise predictors, parents should be aware of them. More importantly, they should become involved or seek assistance if they repeatedly see risky behaviors such as skipping school, failing classes, having significant discipline problems, or being involved in illegal activities.

Students with disabilities are at greater risk of dropping out if:

- they have been held back a grade,
- they are older than the other students in their grade,
- they have limited English proficiency, and
- they have family or economic problems

(Dynarski & Gleason, 1999; Wells, 1990; Williams Bost, 2004).

Among students with disabilities, students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders (EBD) and students with learning disabilities (LD) are at greatest risk of dropping out (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004; Wagner, 1995; Wagner & Cameto, 2004; Wagner et al., 1991).

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Why Do Youth Drop Out?

Why Do Youth Drop Out?

When youth drop out of school, it isn't always an intentional decision. Many say they simply stopped going to school one day and no one objected. Some youth may drop out because they have problems with teachers, dislike school, or receive low grades. Other youth, however, leave school because of problems not directly related to academics, such as financial needs, family caretaking responsibilities, employment, or pregnancy. Others drop out because they think that principals or teachers wanted them to (Dynarski & Gleason, 1999; National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2004; Williams Bost, 2004).

Consequences

Most students who drop out have not fully considered the consequences and typically are not prepared for what happens to them afterward. Although they are not finished maturing physically and emotionally, these adolescents often face the challenging transition to independent living and adulthood without the benefit of adult guidance, support systems, or services. As a result, they are more likely to face poor job prospects, experience lifelong dependence on social service systems, use illicit drugs, become involved in the juvenile justice system, and become teen parents (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003; American Youth Policy Forum, 1998; Hair, Ling, & Cochran, 2003; Harlow, 2003).

Family Involvement and School Completion

Family involvement is one of the most important contributors to school completion and success. The most accurate predictor of a student's school achievement is the extent to which his/her family encourages learning. Success is more likely if the family communicates high, yet reasonable, expectations for the student's education and future career and becomes involved in his/her education. Middle school and high school students whose parents remain involved tend to:

- make better transitions,
- maintain the quality of their work,
- develop realistic plans for their future,
- have higher graduation rates, and
- advance to postsecondary education

(Clark, 1993; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mapp, 2004; Schargel & Smink, 2001; Williams Bost, 2004).

When families are involved, students are more likely to:

- earn high grade-point averages and scores on standardized tests or rating scales,
- enroll in more challenging academic programs,
- pass more classes and earn more credits,
- attend school regularly,
- display positive attitudes about school,
- graduate from high school and enroll in postsecondary programs, and
- refrain from destructive activities such as alcohol and drug use and violence.

Source: National Parent Teacher Association, 2001

Promising Approaches

Strategies Parents of At-Risk Youth Should Know About

The following strategies promote achievement and help students stay in school.

Supporting Student Engagement

Students who actively participate in and identify with their school are more motivated to stay in school and more likely to graduate than those who are not involved with their school. Poor attendance, academic failure, emotional withdrawal, or other inappropriate conduct all can indicate that a student has disengaged from school (Edgar & Johnson, 1995). After-school and extracurricular activities can be an effective way of engaging students who find academics frustrating.

Learning styles, learning disabilities, and life experiences may all contribute to low academic achievement or problem behavior (Kerka, 2003). Many students with disabilities have trouble passing standard assessment tests. One means of promoting student engagement is to identify and accommodate disabilities so a student's academic knowledge can be accurately assessed (Hayes, 1999; Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2002).

Tailoring instruction to meet the needs of individual students also supports student engagement. Many at-risk youth are not well served by mainstream education (Raywid, 2001). The traditional approach to education is well-suited to students with strong language and math abilities. However, teachers can help students find other creative ways to learn, solve problems, demonstrate their talents, and achieve success. Technology and classroom materials designed for use by students of varying abilities can support individualized instruction that engages all students in learning (Smink, 2004). Parents can advocate for their school districts to adopt such "universal design" practices.

Parents or caring adults can also advocate for individualized discipline procedures and modification of school policies, such as alternatives to out-of-school suspension. Another approach is to include students in problem-solving. Engaging students in the development and enforcement of school rules can help youth learn to evaluate possible consequences and make good decisions (Edgar & Johnson, 1995).

Exploring Career Education/Workforce Readiness

Integrated academic and vocational education, career development, and work-based learning can also promote success for at-risk students (James & Jurich, 1999; Wonacott, 2002). Students with EBD are often more successful in schools that provide training for competitive employment and maintain high expectations (Hair et al., 2003; Kerka, 2003). Participation in service learning can also improve grades, school attendance, social responsibility, and community-oriented attitudes (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Hamilton & Fenzel, 1998; Schumer, 1994).

Caring Adults Make a Difference

Youth Need Adults Who Care

Students who drop out often feel that teachers, administrators, and others are not interested in them (Grobe, Niles, & Weisstein, 2001). Caring, knowledgeable adults can establish a climate of trust and support that lets youth know someone is paying attention. These adults can be "teachers, counselors, mentors, case workers, community members . . . who understand and deeply care about youth and provide significant time and attention" (James & Jurich, 1999, p. 340). School programs offering services over a long period foster such trusting relationships between students and adults (Kerka, 2003).

It may be especially important for youth who do not have family support to develop such relationships. All students can benefit from them, however. This includes youth who may find it difficult to confide in their parents as well as children of actively engaged parents (Roehlkepartain, Mannes, Scales, Lewis, & Bolstrom, 2004).

In their middle and high school years, teens want and need more privacy and independence. As they accept increased responsibility for and have opportunities to learn from their own decisions, they may need less parent involvement. Even so, they still need their parents.

Conclusion

Graduating from high school is a cornerstone of future success. Although students with disabilities may face obstacles to completing their education, parents can play a key role in helping their children achieve this goal. By staying involved, focusing on individual strengths, finding the right school setting, and holding high expectations, parents can help their children prepare for successful adulthood.

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Tips for Parents:
Helping Students Succeed in School

Reading, writing, and math skills are the foundation for learning in all subjects. One of the most important things parents can do is help their children build these skills in their elementary school years.

For Middle School Students

The transition from elementary school to middle school is traumatic for many students and their families (Wells, 1989). By only eighth grade, 20% of all students with disabilities and 40% of Hispanic students with disabilities have dropped out (Williams Bost, 2004). Below are some tips for parents of middle school students with disabilities:

- Let your child know that you value education as important to his/her future.
- Set aside time every day for homework, even if your child doesn't have any.
- Make sure that your child completes his/her homework. Find out if your school district has a "homework hotline" students can call for help when studying at home.
- Limit the amount of time your child watches television and plays video games to no more than one or two hours each day.
- Talk to your child about school problems and achievements every day.
- Help your child use problem-solving skills in difficult situations at home and at school. Praise good behavior.
- Know your child's friends and their families.
- Let teachers know that you want to be contacted immediately if your child has problems with homework or behavior.
- If your child is struggling, seek help. Parents and other adults can reduce the likelihood of dropout if they take steps to help youth cope with their problems.

For High School Students

Only 57% of youth with disabilities graduated from high school in the 2001-02 school year, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2002). To help ensure successful completion of high school, try the following tips, which are based on current dropout prevention research.

- Maintain contact with your child's teachers throughout high school.
- Monitor school attendance. If your child is skipping school, it may be a warning sign that he/she is having trouble.
- Encourage your child to seek out extracurricular activities or employment where they can develop positive relationships and have success outside of a classroom setting. Many schools provide after-school and summer programs that cultivate new interests. Encourage your child to participate in at least one extra-curricular activity at school or with other students. These activities can help your child feel part of the group, important to the school, and more motivated.
- Help your child explore career options that interest them and the education needed to be successful in those careers.
- Let your child know that individuals who earn a high school diploma are likely to earn twice as much each year compared to those who don't have a high school diploma or equivalency.
- Help your child establish graduation as a priority. Keep track of the credits he/she needs in order to graduate.
- Identify postsecondary goals. The most important questions to ask are: What interests your child? What is your child good at? Postsecondary technical training or two-year community college programs are appropriate paths to meeting employment goals. If attending a four-year college is the way to reach his/her vocational goal, put steps in place to make this happen. *(Continued on Page 6)*

Tips for Parents of High School Students (cont.)

When There's a Problem

If your child is not doing well or is beginning to have behavioral problems in school:

- Discuss your concerns with your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team. Request a *functional behavior assessment*—a process for determining why problem behaviors occur—and identify effective strategies to address them. Decide, as a group, what can be done to help your child, and what new skills or behaviors your child can learn.
- In some cases, a tutor can help a student who has fallen behind or who has missed important earlier concepts.
- Sometimes, a child's personality may clash with that of the teacher or another student. Meet directly with the teacher to determine if there is a problem or if there has been a misunderstanding. In some cases, it may benefit everyone if you request that your child be transferred to a different classroom.
- Monitor your child's attendance and school performance. Periodically check in with your child's teachers to find out how things are going.
- Concentrate on your child's goals. Instead of focusing on why he/she is unsuccessful in school, have your child identify his/her future goals; develop a list of school, home, and personal barriers to reaching those goals; and devise strategies to address the barriers.
- If you think your child may have a problem with drugs or alcohol, contact the school guidance counselor or a substance abuse counselor, help line, or organization for information and advice.
- Consider alternative school settings. If you, your child, and the IEP team conclude that the IEP goals cannot be reached in the current school environment, ask for help identifying appropriate alternative settings. Options include magnet schools, alternative schools, charter schools, work-based learning programs, career academies, and general educational development (GED) programs. Include your child in all discussions with school personnel and the IEP team.

Additional Resources

- National Dropout Prevention Center
  www.dropoutprevention.org
- Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR)
  www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar
- National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET)
  www.ncset.org
- PACER Center
  www.pacer.org

Alternative School Settings

For some students, an alternative school program is the right choice. Students who are unmotivated or have been labeled troublemakers or failures in traditional schools may thrive in smaller, more individualized settings. Research indicates that about 12% of all students attending alternative schools in the United States are students with disabilities (Lehr, 2004). Here are some options for youth and their families to consider.

Alternative School Settings: Options to Consider

Magnet schools have a unique theme or focus. Theme-based programs can help keep students interested in learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2004), preventing the disengagement that can lead to dropout.

Alternative schools may be an appropriate option for at-risk students who want to succeed. About 12% of students in alternative schools for at-risk students are special education students with IEPs—typically students with LD or EBD (Lehr, 2004; Lehr & Lange, 2003). Alternative schools that promote school completion and graduation typically feature smaller and more personal settings, individualized supports, counseling, positive relationships with adults, meaningful educational and transition goals, and an emphasis on vocational and living skills (Lehr, 2004). The IEP should continue to be followed and services should continue after placement in an alternative school. Parents should make sure that their child's IEP is updated if necessary.

Charter schools are set up independently by teachers, parents, or other concerned people who have ideas for improving learning. Their boards of directors are elected by parents and school staff. Charter schools stress parent involvement. As for serving students with disabilities, charter schools have mixed results. Some parents have questions and concerns; others report having more positive experiences than they had in their previous, noncharter schools (Ahearn, 2001; Fiore, Harwell, Blackorby, & Finnegan, 2000; Lehr, 2004).

Career Academies connect school to work through vocational education, career development, and work-based learning. They provide many students with both the motivation to graduate from high school and a solid foundation from which to pursue their college and career goals. Career Academies have contributed to successful results for many at-risk youth with disabilities (Conchas & Clark, 2002; James & Jurich, 1999; Kemple, 2001; Kerka, 2003).

GED programs may be an appropriate educational environment for older students whose needs cannot be met in the regular school setting. Some students may just need an alternative way to pursue their education. Recent studies suggest that some students with EBD can be more successful in adult education settings that have smaller classes, individualized instruction, an informal classroom climate, and a shorter school day (Imel, 2003; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002). However, a diploma or GED should only be the first step to finishing one's education. The future workforce will require postsecondary education for even entry-level jobs. All youth who go on to college, including those who have a GED, have better outcomes (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004).

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Creating Opportunities for Youth With Disabilities to Achieve Successful Futures

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National Center on Secondary Education and Transition
Creating Opportunities for Youth With Disabilities to Achieve Successful Futures

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