

# Promoting School Completion

By recognizing the factors that cause students to become disengaged from school, principals can create strategies that decrease the likelihood that students will drop out.

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**G**raduating from high school is more important today than ever before in our nation's history. Our increasingly high technological society requires that workers have at least a high school diploma and, more often than not, additional years of education or training to earn a living wage. Often, individuals who do not complete high school experience a lifetime of limited income and opportunities. Yet thousands of American youth drop out of school. Nationally, only 86% of students complete high school, a statistic largely unchanged since 1990 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

Society and schools also suffer consequences when students drop out. The costs to society in terms of lost tax revenue and the expense of government assistance programs for employment, housing, medical care, and incarceration are staggering. Further, the trend in education in recent years has been one of

increased accountability with a focus on student outcomes. Although student achievement is the most common accountability indicator, school-level dropout rates and graduation rates are also being used as measures of school effectiveness.

## The Process of Dropping Out

Successful school completion is dependent on student engagement. There is a great deal of evidence that dropping out of school is a process of disengagement from school and learning that occurs over many years, often beginning early in elementary school (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001). This process can be described in terms of student participation, performance, and identification with school. Research supports the intuitive expectation that participation in school (e.g., attending school and classes, completing schoolwork, and participating in cocurricular

activities) leads to positive school performance. Students who attend school and complete their assigned schoolwork tend to pass their classes. Positive school performance leads to positive identification with school—students feel like they belong in school and share common values with other students and teachers.

In contrast, students who are at risk of dropping out show signs of disengaging from school—they miss classes, do not complete schoolwork, get low grades, and engage in disruptive behavior. In addition, students who are at-risk for dropping out often express disinterest in school and have low expectations of success.

Although the time that students are academically engaged is important, student engagement with school and learning is much broader, encompassing student *behavior* (e.g., attendance, participation); *cognition* (e.g., value of education, relevance to future, self-regulation); and *psychological experiences* (e.g., a feeling of belonging at school and relationships with teachers and peers). Viewed in this context, student engagement becomes a multifaceted construct. When students experience these multiple forms of

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Figure 1

## WHY STUDENTS DROP OUT

Students drop out of school for a variety of reasons. For example, post-hoc research examining the reasons why students drop out of school indicates the existence of push and pull effects in many schools (Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999). Students who drop out most often cite push factors as reasons for leaving school.

**Push effects** include situations or experiences within the school environment that heighten students' feelings of alienation and failure, such as:

- Problems getting along with teachers
- Suspension and expulsion
- Low grades
- Disliking school.

**Pull effects** consist of external factors that weaken and distract from the importance of school completion such as:

- Pregnancy
- Financial responsibilities
- Caretaking responsibilities
- Employment.

## A MODEL FOR SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Check & Connect, a model of sustained intervention used to enhance and maintain students' engagement with school, helps students who are at risk of dropping out succeed in school. A data-driven approach that is grounded in research on resiliency and home-school collaboration, the Check & Connect model has been applied across diverse school settings (e.g., urban and suburban; grades K-12; students with and without disabilities) to increase student engagement and enhance students' social and academic competencies.

**Key features.** Check & Connect is driven by a monitor—a cross between a mentor, an advocate, and a service coordinator—whose primary goal is to keep education a salient issue for disengaged students, their teachers, and their family members. Check & Connect is structured to maximize personal contact and build trusting relationships between students, families, and school staff members. Student levels of engagement (i.e., attendance, grades, and suspensions) are “checked” regularly and used to guide monitors' efforts to increase and maintain students' “connection” with the school. The strategies used by monitors to enhance and maintain student engagement with school include:

- Sharing general information about Check & Connect with the student
- Giving students regular feedback
- Regularly discussing the importance of staying in school
- Problem solving about indicators of risk (e.g., attendance, assignment completion, behavior) on a monthly basis.

In addition, monitors individualize interaction with students and their families to implement specific interventions that meet students' needs. A day in the life of a Check & Connect monitor may include placing wake-up calls to students, meeting with teachers to track students' progress, problem solving with students around issues of concern, or following up on tutoring services for a particular student.

**Effectiveness.** Check & Connect was first implemented in Minneapolis with middle school students who had learning and behavioral disabilities. Findings from this initial project indicated that students who participated in Check & Connect for three years were more likely to be enrolled in school and earn credits toward graduation, as well as to stay in school and complete class assignment (Sinclair Christenson, Evolo, & Hurley, 1998). For more information about Check & Connect, please visit <http://ici.umn.edu/checkandconnect>.

engagement, the likelihood that they will complete school increases.

**School factors.** Numerous studies have shown that student engagement in school decreases significantly for many students as they progress through school (Anderman & Midgley, 1998). By the time these students reach the middle level, a lack of interest in schoolwork becomes increasingly evident. By high school, some students have become so disengaged from educational values and pursuits that they leave school.

There are many reasons why students become less engaged in school as they grow older; consequently, a student's decision to drop out often involves not one primary reason but a multitude of factors that involve the school and home and family environments (Kortering & Braziel, 1999). Recognizing both school-centered factors (e.g., poor relationships with teachers or academic difficulties) and external factors (e.g., taking care of siblings or working) that influence student engagement can help educators and administrators implement practices and policies that will increase the holding power of schools and keep youth in school. (See figure 1).

School factors that fuel students' sense of alienation and failure contribute to disengagement. A lack of connection to teachers or other staff members; an impersonal or intolerant school environment; bullying and harassment; social isolation; and not being involved in cocurricular activities are all factors that can reinforce a student's dislike and distrust of school. Similarly, academic and behavior problems can make students' feel like a failure and at odds with the system, in essence helping to push a student away from school.

**Home factors.** The home environment is also an important influence on school engagement and can be a significant protective factor.

Youth whose families are more involved with their schooling are more likely to achieve in school, engage in school activities, and have higher educational expectations (McNeal, 1999). Research has documented several statistically significant correlates of school completion including the presence of study aids, high educational expectations and aspirations, and parental monitoring and participation (Rumberger, 1995).

Consistency between the expectations of home and school is also an important ingredient to school completion. Students are likely to become confused about how they should behave and about what is expected of them if schools and families have different rules and expectations. This confusion, brought about by discontinuity in the messages students receive from home and school, may put students at risk for school performance problems and dropping out. School administrators and teachers can promote student engagement and success by continually interacting with families about issues related to learning and engagement and developing common messages about the value of education.

### **Promoting Student Engagement at School**

There is no one factor within the school context that promotes or prevents student engagement. School administrators and staff members must be attentive not only to teaching methods and the formal curriculum but also to the larger context of the school culture and disciplinary procedures; grouping practices; relationships between students, teachers, administrators, and parents; the physical structure of the school; and discipline and recognition policies and procedures (Stipek, 1996; Yair, 2000). One of the most important activities is to systematically monitor students for the warning signs of dis-

engagement—such as poor attendance, poor academic performance, behavior problems, little participation in the school environment, isolation from peers, and insufficient credits earned toward graduation—and to follow up with students who are showing these early signs of dropping out.

Because schools have varying needs and resources, there is no one “right” intervention to enhance student engagement. However, a variety of strategies and characteristics associated with increased student success have been identified and can be applied to schools to maximize student engagement.

- **Academic.** Principals foster the academic engagement of students by promoting best practices in instruction. For example, teachers can be encouraged to present tasks that are moderately challenging and at different levels of difficulty so all students are actively involved. Stipek (1996) defines appropriately challenging tasks as those that students can complete, but only with some effort. Because classrooms are usually composed of a diverse group of students who have various skill levels, activities that have the same level of difficulty will only be challenging to a fraction of the students. Thus, to maximize involvement by as many students as possible, there should be varying degrees of difficulty within a task and multiple tasks with different levels of difficulty (Morrone & Schutz, 2000). Teachers and administrators can enhance student engagement and interest by allowing students to select learning activities and assignments, develop their own learning goals, and decide whether to work in groups or independently whenever possible.

- **Behavioral.** Schoolwide discipline policies that are publicized, fair, and applied to all students are associated with lower dropout rates

(Rumberger, 1995). It is also important to use alternatives to out-of-school suspension, a strong predictor of dropping out. Further, schools can enhance student involvement and participation by providing opportunities for recognition that are available to all students. When academic achievement is recognized in a competitive manner, some students will never be acknowledged, which can be devastating to low-achieving students because they come to believe the rewards are out of their reach (Covington, 1992). Conversely, schoolwide practices that focus on effort and improvement provide opportunities for all students to be recognized, are inclusive, and foster student connections to learning. Moreover, principals can promote student engagement by encouraging and facilitating the participation of all students in various cocurricular activities (e.g., jazz band, weightlifting club, yearbook, and track) that build connections to school, foster positive peer relationships, and are related to improved school performance.

- **Cognitive.** Principals can boost cognitive engagement by providing students with opportunities to partake in the decision-making processes of the school and to regulate and direct their own learning. Research emphasizes the importance of encouraging students to take responsibility for regulating their own learning and for being self-determined and autonomous learners (McCombs, 1984). When students feel that they are in control of their decisions, they are more motivated to persist with a task, take responsibility for their own learning, and strive for positive results (McCombs, 1984).

Principals can also enhance cognitive engagement by enhancing students’ sense of purpose for learning. Research has shown that stu-

dents value learning that they consider meaningful and relevant. Instruction is relevant to learners when they can relate what is being learned to their future goals and aspirations. Teachers should underscore the relevance of assignments to students' personal lives and future aspirations rather than emphasizing that students learn material simply because they will be tested on it (Ormond, 1995).

• **Psychological.** Students' perceptions of themselves and their place at school also seem to influence their academic performance and engagement in school. Students who have a high academic self-concept tend to be more motivated to achieve and more engaged in school (Harter, Runbaugh-Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992); students who feel connected to their school are more motivated to achieve and have higher academic expectations for themselves (Berends, 1995). Through genuine relationships with students, teachers can lend support and encouragement to students, communicate their beliefs in students' abilities to succeed in school, and increase engagement in school. Administrators can promote caring relationships between teachers and students by modeling caring relationships from the top down. Teachers who feel that administrators are genuinely interested and supportive of their work are likely to pass on the same interest and support to their students. Another way administrators can promote the development of caring relationships is to organize nonacademic, cocurricular activities between students and teachers.

### Transitions Need Care

Fostering student engagement at school and with learning is especially important during transitions between schools (e.g., middle school to high school). Research has

## MONITORING SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

### Protective factors:

- Consistent attendance
- Family involvement
- Good grades
- Completion of schoolwork
- Involvement in cocurricular activities
- Sense of belonging and school connectedness
- Shared values

### Warning signs of disengagement:

- Poor attendance and skipping classes
- Low grades
- Failure to complete assignments
- Disinterest in academic, social, or cocurricular activities
- Suspension for disruptive behavior
- Low expectations for success

shown that normative school transitions can be a particularly stressful time for youth and may result in educational disengagement and subsequent withdrawal from school (Felner et al., 1993; Rumberger, 1995). Factors contributing to increased vulnerability during transitions include increased expectations for functioning independently, increased complexity of the school environment, and large numbers of new and unfamiliar peers.

Principals play an important role in promoting school policies and practices that provide support, resources, and information to students who are at risk of experiencing difficulties. Techniques that have been used to create more supportive school environments and enhance student engagement have included creating small learning environments to provide more consistency in peers, teachers, and space (e.g., organize classrooms for teams in close proximity) (Felner et al., 1993).

Specific strategies may include assigning students to small cohort groups within a larger grade level. These student cohorts remain together for homeroom as well as core classes (i.e., mathematics,

English) and help to create a sense of community. The role of homeroom teachers can also be restructured to include more of an advisory or guidance component. Homeroom teachers may be given responsibility for tracking attendance, following up with parents about any absences, and increasing communication between home and school. New students can be assigned to older peers who act as mentors and help to allay fears or answer questions about school procedures and the daily routine.

In addition, implementing welcoming activities (e.g., picnic, orientation, team building activities, parent meetings) at the beginning of the school year characterizes schools as supportive environments. Some schools even have programs in place where staff members make brief home visits before school starts to help establish connections with students and their families.

The serious consequences associated with dropping out, the increased importance of high school and postsecondary education, and the need to hold schools accountable for student success point to the fact that successful school completion is more important than ever. However, if we engage students on all levels with school and learning, monitor student performance, follow-up with students and families when warning signs of disengagement emerge, and focus on successful school completion for all students, it is possible to positively influence students toward the successful completion of school. PL

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