

# **Lessons from Successful Alternative Education: A Guide for Secondary School Reform**

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## ***Abstract***

*When examining dropout prevention, districts often lack introspection. They tend to blame outside forces for student dropouts. This study was designed to identify factors that allow dropout recovery programs to be successful with students who had failed in the public schools. In turn, the study identifies strategies that public schools might implement to prevent student failure.*

## Introduction

Critics often point to the number of students who dropout before graduation as an indication of the failure of public education today. As solutions are sought, it is important to examine why some students who fail in the traditional public school setting can succeed in an alternative setting. This study examined why students are leaving selected public high schools and enrolling in, and graduating from, Central Kansas Dropout Recovery Centers (CKDRC). It further attempted to explain:

- (a) reasons why graduates of CKDRCs originally left school,
- (b) reasons why graduates of CKDRCs succeeded at the CKDRC,
- (c) what teachers of selected high schools viewed as the reasons students dropped out of school, and
- (d) what teachers of selected high schools and learning centers viewed as the reasons students succeeded at the CKDRC.

If it can be determined why these students were successful in the alternative setting, changes for traditional public schools can be suggested.

## Review of Literature

Although available research has not completely addressed the issues examined in this study, these studies were used to inform the design and contribute to the conclusions.

### Potential causes for dropping out

Prior studies have identified a wide variety of reasons for students making the decision to drop out (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Weller et al., 1999). Pregnancy is a strong predictor of females dropping out of school (Barro & Kolstad, 1987; Peng & Takai, 1983; Rumberger, 1987). Although no cause and effect relationship was discovered, Mensch and Kandel (1988) found that dropouts, both males and females, were more involved in drug use, alcohol, and smoking than students who graduated from high school. Green et al. (1995) and (1987) and Lee & Staff (2007) identified working in excess of 20 hours per week as a powerful predictor of dropping out of high school. Other factors including family make-up, culture, mobility, level of parent education, level of parental involvement in school, and socio-economic-status (SES) affect

whether students ultimately stay in school and complete their education (Rumberger, 1983, 1987; Rumberger and Larson, 1998; Stedman, 1988; Zimiles & Lee; 1991).

Wehlage and Rutter (1986) argued that the real causes for dropping out are contained within the school system itself. These researchers reported that students drop out because of the structural and contextual flaws in the educational system. Flaws cited in the study include ineffective administrators, ineffective teachers, and poor counseling services. Fine (1986) maintained that students with positive adult relationships in the educational setting are not likely to drop out.

Rumberger (1987) reported that students who drop out of school believed that teachers and administrators were responsible for their school failure. The students in these studies viewed others and the actions of others as determiners in their destiny and failed to connect their problems in life with their own actions and behaviors.

Many studies (Bachman et al., 1971; Pallas, 1987; Pallas et al., 1988; Rumberger, 1983, 1987, 1995, 2001) documented poor academic achievement as the strongest predictor of dropping out of school. One of the most consistent findings in the research literature on high school dropouts is that students who have been retained in a grade are more likely to drop out than students who have not been held back (Bachman et al., 1971; Frase, 1989; Goldschmidt and Wang, 1999; Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001; Lenning, et al., 1980; Rumberger, 1995). Wehlage and Rutter (1986) stressed lack of student buy-in to the curriculum and poor student morale as causes for dropping out.

### **Successful preventive measures**

Fine (1986) reported an important factor in at-risk student success in school was the development of caring relationships with other students, teachers, and administrators. Young (1990) maintained that a shared sense of purpose with common goals and a defined educational philosophy shared by the students and the staff were important in an alternative learning program. The importance of an environment in which students feel safe and know that the teachers respect and care for them was documented by Rumberger, (2001), Wehlage (1987) and Wehlage and Rutter (1986).

The work done by Payne (2003) shows that built-in support systems can be effective as preventative measures. Even though she asserts that many support systems can be effective, she recommends reorganizing the school day and schedule to develop a looping system or a school-within-a-school so

students can build relationships with teachers that are longer in length and more meaningful. She also advocates organizing student population subgroups of like characteristics and focusing instruction that will address their particular needs. Other preventative measures include teaching classroom survival skills, goal setting and survival strategies.

### **Keys to successful alternative education**

Turk and Owens (1997) maintained that because of the failure students had experienced in school, it was important for the CKDRC programs to operate separately from the traditional high school program. Tuck (1989) reported that 75% of the students who return to a traditional high school program after dropping out of school, drop out again because it is difficult for dropouts to be successful in an atmosphere in which they had experienced long-term and profound failure.

Young (1990) maintained that a positive characteristic for an alternative learning setting was "a non-competitive environment where student progress is measured in terms of self-improvement rather than grades and recognition" (p. 2). Lawler (1991) concurred with this declaration by advocating reduced learner anxiety in an alternative learning environment that promotes individual learning success.

Kerr and Legsters (2004) and Smith et al. (1974) identified small enrollment as a necessary component of successful alternative programming. Wehlage (1987) supported the concept of a small school setting, small class size, and individual student instruction for at-risk students. Young (1990) reported that a smaller school provided a more personalized relationship between students and staff, and was essential for effective alternative programming. Knowles (1968) advocated that the teacher's role in an adult learning setting as being that of a learning coach that facilitates learning.

Caffarella (1993) maintained "self-directedness is viewed as the essence of what adult learning is all about" (p. 26). Lawler (1991) identified active participation by the learner in the instructional process, relevant curricular content, and making the learning meaningful to the students' lives as important factors in effective adult learner programs. The literature promoted student-centered instruction as exciting and important in developing a collaborative relationship between the student and teacher. Dyrli (1996) stated, "The teacher as a member of the team is no longer the focus of the classroom. She or he becomes a consultant." (p. 472).

Over a quarter of a century ago, Smith et al. (1974) identified flexibility in schedule and learning time as important to at-risk student success in an alternative setting. The congressionally established National Education Commission on Time and Learning (U. S. Dept. of Education, 1994) maintained that school needed to provide alternative methods of addressing the issue of time. They called for time to become the variable in learning rather than the constant.

Papert (1993) stated, "Computers will not only improve learning, they can support different ways of thinking and learning" (p. 178). Reed (1996) and Trotter (1996) maintained that electronic communication use improves student motivation. Day (2002), Papert (1993), Baker et al. (1996), and Levy (1997) supported the position that instructional technology allows the role of the teacher to change from the dispenser of information to a facilitator of learning who motivates, assists, and guides students in a more learner efficient manner. Several studies (Ayersman, 1996; Mehlinger, 1996; Raizen et. al, 1995; VanDusen & Worthen (1995) indicated that technology could be particularly effective with at-risk students and those of low SES.

Scant literature appeared in the review about the effect of a student's self-esteem on an individual's success in an alternative learning setting such as the CKDRCs. In fact, Bachman et al. (1971) and Wehlage and Rutter (1986) maintained that low self-esteem was not a strong indicator for predicting which students would drop out of high school.

### **Method**

The study used two qualitative research methods of interview and focus group. The population consisted of the 6 Central Kansas counties of Barton, Harvey, Marion, McPherson, Reno, and Rice that had dropout recovery centers.

High school teacher focus group participants had taught in the selected building for a minimum of 3 years. At least one teacher from the language arts, fine arts, math, science, social science, and vocational departments was included in each building focus group. CKDRC teacher focus groups included all staff who had taught at least 1 year in the CKDRC setting.

Former high school dropouts who graduated from a selected CKDRC provided the purposively selected student sample in the study. Twenty-four graduates were identified and personally interviewed.

## **Results**

Examination of the data provided researchers with an insight into why students drop out of school along with reasons why these same students were successful in an alternative school setting.

### **Reasons for dropping out**

The results from both the high school dropouts and the high school faculty focus groups provided several significant areas of agreement. Both groups listed the individual reasons for dropping out as assuming adult roles, such as pregnancy and employment, along with substance abuse and peer pressure. The family reasons stated by both groups were parental divorce, economic stress, and lack of the student's family holding education in high esteem. Other significant potential causes were suggested by focus groups of successful CKDRC students, CKDRC staff, and high school teachers. These groups mentioned students lagging academically, being bored at school, and the irrelevance of the curriculum as school related reasons for students to drop out.

The dropouts listed the lack of care by high school staff, their own feeling of being uncomfortable in the high school setting, and the fact that teachers in the high school didn't help them as reasons for dropping out of school. The high school teachers did not see themselves as a contributing factor to students dropping out.

The researchers concluded that:

- Students drop out of school for a myriad of reasons.
- CKDRC graduates and high school staff have disparate ideas about the reasons students drop out of high school.

### **Reasons for student success in a CKDRC**

The CKDRC students and staff reported that a caring atmosphere existed at the CKDRCs. Both groups registered mutual respect, teamwork, help, and responsibility for student learning as positive characteristics of the CKDRC atmosphere. The high school faculties had not visited the centers enough to provide detailed observations about the CKDRC atmosphere. The high school staff, however, did report that it was difficult for students to return to the high school once they had dropped out because of bad memories and age disparity. High school teachers identified CKDRC students' control over the CKDRC atmosphere as a positive force for success in the CKDRC setting. All groups identified the lack of competition as an aspect of the CKDRC atmosphere. The CKDRC students and staff maintained that the lack of competition was positive.

The high school teachers disagreed and believed that the lack of competition at the CKDRCs would leave the CKDRC students at a disadvantage when they entered the work force.

The CKDRC teachers and teaching assistants agreed that the individual student support at the CKDRCs was a positive condition in CKDRC student success. The small class size and the more time teachers have for each student at the CKDRCs were mentioned as student success factors.

The fact that the CKDRCs provided a new start for the dropouts was also mentioned in a positive light. The high school staff, however, did not feel they could duplicate these factors in the high school setting because of their large enrollments. The high school staff reported the fact that CKDRC students had fewer rules to adhere to was helpful in their success in the CKDRC setting.

Students, staff, and high school teachers recognized the instructional process employed at the CKDRC as important in a student's journey toward earning a high school diploma. CKDRC students and teachers identified the independent learning provided in the CKDRC as a positive factor for increasing student learning. The high school teachers questioned whether or not the independent nature of the CKDRC instruction prepared students for employment. The ability of students to set their own learning pace was identified as a positive condition by CKDRC graduates, teachers, and high school staff. The flexible schedule in use at the CKDRC providing expanded hours for student attendance was reported as good for students in each research group. The aspect of schedule flexibility that allowed students to study one subject for an extended period of time also was viewed as advantageous. The CKDRCs provide time as a variable.

The technology provided in the setting was identified as important in the delivery of independent instruction because it allowed for flexible schedules and the accommodation of different learning rates. The immediate feedback provided to students by the technology also was listed as a positive force in student success.

The high school teachers questioned whether or not students received enough student and teacher interaction when the technology was used for a large portion of the instructional process. The personal reasons stipulated as important for student success by the respondents were goals, maturity, and self-esteem. All three respondent groups agreed that successful students had made getting a high school diploma a chief personal goal. The CKDRC students, staff, and high school teachers identified the following motivators as important in helping students establish education as a high priority goal (a) being married,

(b) becoming an appropriate role model for children, (c) advancing in a career, and (d) rectifying the personal tragedy of dropping out of school.

Each of the groups also identified increased student maturity as an important reason for student advancement toward and attainment of a high school diploma. Participants reported student maturation coincided with their realization that a diploma was a personal and economic necessity.

The researchers concluded that:

- The caring atmosphere at the CKDRC exemplified by mutual respect among CKDRC students and CKDRC teachers is an important aspect of the CKDRC organizational culture.
- The fresh start at the CKDRC, away from the traditional high school location, is an important condition for CKDRC student success.
- Disparity in the value of competition in the learning process exists among CKDRC students, CKDRC staff, and high school teachers.
- The CKDRCs incorporate the principles of adult learning throughout the structure and fabric of their high school diploma program.
- Technology is an important tool for delivering independent learning that allows student control of learning, and maintains time and schedule flexibility.
- Self-motivation is a universal trait of CKDRC graduates.

### **Implications**

School districts wishing to reduce their high school dropout rates may wish to study several of the issues indicated as causal in a student's ultimate decision to leave school prior to graduation. Schools may want to explore programs that will delay the onset of high school students taking on adult roles. The reduction of student substance abuse may prove to be helpful in keeping students in school. School districts should support other public agencies in these endeavors through interagency collaboration. Finally, the understanding of peer pressure may be an issue worth addressing.

Teachers and students agreed on the reasons for dropping out with one notable exception. The exception might be the most significant finding of the study. Students identified the high school structure, staff, and atmosphere as reasons for dropping out while the high school staff made no such observation. The literature supported the dropouts on this issue. High school staffs need to examine their role in inadvertently pushing students out of school.

Schools should "look in the mirror" through an in depth study of the dropout problem in their domain. Such a study would focus, first, on precisely

what the schools could do to insure that students engage in and learn a meaningful curriculum that is relevant to students' lives. Second, high school staff should look for ways to provide a student centered school through a caring staff that supports each and every student's learning. Third, the schools should fashion methods to increase flexibility in schedule and reduce rules. Fourth, the school should develop procedures that do not allow students to fall behind by making learning time a variable within the school structure. The schools should identify and implement practices to increase teamwork, decrease competition, and increase the overall quality of the institution by reducing the "sort and classify" functions identified in each school.

The CKDRC students and staff reported that a caring atmosphere existed at the CKDRCs. Both groups registered mutual respect, teamwork, help, and responsibility for student learning as positive characteristics of the CKDRC atmosphere. High school administrators and teachers would be well served to study their individual high school atmosphere and determine how they can make it more student-centered. An effective high school for students that are at-risk of dropping out should attempt to develop a school culture that enables students to become educationally engaged in relevant, meaningful learning in a caring setting. High schools need to examine the issue of control and seek to establish learning settings that are founded on mutual respect, known learning standards, and teamwork rather than hierarchy, competition, and control.

Time flexibility deserves study by individual school districts looking for methods to use in reducing dropouts and reclaiming students who have left the educational setting. The flexible schedule allows students to (a) work school into their schedules, (b) establish their own time for learning, (c) learn at a pace comfortable to them, and (d) study one subject for an extended period of time.

High schools may wish to study how technology is used to aid in the delivery of (a) independent instruction, (b) immediate learner feedback, (c) flexible schedules, and (d) the accommodation of different learning rates.

In summary, schools wishing to prevent students from dropping out prior to graduation must take a more introspective look at what they do and learn from the experience provided by the success of Central Kansas Dropout Recovery Centers. Continuing to implement failed programs seldom causes improved results.

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