School Education: A Gateway to Success

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Abstract: *Historically, students' graduation rate, particularly at the high school level, has been an area of significant concern among education professionals. The key to understanding the graduation dilemma is to appreciate the role of high school education as being the gateway to higher education, advanced training, and greater earnings potential. During our current tumultuous state, not only is the United States recovering from the worst recession since the Great Depression, it is in the midst of a vast transformation from one of an industrial economy to that of a service economy coupled with all the distress and turbulence that accompanies such fundamental changes. In this time of chaotic disarray, a student simply having a high school education is no longer a matter of a vocational choice; rather, having a high school education has become a critical precursor to an individual having the propensity to participate in today's job market and attain gainful middle-class employment. It is important to discern that according to research, the numbers of students completing their high school education are significantly lower amongst students with special needs. In this article, the authors will discuss some of the intervention techniques as well as the adverse consequences of the failure to intercede.*

1. Introduction

In light of the fact that our society is the midst of an eminent transformation from a manufacturing economy to that of an information society in which education plays a pivotal role in an individual's ability to prosper in the job market and a high school diploma is notably the gateway to higher education, it is unacceptable for the high school graduation rates to continue to remain stagnant at its previous levels. Furthermore, in these difficult times in which our economy is recovering from its worst recession since the Great Depression, and our economy has transformed from a national to a global economy, our ability as Americans to compete in this new global job market has become conditional to our educational superiority over our global competitors. Not too long ago, the United States was more industrial in nature; and, in an industrial society, securing employment was not contingent upon attaining a formal education. In fact, wages for skilled labor was enough to sustain a family with only one parent working. However, today, the United States is transforming into an information society; and, in an information society, a high school education is simply the first step leading to a college education as well as prosperous vocational paths. As a result, allowing our youth to drop out of school is not a viable alternative.

As research shows, the high school completion rate of students with disabilities is significantly lower than that of students without disabilities. The findings of Blackorby's and Wagner's 1996 study showed that the percentage of students with disabilities who fail to complete their high school education is approximately twice as high as that of general education students who fail to graduate. The discrepancy in the graduation rate between students without special needs versus students with special needs was so alarming that merited the enactment of new laws in order to bridge the gap.

2. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997

IDEA was originally enacted in 1975 to ensure that children with disabilities have the opportunity to receive a "free appropriate public education" (FAPE), regardless of their abilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the primary federal statute that allows federal assistance for the education of more than 6 million children with disabilities nationally. The statute has two main components: (1) due process provisions detailing parental rights; and (2) a permanent grant program that provide federal funding to the states. IDEA has been amended several times over the years. On June 4th, 1997, President Clinton signed an IDEA amendment into the law in order to improve the education opportunities of youth with disabilities by: (a) Identifying children with special needs prior to their entrance to school; (b) developing individualized education programs (IEPs); (c) educating children with disabilities with their nondisabled peers; (d) setting higher expectations for students who are disabled; (e) strengthening the role of parents in their children's education and encouraging collaboration between parents and school; and (f) reducing unnecessary encumbrances which includes excessive paperwork.

However, despite the supports contained in IDEA, the graduation rate of students with special needs continue to remain at an unacceptable level.   Some argue that effect of IDEA was canceled out by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson (2002) argue that the dropout rate among students with disability has been amplified by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001.

3. No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is a United States federal statute enacted on April 11, 1965 as a component of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" and has been hailed the most significant federal legislation affecting United States' educational system, to date. The bill's aim was to close achievement gaps between all students by providing each child with fair and equal opportunities to receive quality elementary and secondary educations. As mandated in the law, the funds are authorized for professional development, instructional materials, supporting educational programs, and parental involvement promotion. The act has been reauthorized every five years since its original enactment. In 2001, ESEA was reauthorized under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, by President George W. Bush.

Some believe that NCLB has set the bar too high for schools to meet the ever increasing demands on raising their school's state assessment scores for academic performance to a proficient level for all students including students with disabilities. Schools are constantly scrutinized and held accountable based on academic performance as measured by these high stake tests. According to NCLB, schools are expected to increase their performance for all students on an annual basis. The goal is to make sure that eventually 100 percent of their students score at least at the proficient level as measured by these annual tests. Every year, the percentages of students at the proficiency level should continue to increase until 100 percent of the students are able to attain results showing they have reached the proficiency level. As a direct result of this pressure to raise the percentage of every student to reach the proficiency level, schools have less incentive to work hard to keep low scoring students in their programs. Given the fact that students with disabilities, on average, perform lower on these standardized tests than students without disabilities, and given the fact that schools are not given incentives for students who perform poorly on standardized tests coupled with the fact that schools are mandated to increase their average score on standardized proficiency tests, it raises the question as to whether schools are actually encouraging special needs and low performing students to leave the conventional school setting for alternative horizons, or worse yet, to drop out all together (Thurlow, et.al, 2002).

4. Negative Costs Associated with Dropping Out

There are many costs associated with students dropping out of high school and not completing their high school education. These costs not only affect the lives of students but also place a burden on society. Incarceration is a serious negative cost associated with dropping out of high school (Furger, 2008; Thurlow, et.al, 2002). For instance, according to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's 1995 report (as cited in Thurlow, et.al, 2002), over 80% of those who were incarcerated, dropped out of high school and did not earned their high school diploma. Further, the costs associated with incarceration versus education are at approximately $51,000 per person per year for incarceration as opposed to approximately $11,500 per person per year for educating a student which makes it clear that more needs to be invested to ensure our students earn their high school diplomas (Thurlow, et.al, 2002).

Other important societal cost associated with failure to complete high school education are low paying jobs, unemployment, poor health, and poverty (Furger, 2008). In August of 2007, the Californian Dropout Research Project reported students who dropped out of high school and did not earn their diploma in California earned approximately $290,000.00 less in their lifetime than the average student who earned a high school diploma (Furger, 2008). Hence, it is clear that not earning a high school diploma can have life-long, devastating effects both on the student and society.

5. Causes of Failure to Complete High School Education

Although there are many early warning signs for students likely to drop out or who may fail to complete his/her education, nevertheless, these signs often go unnoticed. Consequently, too many students fall through the cracks and continue to become mere failure statistics.

The early warning signs often appear as early as elementary or middle school. One of the most common warning signs is poor attendance. Other factors students disconnect with school staff, Students not perceiving the curriculum as being relevant, and students not being satisfied with high school life. Other variables include low grades, low self-esteem, feeling of academic failure, alienation, negative attitudes towards school, perception that teachers and peers do not perceive the student well, and behavioral issues (Smith, 2008).

This dropout rate creates serious national concern due to the long-term cost and negative effects associated with students who do not earn their high school diplomas. What are the causes of these dropout rates? What measures can be used to increase student graduation rates? This paper will now focus on the causes and interventions. While there are many factors contributing to our national high school dropout rates, as well as external factors, there are many effective, research based interventions that can be effectively employed to increase the graduation rate.

6. Interventions Strategies

A number of successful models exist to increase retention and graduation rate of students in general. Among these are programs funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), and the Employment and Training Administration (ETA).

In 2002, in a national analysis of retention and graduation school programs funded by the U.S. General Accounting Office, three distinct models for increasing graduation rate were identified. These approaches include: (1) supplemental services for at-risk students (e.g., mentoring, tutoring, counseling, and social support services); (2) different forms of alternative education programs for students who do not do well in regular classroom settings (e.g., school within a school, career academies, other alternative education schools); and (3) school-wide restructuring efforts to allow all students the fundamental steps for successful transition into high school (e.g., adaptations to school schedules program, freshman academy). Although,

these models are helpful to students in general, they are not the only methods used to support students who are at-risk or students with special needs.

During the early 1990s, in order to address the needs of students who were at-risk and those with special needs, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) funded three projects. The following five interventions strategies to increase retention and graduation rates were developed and employed (Thurlow, Christenson, Sinclair, Evelo, & Thornton, 1995):

- **Persistency, Continuity, and Consistency**—These three elements should be employed jointly, to demonstrate to students that: (a) there is a member of school staff who is always going to be there for them and who is not going to allow them to be distracted from school (persistency); (b) there is a member of school staff who knew the student and is available to them throughout the school year, the summer, and into the next school year (continuity); and, (c) there is a steady reminders about the need to stay in school (consistency).
- **Monitoring**—the tracking of risk behaviors (e.g., skipping classes, tardiness, absenteeism, behavioral referrals, suspensions, and poor academic performance) should be constantly monitored.
- **Relationships**—a caring relationship between a member of school staff and the student should be established.
- **Affiliation**—a sense of belonging and attachment to school should be fostered by way of encouraging participation in school-related activities.
- **Problem-Solving Skills**—skills students need for solving a variety of problems should be taught so they can survive in challenging school, home, and community environments.

Further, programs that implemented these strategies showed a decrease in the dropout rates and an increase in the graduation rates (Thurlow, et.al, 2002).

7. The Role of Teachers Role in Dropout Prevention

Since the majority of the students' school time is spent in the classroom setting under the direct supervision of teachers, teachers play a vital role for the students not limited to identifying, monitoring, and reacting to the risk behavior of their students. The role of the teachers also extends to creating a comprehensive classroom system that prevents risk behavior from occurring in the first place. As such, teachers need to recognize their responsibilities that are entrusted in them and identify, monitor, and face the risk factors that lead students to dropping out. A comprehensive classroom system has three subsystems: physical, instructional, and behavioral. Each of the three subsystems should be designed and implemented with ample consideration given to graduation rate. Teachers are entrusted with the authority over all three subsystems (1) control over the physical environment which includes interactions, (2) instructional systems which includes both the curriculum and instruction, and (3) behavioral systems which include rules and expectations (Smith, 2008). These subsystems work together in an integrated manner to create an effective learning environment for all students.

Overall, creating a nurturing environment for all students, providing a sound instructional system, and monitoring behaviors in a positive manner while avoiding punitive measures, all help increase students' self-esteem and self-awareness which, in turn, leads to students wanting to stay in school and complete their high school educations (Smith, 2008). Ways to create nurturing environments include making the classroom safe and inviting; minimizing negative interactions; having predictable routines; increasing self-esteem; helping set goals; committing to all students; and providing teacher modeling and support in the area of relation building; showing teachers care; listening; being concerned; and showing acceptance and belonging will help students feel connected (Smith, 2008). Ways to create sound instructional systems include using prior knowledge; scaffolding; engaging all students in learning; addressing any "areas of need"; making the curriculum meaningful or providing that "real world" connection; monitoring progress; and using instructional time well by

providing a multi-modal approach (Smith, 2008) helps facilitate student learning, and hence, increases graduation rates. Other things according to Smith (2008) that help students graduate are reminding students how their learning connects to their future endeavors; being consistent and fair with regards to behavioral issues; giving positive reinforcement, and positive rewards; giving both verbal and non-verbal praise; using replacement behaviors; and practicing positive feedback all help students want to be in school and want to earn their diplomas. After all, barriers such as punitive discipline and lack of communication could actually harm positive gains (Thurlow, et.al, 2002).

8. Discussion

In conclusion, there are many explanations for students' failure to complete their high school education. Some of the causes are external to school or are not within the schools' control while others factors are at the school level and are controllable by the school. External factors beyond the school's control would include variables such as a family crisis or illnesses. Some of the school level factors may include a disconnect between the students' education and the "real" world, curriculum not being seen as relevant, alienation or a sense of not belonging, perception that teachers do not care or value the student, students finding the schoolwork boring, uninteresting, and/or not challenging, lack of communication, frustration for not understanding the work or expectations, and feeling confused.

   Most of these school level factors have been addressed through research and strategies have been developed for interventions.   Teachers using positive behavior support, creating safe and inviting environments, having a commitment to all students, supporting relationship building, having meaningful curriculum that makes a connection to the real world, using a multi-modal approach to teaching, scaffolding, using prior knowledge, monitoring and addressing student areas of need, listening, and engaging students in learning have proven very productive in increasing student graduation rates (Thurlow, et.al, 2002). And, although external factors can be more difficult to mitigate, there have been wonderful examples of strategies used throughout the country to accommodate students' needs such as holding alternative schools with flexible schedules (later in the afternoon and early evening) along with assistance for GED preparation when an actual diploma is not a viable option (Furger, 2008). One thing research shows is the need to steer clear of is punitive strategies. As previously demonstrated by a project funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) which studied dropout rates and interventions called Check and Connect, it was shown that barriers such as punitive discipline and lack of communication could actually harm positive gains (Thurlow, et.al, 2002). So, while there are many positive interventions, kids most at risk of dropping out of high school and not completing their high school diploma are the same kids most likely to face punitive discipline and a lack of communication.   In order to retain these same kids, we need to look at ways of avoiding punitive discipline, increasing positive behavior supports, and ways of increasing communication to reach these students.

   We, as a society, also must look at the great costs associated with not intervening to help students earn their diploma. The high cost of incarceration far outweighs the cost of a good education. Furthermore, with over 80 percent of the prison population not having a high school diploma, this lack of education amongst the prison population is compelling evidence to see the correlation between the high school dropout rate and incarceration, hence, evidence of supporting at-risk students and students with special needs. Other costs to consider regarding students who do not graduate from high school include poverty, poor health, and crime. Armed with the evidence presented in current research, it is easy to see that the benefits of students earning their high school diploma far outweigh the cost to society and to the students when the system fails. And, there are so many proven strategies available that can be implanted to help these students who are at-risk or who have special needs overcome the barriers to completing their education and become productive citizens, we should be increasing our graduation rates.

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