

This is the first in a series of articles to be prepared by Governance Support Branch highlighting promising practices for reducing truancy and increasing school completion rates. This first issue focuses on the importance of recognizing factors that increase the risk of truancy and early school leaving.

Why do students dropout?

Reasons for dropping out can be grouped into four broad categories (Balfanz, 2007).

- **Life events** outside of school – becoming pregnant, being arrested, having to work to support family members.
- **Fade outs** – students who reach legal school leaving age and who are frustrated or bored and see no reason for coming to school.
- **Push outs** – students who are perceived to be difficult, dangerous or detrimental to the success of the school who are encouraged (subtly or not so subtly) to withdraw or transfer, or are removed from register if they fail too many courses or miss too many days of school.
- **Failure to succeed** – students who repeatedly fail to succeed in school and attend schools that fail to provide them with the environments and supports they need to succeed.

Dropping out of school is rarely an event or determined by a single decision. Early school leaving is usually the culmination of a disengagement process that occurs over several years, and often begins in elementary school.

What are the risk factors?

Risk factors may be related to the home and family, to the student's characteristics and/or to school practices.

Family related risk factors include poverty, high family mobility, low parental education, large number of siblings, minority group status, household stress, inadequate parental guidance and supervision, non-English language background, and siblings who have dropped out.

Personal characteristics that make a student at risk of not completing school include: low literacy level, overage for grade, poor attendance for any reason, having a disability, feelings of isolation and alienation, no school-engaged friends, no involvement in extracurricular activities, and substance abuse.

School practices that increase the risk of dropping out include:

- ineffective discipline systems that are perceived to be arbitrary and unfair
- negative school climate that fosters or allows discrimination or bullying
- repeated use of exclusionary discipline practices such as suspension
- retentions without adequate support
- passive instructional strategies rather than active learning
- disregard of student learning styles and disabilities
- learning that isn't personalized
- no one in the school who gives students in difficulty the sense that someone cares, wants them to come to school, will check up on them and help solve their problems
- irrelevant curriculum.

Children who are not in school cannot learn. Missing only 2 days of school a month or 20 days a year from Grade 1 means missing a full year of schooling by grade 10!

Identifying the Risk Signals Early

A high percentage of dropouts send distress signals long before they actually drop out of school. Schools need to recognize the importance of education-related factors in order to implement early supports.

An extensive study followed the entire cohort group of 14,000 Philadelphia students who entered the 6th grade in September 1996. The study found that a 6th grader with even one of the following four signals had at least a 75% chance of dropping out of high school:

- a failing final grade in Mathematics
- a failing final grade in English
- attendance below 80% for the 6th grade year
- a final “unsatisfactory” behaviour mark in at least one class.

Students with more than one signal had an even higher probability of dropping out within six years. The study also showed that the earlier a student first sends a signal, the greater the risk that he or she will drop out of school, and the earlier that the student will dropout.

Transition to junior high and high school is a critically important time for students. Poor attendance during the first month of the school year in a new school is a powerful predictor of dropout.

The Price of Not Intervening

Dropouts are more likely to:

- be unemployed
- be employed in low-skilled, low-paying positions with little chance of advancement
- commit crimes and are eight times more likely to be in jail
- be living with parents
- be dependent on social assistance programs
- have health problems
- die earlier

and are less likely to:

- volunteer, vote, or be active community members.

More information on risk factors for truancy and dropouts:

Balfanz, Robert (2007). *What Your Community Can Do to End its Drop-out Crisis: Learnings from Research and Practice*, Prepared for the National Summit on America’s Silent Epidemic

Community Health Systems Resource Group (2005) *Early School Leavers: Understanding the Lived Reality of Student Disengagement from Secondary School*, Prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training

Hammond, C. et al (2007) *Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report*, National Dropout Prevention Centre at Clemson University and Communities in Schools, Inc.

Jerald, Craig D. (2006) *Identifying Potential Dropouts: Key Lessons for Building an Early Warning Data System*, A white paper prepared for Achieve Inc.

Neild, Ruth Curran et al “An Early Warning System” in *Educational Leadership* October 2007, pp 28-33

Share Your Successes

We plan to include success stories in our future issues—articles describing what Alberta schools are doing to improve attendance and reduce the number of early school leavers. We also plan to highlight promising practices derived from recent research.

We are looking for a brief description of your promising practices and how they have improved attendance. Please include your name, e-mail and phone number, so we can contact you for more information.

Please e-mail your success story to: John.Gunraj@gov.ab.ca or mail it to:

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