

School Problem Assessment and Problem Analysis

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## Highschool Dropout and a Way for Change

### **Introduction**

The public school system in the United States has many positive aspects to it which engage our children and educate them to be successful in this and future generations. However, no system is perfect. The U.S. public school system is no exception to this as there are different areas that tend to fail our students. While many have spent their life working to create change and resolve these issues, the system has not yet been perfected. One specific issue within the U.S. public school system is the dropout rates among high school students. Somehow our system loses a staggering number of students through high school instead of setting them up for success in their future. While this issue can seem overwhelming when one looks into the details, it is not a lost cause. Change can be created and implemented into the public school system which would set students up for success not only in completing high school but also setting them up for success in their future careers.

### **Problem**

When a child enters preschool or kindergarten, it is assumed that they will be in school, moving through the different grades, until they graduate from high school with a diploma. While this is the way the educational system was set up and intended to work, sadly not every student makes it through high school and receives a diploma. According to the Community Mental Health Journal, depending how dropout rates are measured, up to 43.7% of the first-year student that enter high school will not graduate within 4 years (Maynard, Salas-Wright, & Vaughn, 2015). That is almost half of the students that enter high school. In 2020, the dropout rate for high school students was measured at 5.3% (High school, n.d.). While the dropout rates have been on a downward trend over the years, the 2020 dropout rate was higher than the previous

year by 1.19% (High school, n.d.). This begins to show the need for improvements in our educational system to continue decreasing the dropout rate.

A study done by authors Parr and Bonitz revealed that there were some ways to predict the high school students that were to dropout. This study showed that factors such as family background, "...students' beliefs about their abilities and the importance of school...", "...socioeconomic status, academic performance, parental involvement, and absenteeism..." had an impact on high school students and contributed to them dropping out (Parr & Bonitz, 2015). Another study added to the discussion by pointing out that previous generations' success or failure to graduate high school contributed to the risk of current generations success in graduating high school (Archambault, Janosz, Dupere, Brault & McAndrew, 2017). A third study added that the dropout rate is higher for students in racial and ethnic minority groups (Maynard et al., 2015). However, these are not the only factors that contribute to the dropout rates of students from high school.

Mental and emotional health as well as past experiences of a student can also contribute to being at a higher risk of dropping out of high school. A study was done that looked at the correlation between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) and the risk of dropping out of high school. It was found that there was a direct relationship between high school dropout and the number of ACE's that a student had (Morrow & Villodas, 2018). When a student has a high ACE score, it can disrupt multiple aspects of their life making it difficult to focus on school. This contributes to the higher rates of high school dropout. Additionally, mental, and emotional health can impact a student's risk of dropping out of school. A study was conducted to determine the relationship, if any, between dropout rates and depression among high school students. It was found that students that struggled with mental health were more than twice as likely to drop out

of high school (Dupere, Dion, Nault-Briere, Archambault, Leventhal & Lesage, 2018). In today's world, most students experience trauma at an early age and are at a greater risk for struggling with mental and emotional health. While the odds for completing high school seem to be against students, it is not a hopeless cause. In fact, there are policies that have been put in place specifically aimed at helping students succeed.

## **Policy**

In 2015, President Obama signed a policy entitled Every Student Succeeds Act or ESSA. This policy amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 as well as replaced the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The purpose of this act was "...to make sure public schools provide a quality education for all kids" (Lee, n.d.). This was done by putting more responsibility back on the states to ensure their schools were getting the resources they needed to successfully provide quality education for all of the students. It also encouraged transparency by requiring that states provide a state report card that could be publicly accessed showing how each school was performing.

While this act works to increase equity within public schools and requires that a high standard level of education be taught to all students, there are gaps in the legislation. This act, although it discourages the use of test results to determine teacher performance, still places a high emphasis on test scores to determine the success of a student (Gaille, 2019). In addition, this act does not address the root causes of the inequality that is represented in the school system. While it does require states to be transparent with what is happening within schools, it does not address ways to specifically improve these schools on a wholistic level.

The Every Student Succeeds Act made strides to improve the educational system and has done a decent job. In 2016 the U.S. high school graduation rate was 84.1% (Balingit, 2017). Fast

forward to 2020, the U.S. high school graduation rate was 86% (Biron, 2021). While it has improved, the dropout rate of high school students is still higher than it should be. Continued efforts need to be made to decrease the dropout rate of high school students in schools.

### **Proposal for Change**

While policies have been put in place to work towards helping students succeed in school, students are still dropping out of high school. This puts students at a significantly higher risk for poor health, unemployment, and entering the criminal justice system (Iachini, Rogelberg, Terry, & Lutz, 2016). There is, however, a way for change. It comes in the form of an intervention method called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support or PBIS.

“Positive Behaviour Intervention Supports is a data driven, three-tiered framework of behaviour support designed to encourage and promote pro-social behaviour and facilitate positive, meaningful behavior change for students who struggle with positive behaviour expectations” (Tanfara, 2017).

The model is designed to come along side students who are at risk of dropping out of high school and provide support and positive reinforcement to those students. It has been found that PBIS is effective for 71% of students who are in high school by providing programs that focus on students’ strengths and needs, utilizing support agencies, as well as home and school presence (Tanfara, 2017). This works to meet students where they are at and ensure they are set up for success through their high school experience.

By implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports into each and every high school in the United States, great strides would be made on decreasing dropout rates of high school students. Schools that already have implemented PBIS into their programing have found that it has “...significant positive effects...” on increasing attendance and decreasing the risk of

dropping out (Freeman, Simonsen, McCoach, Sugai, Lombardi, & Horner, 2015). While it would take some time to get PBIS implemented throughout all high schools in the United States, after year four of implementing this intervention method, it is planned that high school dropout rates would be at an all-time low in the United States. An article from *The High School Journal* supports this by stating that “...school-level tiered interventions may increase a school’s capacity to address intensive needs of some students and... begun to conceptualize the dropout problem as a system level failure...” (Freeman et al., 2015). By being intentional about implementing positive intervention methods, change can be made, and more students can succeed.

### **School Social Work Intervention**

School social workers have an obligation of upholding the dignity and worth of human beings, serving the schools with integrity and competence as well as fighting for social justice. The PBIS model draws on all aspects of these values by “...draw[ing] on behavioral, social learning, organizational, and positive youth development theories...” (Bradshaw, Pas, Debnam, & Johnson, 2015). This is done by having consistent, school-wide policies and procedures for how PBIS is implemented. According to an article from the *School Psychology Review*, the first tier of PBIS consists of seven different critical features. First, a team is formed within the school that consists of six to ten staff who will specifically work with implementing PBIS within the school. This involves attending trainings, training others, meeting twice a month to discuss action plans, and gathering materials to use within the program. Next, a behavioral support coach is needed which will aid with any technical issues as well as consultation at the school when needed. This person will be a professional who has prior experience with implementing PBIS into a school.

The third thing that is needed is three to five positive student behavior expectations that are posted throughout the school and well known by students and staff. After this, behavioral expectations need to be created and clearly defined. These are then taught to the students by the school staff. Next, a system is created and implemented which rewards and positively reinforces students for exhibiting the positive student behavior expectations that have been clearly defined. The sixth thing that is needed is a system of how to manage violations to the behavioral standards that have been set up. This system needs to be agreed upon by administrators and teachers so that it can be consistent throughout all classrooms. Lastly, a system needs to be established to gather data to be analyzed and evaluated. Social work practices are based on evidence-based interventions thus it is extremely important to have a way to evaluate the intervention method to ensure it is truly working how it is intended.

It is also important that this model be implemented in a way that is consistent throughout the entire school and staff. This will work to create an altered environment in our high schools where positive behavioral change is promoted for both students and teachers (Bradshaw et al., 2015). By implementing this system into high schools in the United States, students who are at risk for dropping out will get the support they need to be successful throughout their high school experience and prepare them to enter college and a future career.

## **Conclusion**

Although great strides have been made to give every student everything, they need to be successful through high school, into college and a future career, not all students are making it to their high school graduation. Policies such as the Every Student Succeeds Act worked to improve the quality and accessibility to education that all students get. However, this policy focuses heavily on standardized testing as a way to measure success. One thing it lacks is the

ability to address the risk factors that inhibit students from succeeding in school. By implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports into each high school in the United States, a consistent, evidence based, data driven method can be used that specifically focuses on providing for students' needs and creating a positive school environment where students can succeed. As a result, the dropout rates for high school students will drop and progress will be made on improving the educational system. Each child deserves success, let us make success a reality.

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