

**School Problem Assessment and Policy Analysis: Improving School Engagement,
Attendance and Dropout Prevention**

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Introduction

Public school systems measure their success based on their collected data. Data collected from attendance, dropout rates, and school engagement affect the impression of their community members and potential students. Similar to choosing a college or university, prospected students and families look for institutions with high success rates along with a supportive staff that will help transition them into a prosperous future.

According to the compulsory education laws in the United States, children are mandated to report to an accredited school. All states have their own jurisdiction to determine when a student should begin schooling and when they can exit (Schonrock et al., 2016). For example, in the state of Georgia children are required to attend school between the ages of 6 to 16. On the other hand, in the state of Washington, children are required to attend school between the ages of 8 to 18 (NCES, 2017). Although states have their own regulations, all children must receive an education. Parents and/or students may be penalized if this is not fulfilled.

The federal obligation of educating a child in the United States, goes along with the mission statement of the U.S Department of Education which is “to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (U.S Department of Education, 2021). Overall, the goal of U.S Department of Education is to ensure all adolescents receive an education to carry on the next generation of the nation.

Problem Identified

School engagement, attendance, and dropout prevention are factors that contribute to successfully lead a child towards graduation. Students who fail to

comply with a school district's attendance policies may be at risk for several negative pathways such as delinquency, substance abuse, and mental health challenges (Gubbels et al., 2019).

School engagement refers to a student's participation in school along with the interactions they have with the learning material and their peers (Wang et al., 2017). School engagement may also be described as the student's experience with staff members, classmates, personal observations, along with their own connection to the school and the school's community (Maynard, 2014). The significance of school engagement has been highlighted throughout several studies. Attendance and dropout have also been associated with school engagement. Students who are engaged throughout high school will not only pursue academic attainment, but they will also be preparing for adulthood by increasing their academic self-concept (Lombardi et al., 2019). The level of engagement a student has can determine if they are at-risk of dropping out. Students who are disengaged are also at-risk for future economic hardship, physical health problems, and poor mental health (Lombardi et al., 2019).

School absenteeism includes absences that are excused and unexcused. If a student is absent due to a medical reason, then it would be considered excused with the proper documentation. All other reasons would be considered unexcused unless otherwise is specified in the school district's policies. School absenteeism includes many other instances such as a child refusing to come to school due to anxiety and/or depression, fear of school, and truancy. The majority of truant students are most likely struggling with barriers such as homelessness, family problems, poverty, and teen pregnancy (Kearney, 2008). Zhang (2003), identified that children from low-income families are more likely to miss school. There are many low-income families throughout the United States so, it is important to note that a student who shows

excessive absenteeism may be at risk for permanently dropping out of school thus, continuing the cycle of poverty (Kearney 2008).

In the United States, students have the option to drop out of school after a certain age. Dropping out of school or permanently being absent from school means that the child will not continue to pursue their high school diploma in the institution they are withdrawing from. A student who decides to drop out of school will typically face many other consequences. Without a high school diploma, a student has a high rate of unemployment and depends more on social assistance as they may have a difficult time finding employment that can support them financially (Fortin et al., 2013). There are many reasons as to why a student decides to drop out of school. Low parental support has been significantly related to student dropout. Parents who have low educational expectations, lack of parental supervision, or have a low socioeconomic status have all been associated with a high dropout risk for their students (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000).

As you can see, school engagement, attendance, and dropout are all interconnected with one another. There are many risks for students who face barriers throughout their education.

Interventions

School Engagement

School engagement includes a broad array of factors that affect the student's experience in school. The enjoyment of school is influenced by factors such as the expectations of their peers, teachers, and families. It can also be influenced by the skills the student possesses such as reading or writing (Lombardi et al., 2019).

It is clear that the lack of student engagement is associated with dropout. Therefore, it is imperative that it is addressed before it gets to that point. Students who have

experienced trauma have a high risk of dropping out and being disengaged in school (Rumsey & Milsom, 2018). Although everyone experiences trauma differently, some students who lack resilience are still faced with barriers that interfere with their engagement in school. Symptoms of trauma may include truancy, low support, and other learning challenges (Rumsey & Milsom, 2018). Although schools cannot directly stop trauma from happening, there are several interventions that can take place to increase student engagement among students who have experienced trauma.

Collaborative partnerships have been found to be effective in increasing engagement throughout the school. Rumsey and Milsom (2018), suggest counselors and other school personnel to engage with the student families by targeting specific areas. Three of the areas identified are parenting, communication, and decision-making.

School personnel can connect with parents and educate them on common developmental challenges a student may endure. If parents can identify the signs of trauma then they are able to intervene before it drastically negatively affects the child. Educating them on the signs and ways to seek support from the school and community can serve as a preventative factor in decreasing the student's engagement (Rumsey & Milsom, 2018).

Communication is important to build a relationship between the school and families. Rumsey and Milsom (2018), recommends implementing a two-way communication. This can be done by having regular conversations and meetings with the families. These meeting times should be accessible to working families and be available in multiple languages to welcome all. Setting up convenient times and locations is significant in connecting with families who may not be able to meet other expectations due to their socioeconomic status.

Lastly, involving families in school policy decision-making can help improve school engagement. Recruiting parents from diverse backgrounds to a committee that is heavily involved in developing discipline policies can help ensure that culturally sensitive policies are being implemented (Rumsey & Milsom, 2018).

Attendance

A student with excessive absences is more likely to become truant. In order to address school absenteeism school districts can implement several interventions to meet the needs of their students. Similar to improving student engagement, Kearney and Graczyk (2014) suggest that parental involvement can help reduce attendance issues. Cultural differences between parents and the school should not be a hinderance in the communication between the two. Schools should implement interventions such as promoting cultural integration, using interpreters, and recruiting parents in school activities or committees. By increasing parental involvement in school, students are less likely to miss school and misbehave (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014).

Dropout Prevention

Dropout prevention has been implemented throughout the United States due to excessive absences and dropout. Dropout prevention programs are an attempt to increase graduation rates. Although there are a wide range of factors that contribute to a student dropping out, there has been several suggestions on how to support the graduation rate from scholars. Messacar and Oreopoulos (2013), proposes to intervene from a macro perspective. The decision or act of dropping out of school must be noted as a symptom of school disengagement. The pattern and behaviors associated with school disengagement starts early on in elementary school. States should be encouraged to develop programs to reengage at-risk youth at all levels (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013). The school's environment is a key factor in contributing to the

success of a student's academic attainment. A supportive and encouraging environment from peers and school personnel can help students have a better experience in school (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013). A positive and supportive dropout prevention method is the Check & Connect program. The Check & Connect program has been known to increase graduation rates and lower tardiness and absences. This mentor-based program provides students and families with positive caring adults who support them through case management, mentoring, and educating on school expectations (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013).

Policy Implications

Compulsory Education Law

The compulsory education law in the United States was in attempt to address the widespread of child labor laws in the 19th century and improve literacy rates throughout the nation (FindLaw Team, 2016). States have the power to create their own guidelines on when a child should enter and decide to withdraw from school. The average age of mandatory school attendance across the states is from age 6 to 16. It is important to highlight that the compulsory education laws vary across the states, but it only insists on attendance versus completion of high school. There are 25 states that only allow students to drop out of school at 18 years old. With the exclusion of Texas which has the minimum drop out age of 19, all other states require a student to be at least 16 or 17 (NCES, 2017).

At the age of 16, students have limited options on what they can do after withdrawing from school. As mentioned previously, dropping out of school has many risks and can lead towards negative pathways such as unemployment, substance abuse, and delinquency. At 16 years old, a child cannot partake in most activities without parental consent. This includes simple things like getting a tattoo/piercing or

donating blood. Although parental consent is needed to withdraw from school at 16, the law still allows this option knowing that there is limited freedom for children this age.

Proposal for Change

There are many interventions to improve school engagement, attendance, and dropout prevention. Although there are many effective interventions, the federal government can assist school districts by raising the minimum dropout age to 18 years old across all states. The compulsory education law only requires students to attend school between a specific age. It would be a simple solution to propose that a high school diploma should be required from all students in the United States but that would not align with the social work values.

The proposal to raise the dropout age to 18, may be beneficial in increasing graduation rates. In order to see the benefits of this proposal, school social workers can encourage a strong parental presence in school, promote cultural integration, and advocate for a mentorship program.

Having a strong parental presence in school has been known to increase student engagement and keep kids in school. Involving parents in the community in school-related activities and welcoming them into a space where they have a say in school discipline can empower them to be aware of the importance of education. School social workers can encourage this by collaborating with counselors and principals to host events in the community that are easily accessible to the target population. These events can be informational sessions where parents are free to ask questions and give feedback on current school policies. This would differ from a school board meeting because it would be informal.

Schools that integrate cultures from their community tend to be more welcoming for students. School social workers can promote cultural integration by advocating their school board member to equip their staff with employees that reflect their community members. Having a diverse staff can provide students with role models that look like them.

Lastly, advocating for a mentorship program like Check & Connect can provide students with an additional positive caring adult that is not a parent or school employee. Adding a mentorship program in all schools can help support students who are at-risk, have low engagement, and cannot legally drop out of school. Although school social workers can be a student mentor themselves, collaborating with community programs is important to strengthen relationships and support the wellbeing of the students.

Conclusion

The risks of not attending school can result in several negative consequences that can be detrimental to an adolescent transitioning into adulthood. It is clear that student engagement, attendance, and dropout are all connected. School social workers have the opportunity to advocate for change within school systems to increase the well-being of students and contribute to the success of the next generation of society. The interventions discussed are associated with the six social work core values. Specifically, the importance of human relationships has been highlighted throughout. Building community while creating a positive and inclusive space for students has been seen in every intervention discussed. As always, it is important to note that change cannot happen overnight nor without help. School social workers must continue to connect with others and be a lifelong learner in all things that affect society from a micro, mezzo, and macro level.

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