

33 Years of Dropout Prevention – Have We Been Barking Up the Wrong Tree?

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October is National Dropout Prevention Month. As a nation, we continue to struggle with the dropout issue and raising high school graduation rates. The National Dropout Prevention Center knows that school dropouts are a major problem for America in terms of economic prosperity, equity, and quality of life. Since 1990, we've only been able to increase the national 4-year high school graduation rate from 74% to 84%, an improvement rate of less than one-half percent per year.

Our dropout prevention efforts over these past 33 years have focused on improving instruction and finding programs, strategies, and interventions to academically engage our most at-risk students. We've attempted to address truancy, academic failure, grade retention, and behavior problems with strategies such as attendance enforcement, summer and after-school programs, modified school calendars, and character education. We've developed and implemented dropout early warning systems to alert us to the most at-risk students. We've mounted aggressive community programs to persuade students to stay in school and to persuade dropouts to return. We've tried what seemed to be innovative approaches to school structure and delivery such as charter schools and virtual education.

America's dropout prevention efforts since 1986 have been sound, well intended, often research-based, and aggressively pursued by thousands of dedicated educators and community leaders, but we haven't been able to capture that elusive 16% of students who aren't graduating. Maybe we've been barking up the wrong tree.

In recent years, America's schools have turned increased attention to the impact of childhood trauma, mental health, and stress on school outcomes. Since 2016, the National Dropout Prevention Center, a non-profit research/design studio, has studied existing research on how childhood trauma, broadly defined, impacts school behavior, learning, and graduation. We also reviewed the wide range of professional development, programs, and policy solutions being pursued by schools, districts, and states.

We've reached the following conclusions:

- At least half of the students in schools today have experienced trauma to the extent that it negatively impacts school behavior and learning, and that percentage is growing.
- Trauma impacts mindsets, assumptions, perceptions, behavior patterns, and ability to engage with instruction. These conditions may manifest themselves in school as bad behavior, truancy, hostility to authority, and failure to master academic content.
- We have addressed symptoms such as behavior, disengagement, truancy, and low academic performance rather than addressing the deeper root cause of school failure, the influence of trauma on behavior and learning.
- For trauma-impacted students, doubling down on instruction is not likely to produce increased content mastery, and programs that address surface symptoms are not likely to improve graduation outcomes.
- Schools, districts, and states are attempting to address the trauma issue by a) training teachers about trauma and b) employing more mental health professionals. While positive, these measures will not resolve the greater problem because a) all personnel, not just teachers, must

be trained, b) training must focus on the influence of trauma on behavior and learning, not on the trauma itself, and must address what to do about it, and c) the large number of trauma-impacted students in schools makes it impossible for mental health professionals to serve a large percentage of the total student population in need.

- There is a difference in “trauma-informed” (knowing about trauma), “trauma-sensitive” (feeling empathy and concern about trauma), and “trauma-skilled” (taking specific school-based actions to help trauma-impacted students succeed).

Our conclusions about the impact of childhood trauma on behavior, learning, and graduation outcomes indicate that we have not drilled deep enough into the root cause of the dropout problem – childhood trauma. As educators and policy makers, we must ask “Have we been barking up the wrong tree to raise graduation rates above 84%?”. And if so, what specifically do we do now? How do we move from being just “trauma-informed” or “trauma-sensitive” to becoming “trauma-skilled”? What specific skill sets must all educators master to support trauma-impacted students, even those we will never identify? How do we modify school climate at all grade levels to rebuild resilience in trauma-impacted students so they can go beyond their trauma, to succeed in school and graduate?

In response to these questions, and toward educators more effectively “barking up the right tree,” the National Dropout Prevention Center proposes a Trauma-Skilled Schools Model by which educators can acquire specific skills to achieve national certification and schools can take strategic action steps to build a climate of resilience and improve graduation outcomes for trauma-impacted students. Our team looks forward to more students graduating in the years ahead.

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