

Research Brief



Strengthening At Risk Students' Affiliation with the School

Question: What does research say about strengthening students'—especially at-risk students'—affiliation with the school?

Summary of Findings:

Student “affiliation,” also referred to as “engagement,” “involvement,” “identification,” “connectedness,” “participation,” and “bonding” with the school is linked to student success, and a lack of affiliation is directly connected to students' reasons for dropping out of school.

Educational reformers and school leaders are beginning to turn their attention to students' affiliation with their schools—and with sound reason. Recent research indicates that students, especially at-risk students, both benefit from and may even be dependent on the supportive, engaging, stimulus that comes from being connected to one's school.

With 30% of high school freshman never earning a standard diploma (Tobin & Burns, 2005), and with a significant body of research indicating that dropout rates correspond to a lack of school connectedness (Cantu, 2006; Finn, 1989) there is a clear need for strategies which strengthen students', especially at-risk students', affiliation with their schools (Cantu, 2006; Evelo et al., 1996; Renschler, 2002; Tobin & Burns, 2005).

A Need for Increased Level of Student Affiliation

Drop-out Rates: A 1994 study from John's Hopkins University's Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students indicates a consistent pattern for students' decision to drop out of school. Across racial, ethnic, and gender groups, students most frequently cite in-school factors such as having poor relationships with teachers as reasons for dropping out of high school (Jordan & McPartland, 1994, as cited in Black, 2002).

Disengagement: Chronic levels of boredom and disengagement are reported. The 2006 report on High School Survey of Student Engagement indicates that 2 out of 3 students are bored every day in their high school classes (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006). This same study reports that there may be an “engagement gap” for boys, special education students, non-white and non-Asian students, those on free or reduced lunch, and for students in grades 11 and 12.

Benefits of Increasing Student Affiliation

Findings from a study on student-school bonding and problem behavior in adolescents concluded that if schools are successful in competing for students' affiliation, students are likely to be more engaged in school and less involved in problem behaviors in and out of school (Simons-Morton, Crump, Haynie & Saylor, 1999). A synthesis of research and scholarship reveal numerous benefits from increasing students' affiliation with school:

- Fewer dropouts
- Increased attendance

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- Reduced frequency of “risky behavior”
- Increased achievement
- Academic engagement
- Increased sense of community and care

Strategies for Strengthening Student Affiliation with the School

While there isn't a one-size-fits-all implementation package for increasing student involvement, there are several common characteristics amongst existing and emerging programs working to strengthen student affiliation:

- **Size**- Smaller schools and classes support interpersonal relationships;
- **Rigor**- Challenging courses and communication of high expectations benefit both at-risk and high-achieving students;
- **Environment**- Schools and classrooms that build a positive climate, offer students a sense of safety and belonging, promote respect, offer students the opportunity to communicate, and encourage students to participate stimulate student affiliation;
- **Parent Involvement**- Informing and enlisting parents is vital; parents respond when schools reach out to them;
- **Connection**- Creating opportunities for students to build relationships with caring adults, peers, community, and topics of interest is essential for building students' affiliation; Teachers who show interest in students' lives and personalizing instruction help students to connect and become more affiliated with schools;
- **Partnerships**- Building bridges between school and community extends learning and to “real-world” situations; typically these programs take the form of after-school or youth-serving initiatives.
- **Governance**- Administrative leadership facilitates school-wide and classroom efforts to strengthen student affiliation with the school and helps generate a conducive environment for student affiliation.

Online Resources:

Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program: Strengthening Student Connections with School

Linda Cantu

Intercultural Development Research Association, 2006

Research indicates students are disengaged from school; however, a caring adult could make a difference in student behaviors and risk of dropping out of school. The internationally recognized Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program successfully helps prevent dropout by pairing an at-risk high school or middle school student with a struggling elementary school student. As a tutor to the youngster, the secondary student both develops relationships with adults and children who care about him/her, and has an opportunity to gain academic skills previously forgotten or missed during his/her elementary schooling. The program has five core components: tutoring, field trips, role models/community leaders, and student recognition events. When implemented as designed, the program leads to participants who stay in school, have increased attendance and academic performance, and continue into higher education.

http://www.idra.org/IDRA_Newsletters/October_2006_School_Holding_Power/Coca-Cola_Valued_Youth_Program_-_Strengthening_Student_Connections_with_School/

“Crossing the Bridge” Puts Freshman on Solid Ground
Partners for Student Success

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Developed out of a realization that students must “be present physically and emotionally, to do well academically,” Aiken University High School in Cincinnati, Ohio has employed a program called “Crossing the Bridge.” Its goal is to improve dismal attendance, suspension, expulsion, and drop-out rates by providing support and guidance to freshmen. For two weeks prior to the start of school, incoming freshmen engage in a daily program that revolves around three learning strands: academic, social, and environmental. Reading and math assessment, team-building activities, and a visit to a college are all part of “Crossing the Bridge.” Older students who have gone through the program welcome newer students to the school. Over the years, 92% of student participants indicate that the program was helpful to them.

<http://www.educationworld.com/admin/partners/partners017.shtml>

Dropping Out of High School: The Role of School Organization and Structure

Valerie E. Lee and David T. Burkam, *American Educational Research Journal*, v40 n2, summer 2003

While research has traditionally examined students’ social backgrounds, academic performance, and academic behaviors as risk factors for drop out, research findings indicate that school size, curriculum, and social relations are factors too. Lee and Burkam conclude that in schools which offer more academic and less nonacademic classes, students are less likely to drop out; medium size schools have students who are more likely to stay in school; and the “most important” finding reveals that students are less likely to drop out in schools where students perceive there to be positive relationships between students and teachers.

<http://aer.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/40/2/353>

Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students’ Motivation to Learn

Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Research Council. York: National Academies Press, 2004.

This comprehensive study addresses the need for helping students to connect cognitively and emotionally to school. Findings suggest that teachers who draw on students’ prior knowledge, experiences, interests, culture, and real-world experiences help students become engaged in learning. The panel recommends high school courses and instructional methods be redesigned to promote student engagement. Small learning communities, community internships, and block scheduling are suggested examples. The panel also recommends teachers include time for daily interaction and regular assessments of student work. They suggest that teachers collaborate to make meaning of student work, and that they discuss student work as ways to think about curriculum and instruction and the level of engagement promoted in instructional strategies. The full book is available online. Podcasts are also available.

<http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?isbn=0309084350> Online podcast available from
http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=10421#podcast

Factors That Influence High School Student Mentoring Relationships

Nancy Harjan, Winter 1994 “Mentoring Connections” from the International Mentoring Association

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Using a cross-sectional survey approach, research conducted through community-based and school-based mentoring programs indicates demographic variables do not influence ability of mentoring relationships to improve students' grades, attendance, and general behavior. Conclusion notes that successful high school mentoring may lead to more enriched futures for students.

<http://www.mentoring-association.org/FactorsHS2.html>

Keeping Kids in School

Susan Black, American School Board Journal, v189 n12, December 2002

Although many want to blame dropout rates on parents and on the community, Black points to research which indicates students might be “pushed” out of school by the size of the school, the curriculum, and the lack of positive student-teacher relationships.

<http://www.asbj.com/MainMenuCategory/Archive/2002/December.aspx>

Keeping Kids in School: Using Check & Connect for Dropout Prevention

David Evelo, Mary Sinclair, Christine Hurley, Sandra Christenson, and Martha Thurlow from the Institute on Community Integration and the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota

Originally funded by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs as a dropout prevention program for junior high and special education students, Check and Connect monitoring and school engagement procedures are used for working with youth that are at a high risk for dropping out of school. “Check” refers to a systematic procedure for determining the extent which students are engaged in school or demonstrating signs of withdrawing from school. “Connect” refers to procedures for regularly responding to students’ individual needs. This report discusses identifying students who are at risk of dropping out, describes check and connect procedures, outlines barriers and strategies for implementing the procedures, and offers indicators of success.

<http://ici.umn.edu/checkandconnect/KeepingKidsInSchool.pdf>

<http://ici.umn.edu/checkandconnect/model/default.html>

On Engaging Latino Students in Their Education: A Resource Guide to Research and Programs

Jose R. Rosario, the El Puente Project

Latinos are both the fastest growing ethnic minority in America, and the most likely youths to drop out of school. Samples of research and program materials designed to best engage Latino students in their education are addressed in this document. As a resource guide which synthesizes and analyzes research between 1991 and 2005, the reported resources for improving student success focus on: preparation for college, collaboration between school and community, the education of parents, staff development, and youth leadership. An annotated bibliography is also provided.

http://www.elpuenteproject.com/defiles/On_Engaging_Latino_Students_in_their_Education--A_Resource_Guide_to_Research_and_Programs.pdf

The Benefits of Youth Entrepreneurship Training: What the Research Shows

The Faith and Service Technical Education Network

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Students can be motivated to work harder in school as well as learn to channel their talents in entrepreneurship programs which teach students how academic concepts relate to real business opportunities. Entrepreneurial training programs give teens, especially at-risk teens, a sense of meaning and belonging (White & Kenyon, 2000).
<http://www.fastennetwork.org/qryArticleDetail.asp?ArticleId=1885BE02-AB52-4757-8DC2-53D5CF9B86>

Voices of Students on Engagement

Ethan Yazzie-Mintz, Project Director, High School Survey on Student Engagement

Extensive time and resources have been directed toward closing the achievement gap on standardized tests; however, there the data from the 2006 High School Survey of Student Engagement indicates that there may be another gap schools should be paying attention to: the engagement gap. Considerable gaps exist across the three dimensions of engagement: Cognitive/Intellectual/Academic Engagement; Social/Behavioral/Participatory Engagement, and Emotional Engagement. Student engagement across all three dimensions lessens as students move up from grade 9 to 12; is lower for boys; is higher for those in an honors/college preparatory track; is higher for white and Asian students; is lower for special education students; and is higher in students who are not eligible for free and reduced lunch.
http://ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/pdf/HSSSE_2006_Report.pdf

Withdrawing From School

Jeremy D. Finn (1989). Withdrawing from School. *Review of Educational Research*, 59(2), pp. 117-142.

This review of research presents two developmental models for considering why students drop out of school. The frustration-self-esteem model is typically used to explain why students become delinquent and truant; school failure is often seen as a starting point for when students begin to feel rejected by school or to reject schooling. The participation-identification model considers behavior and emotions and focuses on student involvement in school. According to this model, failure to participate in school, participate in school activities, or develop a sense of identification with a school may have harmful consequences for students.
<http://www.jstor.org.proxy.usf.edu/view/00346543/ap040278/04a00020/0?frame=noframe&userID=83f7644d@usf.edu/01cce4406500501be3596&dpi=3&config=jstor>

Small Schools and Student Affiliation

Linda Starr, Education World

This article discusses the seeming pendulum swing toward smaller schools. Characteristics of small schools are offered and advantages of small schools are presented, including: personalization, climate, student achievement, morale, extra-curricular activities, and governance. The author also discusses “downsizing” and the movement to create small schools within big buildings. Strategies discussed include: creating “house plans” to assign students to groups or houses who stay together; making “mini-school” plans to create curriculum and instruction for small groups; delineating “schools-within-schools” who share common space but are autonomous.
http://www.education-world.com/a_issues/issues048.shtml

Student-School Bonding and Adolescent Problem Behavior

Bruce G. Simons-Morton, Aria Davis Crump, Denise L. Haynie, and Keith E. Saylor

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From 4,263 middle school students (91% of students enrolled across seven middle schools in one US district), school bonding shows positive correlations with school adjustment and perceived school climate, but inverse negative correlations with problem behavior. Problem behavior was higher in males, and increased from grade to grade, while school bonding, climate, and adjustment were higher in females. Data supports that school bonding is linked to problem behavior. *Going Places*, a problem behavior prevention project that attempts to increase school bonding through skills training, parent education, and environmental change is described.
<http://her.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/14/1/99>

Submitted

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