School related factors in high school students' decisions to drop out

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SCHOOL RELATED FACTORS IN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' DECISIONS TO DROP OUT

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Faculty of the College of Education
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Plan B

by
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December, 1999
Approved by the Department of Counselor Education

[Signature]

Approved by the College of Education Graduate Office

[Signature]
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I  Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II  Review of Literature</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III Method</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV  Results</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V  Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter I

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing concern about high school dropout rates. Approximately one-fourth of ninth-grade students in the United States drops out before graduating from high school. Students who become truant and eventually drop out of high school too often set themselves up for a life of struggle. Research data tells us that students who become truant and eventually dropout of school put themselves at a long-term disadvantage in becoming productive citizens. High school dropouts, for example, are two and a half times more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed. Moreover, high school dropouts who are employed earn much lower salaries (Alspaugh, 1997).

Students have different reasons for dropping out: some simply dislike school; some cannot get along with their teachers; some perceive school as a waste of their time; others begin working full time, either by choice or by necessity, and cannot maintain their schedules as students. For young women, pregnancy, childbirth, and subsequent childcare responsibilities may interfere with school, while young men who become fathers may have childcare duties or be required to work to support the family. (Berktold, Geis, Kaufman and MPR Associates, Inc., 1998).

Researchers have identified clusters of factors related to a student’s decision to drop out. Franklin & Streeter (1995) listed two major clusters: psychosocial and school correlates. Phelan (1992) identified three clusters: family background, personal
problems, and school-related factors. Family background factors include parental modeling, finances, and cultural influences. Personal problems include factors such as substance abuse, pregnancy, and depression. School-related factors are those factors under the control of the high school that can influence a student's decision to stay in school or to drop out. For example, the degree to which a student feels welcome and supported while he or she is at school is a school-related factors that can influence his or her general attitude towards school. This study focuses specifically on school-related factors.

Statement of Problem

It is generally accepted that high school dropout rates are a reflection of the schools and the communities they serve. Some factors that influence dropout rates (e.g., socioeconomic status of students) are out of the control of schools. Other factors, however, can be addressed directly by high school administrators. For example, being part of a long-term cohort group of students in a supportive social structure provides a number of incentives for students to remain in school (Alspaugh, 1997). A growing body of evidence shows that high school students who decide to drop out often base their decisions on issues related to the school itself (Alspaugh, 1997, 1998; Berktold et al., 1998; Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Hoffer, 1997; Phelan, 1992).
Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore school-related factors that contribute to high school dropout by developing a survey and administering it to a group of high school students. The survey was designed to elicit details about school-related challenges that have been shown to contribute to students’ decisions to drop out of high school. The data obtained from this study can be used to find ways for high school teachers, counselors, and administrators to eliminate some of the frustrations that can result in a student deciding to drop out.

Research Questions

Based on recent research and literature, this study derived the following research questions to gain information about major school-related factors that can contribute to a student’s decision to drop out.

1. What is the impact of school size on students’ school experience?
2. To what extent is continuity in school important to students?
3. To what extent do students feel that their school helps them with personal issues?
4. How do school-related activities influence students’ attitudes towards school?
5. How do students’ relationships with their friends at school and outside of school affect their attitudes towards school?
6. To what extent do students’ relationships with adults at school affect their perceptions of school?
Assumptions

In order to carry out this study, the following were assumed:

Students will cooperate.

Students will show up for the administration of the survey.

The students will take the study seriously.

Students will understand the statements in the survey.

The students will understand the purpose of the study.

Students will respond honestly.

Limitations

For the purpose of conducting this research, this study accepted the following restrictions:

Participation in the study was limited to public high school students from Santa Clara County.

The study’s focus was limited to school-related factors; other factors such as Socio-Economic Status, ethnicity, and family background were not addressed.

Significance of Study

This study can help to reduce high school dropout rates by identifying risk factors that can be addressed directly by schools. With focused attention and support by schools, this study can be utilized as a prevention and intervention tool to help students.
This study's survey can help any high school student to learn more about themselves and about the school-related factors that can contribute to their success.
Chapter II
Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to explore school-related factors that contribute to high school dropout by developing a survey and administering it to a group of high school students. The survey was designed to elicit details about school-related challenges that have been shown to contribute to students’ decisions to drop out of high school. The data obtained from this study can be used to find ways for high school teachers, counselors, and administrators to eliminate some of the frustrations that can result in a student deciding to drop out.

A review of current literature identified major school-related factors that can contribute to students’ decision to drop out. The literature on this topic can be organized into six major categories, including suggested solutions to mitigate these factors:

1. School Size
2. School Continuity
3. Personal Issues
4. School Activities
5. Relationships With Friends at school and outside of school
6. Relationships With Adults at school
7. Suggested Solutions to decrease the number of dropouts due to school related factors.
School Size (the number of students attending a particular school) can have an impact on a student’s feelings of belonging and success at school. School Continuity refers to how changes in the school environment can contribute to a student’s decision to stay in school or to drop out. Personal Issues involves not only the personal circumstances that contribute to a student’s decision to drop out, but also the level of support the student receives from his or her school. School Activities considers the importance of school activities in students’ attitude towards school. Relationships With Friends considers the influence of peers on a student’s decision to continue education or not. Relationships With Adults refers to the importance of students’ interactions with teachers and other adults at school in their attitude towards school. According to the literature, these school-related factors contribute to a student’s decision to dropout. The lack of stability and familiarity in the school environment can put many students at risk or dropping out.

School Size

Alspaugh (1997) reviewed the literature on a number of factors that contribute to dropping out of school. In one study of dropout rates for Mississippi high schools, large schools had higher dropout rates than small schools. The effect of school size on school climate contributed to the dropout rates. Larger schools, which show a deterioration of school climate, experience higher dropout rates; smaller schools, with a more conducive social environment, experience lower dropout rates.
School Continuity

Frequent and dramatic changes in a student's school environment can lead to confusion, frustration, and ultimately, giving up on school. Alspaugh (1997) identified two key areas in which a school's continuity impacts a student's life: the school's grade span (the number of different class levels at the school), and students' transition (moving between grades and/or between schools) experiences.

**Grade Spans.** Alspaugh reports that schools with longer grade spans (such as seven to twelve) have lower dropout rates than schools with shorter grade spans (such as nine to twelve or ten to twelve.) This suggests that the longer a student remains in a familiar school setting, the less likely he or she will be to drop out of school. In grade 7-12 high schools, students tend to have the same teachers for more than one class, either within the current year or over consecutive years. The extended amount of time that students spend with a smaller number of teachers in grade 7-12 high schools may be influencing the relationships between students and teachers.

With longer grade spans the interpersonal relationships among the students and between the students and teachers may have more time to mature and to positively change the school climate. It is possible that changing from the traditional 50-minute class periods to block schedules may help to reduce dropout rates, because students will have longer periods of time together (Alspaugh, 1997).

**Transition.** In a related study, Alspaugh (1997, 1998) found that whenever elementary students made a transition from one grade-level school organization to the next grade-level organization there was a consistent loss in student achievement. Students attending grade 10-12 high schools have experienced more transitions than
have students in grade 7-12 high schools. The timing of the transition at grade 10, when most students are approximately sixteen years old, may be a factor in the dropout rates. At this age students are particularly sensitive to issues of acceptance, stability, and security.

Hoffer (1997), supporting Alspaugh, reports that students who make a transition from a junior high/middle school appear to have a higher dropout rate than students who attend grades seven though twelve at the same school. Also, when two or more junior high/middle schools graduate to a single, large high school, the dropout rates are even higher—as relationships among students are disrupted.

Alspaugh (1997) found that students experience a significant loss in self-esteem during the first year after they change schools. This loss in self-esteem is exacerbated by multiple school transitions. Crockett et al. (1989, as cited in Alspaugh, 1997) found a negative effect of double school transitions on the functioning of adolescents, particularly with respect to course grades. There may be a relationship between students' experiences with double school transitions and higher dropout rates for high schools with shorter gradespans.

The diversity of the instructional program (for example, the variety of courses available) was found to have less relationship to high school dropout rates than how a students feel about the school environment itself (Alspaugh, 1997). There is a possibility that when a school expands its course offerings it is also fracturing the student body into isolated groups. When students do not go from class to class with the same friends the school climate may deteriorate and student may be more likely to dropout of school.
Personal Issues

Emotional distress and other personal problems are common among high school students (Wassef, Mason, Collins, O’Boyle, & Ingham, 1996). Students are more at risk of dropping out if they have unsolved personal problems, for example, becoming parents at an early age (Berktold et al., 1998). Other personal factors include substance abuse, family problems, and taking on a full-time job (Franklin & Streeter, 1995). High schools can either improve or exacerbate this risk depending on their attitude towards students in these circumstances. McPartland (1993) included “help (given by the school) in attaining freedom from personal problems” as a key focus area for dropout prevention. One program to help students with self-assessed emotional problems achieved some positive results through the use of a voluntary peer support group that met at school, during school hours. Of participating students, 77.8% reported that the program helped them find new ways to deal with their problems. (Wassef et al., 1996).

School Activities

As the number of students attending a particular high school increases, the number of those students who participate in student activities decreases (Kleinert 1969, as cited in Alspaugh, 1997). When the number of participants in the school activities is fixed, the probability that an individual student will have an opportunity to participate decreases as the school enrollment increases.

The number of activities in high schools tends to remain consistent whether the number of students increases or decreases. Students in larger schools, therefore, often have fewer opportunities to participate in school activities than they would in schools.
with smaller student populations. For example, nearly every high school has only one football team, whether the school has 200 students to 2000.

Lack of participation in extracurricular activities was common among Kansas’s high school’s dropouts. Participation in activities such as athletics and fine arts were related to student retention. Participation in activities such as academic and vocational clubs had no relation to student retention (Bell, 1967).

Relationships With Friends

Alspaugh (1998) mentioned the importance of friends and how much they can influence each other. They can encourage each other to go to school or they can encourage each other to drop out of school. Both completion and dropout status were strongly associated with the number of friends 1988 eighth graders had in 1992 with plans to attend a 4-year college, the year their friends were graduating from high school.

Dekovic and Meeus (1997) emphasize the importance of close relationships in the development of adolescents’ self-esteem. Without at least one close friendship, students naturally feel isolated in their school’s social environment. On the other hand, achieving the “significant social achievement” of having close friendships will increase adolescents’ self-confidence and their ability to succeed socially at school.

Relationships With Adults

According to Testerman (1996), “research shows that poor student-teacher relations adversely affect students’ self-concept.” She also reports an example of one high school where positive adult/student relationships were consciously developed, which resulted in improved attendance and grade-point averages. A teacher/student mentorship program produced similar outcomes, including a lower dropout rate
(Campbell and Campbell, 1997). Clearly, students have a better chance of succeeding in school when they have the benefit of a strong relationship with an adult at school.

Suggested Solutions

West (1991) identified three key principles that characterize successful dropout prevention programs: helping students to feel valued and cared for, motivating student engagement in the educational process, and a supportive environment for the teachers themselves. Given the above school related factors contributing to high school dropout decisions, Alspaugh (1998) summarizes ways in which administrators can make the high school environment positively influence these factors. At a high level, the organizational structure of the school can influence its social structure. Positive, abiding personal relationships provide a strong incentive for students to remain in school. Because they encourage and reinforce long-term friendships and relationships with adults, therefore, small neighborhood schools and longer grade spans are preferable to larger schools and shorter grade spans. Small schools organized with K-6 and 7-12, moreover, experience the lowest dropout rates. In short, “bigger is not better.”

Summary

Although dropouts may have chosen to leave school for a number of reasons, many of those reasons are related to the school itself. In one study, more than three-quarters of dropouts cited a school-related reason for dropping out (Berktold, et al., 1998). The size of a high school student population affects both the social climate and available opportunities for school activities. Continuity is an important element in retaining high school students. Furthermore, high schools with longer grade spans promote continuity, greater teacher and peer familiarity, and fewer disruptive transitions.
Such schools are more likely to retain students than schools with short grade span. High schools have a better chance to prevent students from dropping out if they contribute to a supportive social environment for students facing personal crises. The availability and the variety of a high school’s extracurricular activities—especially athletics and fine arts—is an important component in a student’s affinity with his or her school. When a student has a strong social environment at school, he or she will be less likely to drop out, especially if his or her friends view school favorably. Finally, a positive personal relationship with one or more adults at school can overcome other challenges that contribute to a student’s decision to drop out.
Chapter III
Method

The purpose of this study was to explore school-related factors that contribute to high school dropout by developing a survey and administering it to a group of high school students. The survey was designed to elicit details about school-related challenges that have been shown to contribute to students’ decisions to drop out of high school. The data obtained from this study can be used to find ways for high school teachers, counselors, and administrators to eliminate some of the frustrations that can result in a student deciding to drop out. Finding the school-related contributors to dropout rates help schools find ways to remove obstacles, improve the relationships they have with their students, and increase retention. This in turn will help find solutions to assist students in their success and satisfaction in school.

Participants

The participants in this research were 40 Asian high school students. Each student attended one of four high schools in Santa Clara County. Their ages ranged from fourteen to eighteen years. Twenty-five females and fifteen males participated. All of these students were selected to participate in this study because they were at risk of dropping out. The reasons they were at risk are manifold: their grades were declining, they were missing too much school, or personal problems were distracting them from their studies. Hopefully, the results of this study will identify ways to help students improve their relationship with the school.
The research literature provided information and ideas used to construct the survey. Studies provided insight into school-related factors that can put high school students at risk of dropping out, such as the relationships the students have with teachers and friends at school.

The survey (see Appendix) consisted of 13 Likert type statements, each of which related to one of the following six Research Questions:

1. What is the impact of school size on students’ school experience?
2. To what extent is continuity in school important to students?
3. To what extent do students feel that their school helps them with personal issues?
4. How do school-related activities influence students’ attitudes towards school?
5. How do students’ relationships with their friends at school and outside of school affect their attitudes towards school?
6. To what extent do students’ relationships with adults at school affect their perceptions of school?

Research Question No. 1 was addressed by survey statement 13; Research Question No. 2 was addressed in survey statements 1, 2, and 12; Research Question No. 3 was addressed in survey statements 5 and 11; Research Question No. 4 was addressed in survey question 6 and 7; Research Question No. 5 was addressed in survey statements 3 and 4; and Research Question No. 6 was addressed in survey statements 9 and 10.
One additional survey statement (No. 8) was included to obtain information regarding the respondent's general attitude towards school.

Because high school students sometimes feel as though they have limited options in their lives, they may not apply much thought or effort in responding to simple “yes/no/sometimes” questions. This study’s survey was designed to encourage the respondents to think and to express themselves more clearly and lucidly. For each of the 13 statements, the participant had possible responses ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” requiring more precise assessment of his or her true opinions. No indefinite (“sometimes”) responses were available. Moreover, the student was asked to explain his or her response.

Each statement also included an area for ideas the student might have for improving the situation reflected by the statement. This gave the respondent an opportunity to broaden his or her self-image by contributing to the solution rather than remaining a victim of the problem.

Procedure

All participants were informed of the specific purpose of the study, and instructions for the instrument were clearly explained to the students. Each student received the instrument individually, and responded to the statements immediately after receiving the instrument. The facilitator remained with each student throughout the entire response process, to clarify any questions, and to help elicit more details from the respondent. There was no time limit. Each student returned the completed instrument to the facilitator. The participants were guaranteed that their responses would be kept
confidential. The total time taken to administer the survey was approximately 80 hours, or an average of 2 hours per student.
Chapter IV

Results

Some factors that enter into students’ decisions to drop out of school are related to the school itself. The purpose of this study was to explore six school-related factors identified through recent research: School Size, Continuity, Personal Issues, School Activities, Relationships with Friends, and Relationships with Adults. For this study, a survey was designed to elicit details about school-related challenges that have been shown to contribute to students’ decisions to drop out of high school. The data obtained from this study can be used to find ways for high school teachers, counselors, and administrators to eliminate some of the frustrations that can result in a student deciding to drop out. Finding the school-related contributors to dropout rates help schools find ways to remove obstacles, improve the relationships they have with their students, and increase retention. This in turn will help find solutions to assist students in their success and satisfaction in school.

The survey was designed to obtain as much information as possible by allowing respondents to express their strongest feelings about issues relating directly to the school environment, while having the opportunity to explain their answers and to make suggestions for improvement.

The participants in this research were 40 Asian high school students. Each student attended one of four high schools in Santa Clara County. Their ages ranged from fourteen to eighteen years. Twenty-five females and fifteen males participated. All of these students were selected to participate in this study because they were at risk
of dropping out. The reasons they were at risk are manifold: their grades were declining, they were missing too much school, or personal problems were distracting them from their studies.

The responses confirmed the importance of the school-related factors identified by current research. The frequency of responses in the "Strongly Agree" and "Strongly Disagree" categories indicates the significance of these factors to the respondents.

Tabulation and Correlation

Each of the six Research Questions addresses a particular school-related factor (Research Focus Area) that can contribute to a student's decision to drop out. Each of the thirteen survey statements provides information for a specific Research Question. Table 1 shows the correlation between survey statements and Focus Areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Area</th>
<th>Survey Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. School Size</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Continuity</td>
<td>1, 2, 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Personal Issues</td>
<td>5, 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. School Activities</td>
<td>6, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Relationships with Friends</td>
<td>3, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Relationships with Adults</td>
<td>9, 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of the 40 participating students provided objective responses (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree) for all thirteen survey statements. These responses are tabulated in Table 2.
Table 2
Tabulated Objective Responses (N=40)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Area</th>
<th>Survey Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. School Size</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Continuity</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Personal Issues</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. School Activities</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Relationships with Friends</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>6. Relationships with Adults</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td></td>
<td>133</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One survey statement (No. 8) was designed to obtain information regarding the Respondent’s overall attitude towards school. Survey results for each Focus Area are summarized in the following section, along with selected representative comments. The results are also presented graphically in charts.

**Focus Area 1: School Size**

Research Question 1 asked: What is the impact of school size on students’ school experience? Respondents felt more strongly about this area than any other:
88% disagreed with the proposition (survey statement 13) that they prefer going to a large school (See Figure 1). Selected comments on school size included:

- Unless the school is bad, staying at the same place cause it minimizes the stress of transition and gives more time to develop good relationships with peers and adults.
- I feel much safer and more comfortable.
- The longer I stay at one school, the more comfortable I become.
- I get more attention when there are fewer students in the classroom.

Focus Area 2: School Continuity

Research Question 2 asked: To what extent is school continuity important to students? Three survey statements (Nos. 1, 2, and 12) related to this Research Question. In all three cases, a large majority of the respondents confirmed that continuity (stable, consistent environment) is an important component of their attitudes towards and success in school. 97% (39 of 40 respondents) either strongly agreed or agreed with survey statement No.1 (“I like seeing teachers at school that I had when I was younger”). A similar majority (92% or 37 of 40 respondents) agreed or strongly agreed with survey statement No. 2 (“I like to stay at the same school for as long as possible”). This pattern remained consistent in the responses to survey statement No.3 (“Changing schools has had a positive effect on how well I do in school”): 70% (28 of 40 respondents) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. In this case, however, more students (30% or 12 of 40 respondents) indicated that changing schools actually had a positive
Research Area 1: School Size

(13) I like to go to a school with a lot of people.

![Bar Chart](chart)

- **Strongly Agree**: 2
- **Agree**: 3
- **Disagree**: 14
- **Strongly Disagree**: 21
effect on their academic success. (See Figure 2). Selected comments on school continuity included:

- It always helped me to see familiar faces and do the same things. Change is always scary.
- If I have to change schools, then I will start all over again. It will be too hard to make good friends again. It will be too (disruptive), I would have to get used to everything again.
- I lost too much friends and people I know.
- If you change schools, you have to change your entire routine.
- Staying in one place makes you do better in school.
- Grades might go down if I change too much school.
- I like to keep my relationship with my teachers.
- Teachers were always there for me when I was younger; it seemed so simple back then.
- It is always good to see our teachers because they always knew if something was wrong with us.
- Going from one school to another really affect(ed) my self-esteem.
- The longer I stay at one school, the more comfortable I become.

**Focus Area 3: Personal Issues**

Research Question 3 asked: To what extent do students feel that their school helps them with personal issues? Two survey statements (Nos. 5 and 11) related to this
Research Area 2: School Continuity

(1) I like seeing teachers at school that I had when I was younger.

(2) I like to stay at the same school for as long as possible.

(12) Changing schools has had a positive effect on how well I do in school.
Research Question. Responses to these two statements were consistent: 78% (31 of 40 respondents) disagreed or strongly disagreed with survey statement No. 5 ("I feel like my school is there to help me no matter what I might encounter"), and of these, most (19 of 31) strongly disagreed. Similarly, 73% (29 of 40 respondents) disagreed or strongly disagreed with survey statement No. 11 ("My school values the things I do at school"). In this case, however, there were fewer strong disagreements (41%, or 12 of 29) than for survey statement No. 5.

Consistent personal issues reported by respondents included loneliness, fear, uncertainty, and pressure. Moreover, a large majority of responses indicated that the school environment exacerbated these issues rather than helping students deal with them effectively (see Figure 3). Selected comments on personal issues included:

- They never seem to want to help.
- School doesn’t really seem interested in anything that my friends and me do. I do not even think that we are welcome.
- No one is ever there to lend a helping hand. When I ask for some advice, I always get the runaround. My answers are never given and my problems never seemed to get fixed.
- They are different when they at school and at home.
- My friends are always there for me, even if we are not in school.
- My friends act differently—in school and out of school.
- Teachers are very strict and don’t seem to care. They are just lecture and give homework and tests. They never seem to say anything to us besides “Be quiet” and “Test tomorrow.”
Research Area 3: Personal Issues

(5) I feel like my school is there to help me no matter what I might encounter.

(11) My school values the things I do at school.
- They don’t understand my culture.

- They aren’t really active with many students. It is pretty routine for them.

- I guess! You need to do well in order for them to look good, so I guess that’s encouragement.

- Teachers do not even know me.

- The only adults that I encounter are my teachers and they aren’t very talkative outside of class.

- My art teacher is cool. He always asks me how I am doing.

- Every year I get new teachers and I never get to know them.

Focus Area 4: School Activities

Research Question 4 asked: To what extent do school-related activities affect students’ feelings about school? Two survey statements (Nos. 6 and 7) related to this Research Question. School-related activities turned out to be more important to the respondents than their actual participation in those activities would have indicated. While 73% expressed interest in some kind of extracurricular school activity (Question 6), 75% did not feel that these activities were available to them (Question 7). (See Figure 4). The perceived reason for this disparity most commonly reported was that most activities are designed for males. Selected comments on school-related activities included:

- A lot of sports I’m interested.

- …I …want to have fun doing activities and learning something while I’m having fun.
Research Area 4: School Activities

(6) There are school activities that I am interested in.

Strongly Agree 13
Agree 16
Disagree 4
Strongly Disagree 7

(7) Any activities that I am interested in are available to me.

Strongly Agree 5
Agree 4
Disagree 12
Strongly Disagree 19
- I like to try out all different kinds of activities to see what I might be interested in.
- I am interested in sports, but they are not very welcoming towards me and my friends…
- It is hard to make a team because (there are) too much people.
- (School activities are) available, but I am too discouraged to try out for them.
- It is only for guys.

Focus Area 5: Relationships with Friends

Research Question 5 asked: How do students’ relationships with their friends at school and outside of school affect their attitudes towards school? Two survey statements (Nos. 3 and 4) related to this Research Question. Regarding their friends’ attitudes towards school (survey statement 4), the respondents were, in general, evenly divided: 42% (17 of 40 respondents) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “My friends like to go to school”; 57% (23 of 40 respondents) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. The distribution of opinions for survey statement 3 (“I have as much fun with friends at school as I do when I’m not at school”) was more heavily weighted towards agreement: 68% (27 of 40 respondents) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. (See Figure 5).

In their responses to a variety of questions, students consistently indicated that the quality of their relationships with friends was important enough to affect their overall perception of school. Most students felt as though they could not have the same quality relationship with their friends at school as they could have outside school. Respondents
Figure 5

Research Area 5: Relationships With Friends

(4) My friends like to go to school.

(3) I have as much fun with friends at school as I do when I am not at school.
generally reported that their attitude towards school reflected the attitudes of their friends. Comments on respondents’ relationships with friends included:

- They are different when they (are) at school (from how they are) at home.
- At school—we do not see each other much or too busy. Out of school—more fun—do things that we enjoy.
- School is primarily the only time I can see my friends and hang out with them. So school is fun for me.
- It doesn’t matter where you’re at. As long as you’re with your friends, the environment doesn’t matter much.
- My friends like school and because of that, they always encourage me to stay in school.
- They are fed up with the school system.
- Hardly any of my friends go to school.
- We like to go to school. It lets them do something besides sleep and watch TV.
- I like to hang out with friends who go to school because they encourage me to go to school.
- They always encourage me to cut with them.
- If I want to spend time with my friends I have to cut class.

Focus Area 6: Relationships with Adults

Research Question 6 asked: To what extent do students’ relationships with adults at school affect their attitudes towards school? Two survey questions (Nos. 9 and
10) related to this Research Question. The respondents were evenly divided (50%, or 20 of 40 respondents) on their agreement or disagreement with survey statement 9 ("I have a strong relationship with an adult(s) who cares for and supports me at school"). Most of those who did not agree with this statement (80%, or 16 of 20 respondents) strongly disagreed. Similarly, the responses to survey statement 10 ("Teachers at school encourage me to be the best I can be") were generally evenly divided: 45% (18 of 40 respondents) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while 55% (22 of 40 respondents) disagreed or strongly disagreed. (See Figure 6).

In sharp contrast to their strong identification with their friends, respondents overwhelmingly reported strong feelings of alienation from their teachers or other adults at school. On the other hand, in those few cases where students had established a relationship with one or more teachers, that relationship was reported to be very important and helpful to them. Comments on respondents’ relationships with adults at school included:

- The only adults that I encounter are my teachers and they aren’t very talkative outside of class. I think they are too busy. The other adults walk around with walkie-talkies around the campus.
- Teachers are too busy and other adults are too cranky.
- I only talk to adults when I have a question about a lecture or assignment. I don’t think the school is very supportive.
- (My coach) appreciates me for who I am.
- Teachers are very strict and don’t seem to care.
- They try to help me whenever they can.
Research Area 6: Relationships With Adults

(9) I have a strong relationship with an adult(s) who cares for and supports me at school.

- Strongly Agree: 11
- Agree: 9
- Disagree: 4
- Strongly Disagree: 16

(10) Teachers at school encourage me to be the best I can be.

- Strongly Agree: 8
- Agree: 10
- Disagree: 9
- Strongly Disagree: 13
They aren’t really active with many students. It is pretty routine for them. Lectures, homework, papers…

They never understand my situation.

They do not care about me.

I think all teachers want their students to be successful. It shows that they are doing their job.

I feel more comfortable to talk to them, to share with them about everything.

**Overall Disposition towards School**

Survey statement No. 8 (“I look forward to going to school”) was included to obtain information regarding the respondent’s general attitude towards school. The responses to this question reflect a variety of opinions: 57% (23 of 40 respondents) showed an interest in school by agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, while 43% (17 of 40 respondents) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. (See Figure 7).

**Respondents’ Recommendations for Improvement**

Although very few respondents articulated actual improvement strategies, several comments singled out specific improvement areas. The following selected comments are representative of this group.

**School Continuity.**

- I want to get to know all my teachers and friends.
- I like to see familiar faces and familiar school.
- I do not have to make new friends all the time.
Figure 7

Overall Disposition Towards School

(8) I look forward to going to school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disposition</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Personal Issues.

- I feel that the school needs to let all students know what resources are there to help them.
- I do not believe that they are there to help me
- Schools need to be more helpful...the only time I see an administrator is when something is in trouble. They need to be there for good things too.

School Activities.

- Most guys and girls like sports
- Not enough activities
- They need (to) encourage girls to get more involved by having more activities

Relationships with Friends.

- I just want to have fun with my friends when I’m around them.
- I think that they should allow us to socialize much more...schools need to emphasize that learning is fun.

Relationships with Adults.

- No one ever told me that I did a good job
- I want to be able to speak my mind.

Additional Information

Based upon a number of comments made by respondents to statements regarding school-related factors contributing to dropping out, another theme emerged: fear.

Clearly (for these students at least), school can be a potentially dangerous environment.
The following comments (with the survey statement to which it was attached) illustrate this theme:

- You do not know who to trust
- Too much peer pressure and unsafe
- ... we do not know which one to which and that can lead to something dangerous
- Sometimes I feel unsafe around a lot of people because some people got weapons
- I feel intimidated and scared
- More gangs and fights
- Some of the teachers are racist
- Sometimes I feel unsafe (at school)
Chapter V

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

Some factors that enter into students’ decisions to drop out of school are related to the school itself. The purpose of this study was to explore six school-related factors identified through recent research: School Size, School Continuity, Personal Issues, School Activities, Relationships with Friends, and Relationships with Adults. School Size (the number of students attending a particular school) can have an impact on a student’s feelings of belonging and success at school. School Continuity refers to how changes in the school environment can contribute to a student’s decision to stay in school or to drop out. Personal Issues involves not only the personal circumstances that contribute to a student’s decision to drop out, but also the level of support the student receives from his or her school. School Activities considers the importance of school activities in students’ attitude towards school. Relationships With Friends considers the influence of peers on a student’s decision to continue education or not. Relationships With Adults refers to the importance of students’ interactions with teachers and other adults at school in their attitude towards school.

In order to gain understanding about these school-related issues, the following Research Questions were developed for this study:

1. What is the impact of school size on students’ school experience?
2. To what extent is continuity in school important to students?
3. To what extent do students feel that their school helps them with personal issues?

4. How do school-related activities influence students’ attitudes towards school?

5. How do students’ relationships with their friends at school and outside of school affect their attitudes towards school?

6. To what extent do students’ relationships with adults at school affect their perceptions of school?

For this study, a survey was designed to elicit details about school-related challenges that have been shown to contribute to students’ decisions to drop out of high school. The data obtained from this study can be used to find ways for high school teachers, counselors, and administrators to eliminate some of the frustrations that can result in a student deciding to drop out. Finding the school-related contributors to dropout rates help schools find ways to remove obstacles, improve the relationships they have with their students, and increase retention. This in turn will help find solutions to assist students in their success and satisfaction in school.

The survey was designed to obtain as much information as possible by allowing respondents to express their strongest feelings about issues relating directly to the school environment, while having the opportunity to explain their answers and to make suggestions for improvement.

The participants in this research were 40 Asian high school students. Each student attended one of four high schools in Santa Clara County. Their ages ranged from fourteen to eighteen years. Twenty-five females and fifteen males participated.
All of these students were selected to participate in this study because they were at risk of dropping out. The reasons they were at risk are manifold: their grades were declining, they were missing too much school, or personal problems were distracting them from their studies.

**Discussion of Findings**

The responses confirmed the importance of the six school-related factors identified by current research and focused on in this study. The consistency of responses in the “Strongly Agree” and “Strongly Disagree” categories indicates the significance of these factors to the respondents. This study’s findings suggest that students at risk of dropping out do not necessarily begin with negative feelings towards their schools. The respondents’ overall disposition towards school was not significantly either positive or negative. The data, in fact, show a consistent willingness to make the best of their school experience. The school environment clearly influences students’ attitudes towards school. Although some students report positive school experiences, a large majority reported that the school environment more often contributed to feelings of isolation, fear, confusion, frustration, and even despair. Objective and subjective responses obtained in this study show strongly that the six Research Focus Areas are truly significant factors in students’ satisfaction or frustration with their schools. This study’s results demonstrate that there are key factors contributing to students’ decisions to drop out that are under the direct control of the school itself. Schools, therefore, can make a difference in reducing dropout rates.
Respondents overwhelmingly (88%) preferred to attend a school with a small student population. These students currently attend large high schools (>3000 students); their comments about this environment reflect consistent feelings of pressure, isolation, and fear.

Results strongly indicate that continuity in their school experiences is important to these students: 93% agreed or strongly agreed that they preferred to stay at the same school for as long as possible. Respondents’ comments in this area consistently referred positively to the feeling of familiarity with the environment and their daily interactions with peers and adults. Conversely, change in the school environment consistently was seen to be a negative phenomenon. Several respondents commented that change had a negative impact on their self-esteem.

The study found that a large majority (78%) of these students did not feel as though their schools supported them personally. Respondents consistently commented that they had to deal with personal issues alone, with no help from school staff. Most often, moreover, respondents perceived the school as being in conflict with themselves. One troubling theme that emerged was that students often do not feel as though they are valued by the school system. Sometimes, in fact, they do not even feel welcome.

Findings clearly indicate that students are interested in participating in school activities: 73% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there are one or more school related activities in which they are interested. At the same time, however, most respondents (80%) felt as though they did not have access to the school activities that interested them. In addition to a general lack of enough activities to accommodate a school with a large student population, students also reported in their comments that...
activities were designed only for students who fit a predefined profile, for example, “fit and attractive” or “male.”

Results demonstrated fairly evenly-distributed opinions among respondents’ friends regarding school: 43% reported that their friends like school; 57% disagreed with this proposition. Surprisingly, most respondents’ comments indicated that they did not feel as though school would impair their social interactions with friends. No correlation was apparent between a respondent’s feeling towards school and his or her friends’ feelings. This indicates that students may not be as easily influenced by their friends as might be expected regarding decisions to stay in school or to drop out. The most significant information in this area obtained from respondents’ comments was the importance of friends in these students’ lives.

The findings demonstrate that these students would very much like to have a good relationship with one or more adults at school. Their responses, however, show that only half of them (50%) have been able to reach this goal. Those students who did not report a strong relationship with an adult at school consistently expressed their disappointment with this situation in their comments. Although students sincerely would like to be on better terms with adults at school, their comments indicate that they usually see adults as being distant, apathetic, and authoritative.

Conclusions

Schools can make a difference in preventing their students from dropping out. This study consistently showed that students are desperately looking to adults at school for understanding, reassurance, and supportiveness. The results of this study suggest
that traditional dropout causes such as predisposition towards school and the influence of friends are less important to students than how their schools treat them personally.

Students overwhelmingly prefer a school environment that promotes familiarity, physical and emotional safety, and supportiveness. They want to be able to get to know individuals at school—both peers and adults. When the school helps the student feel important and cared for, he or she has a much more positive attitude towards school. Conversely, when the school is not supportive in these areas, a student can feel isolated, fearful, and disillusioned. These are the types of feelings that can greatly reduce a student’s motivation to attend school.

Recommendations

Adults in the school system (teachers, counselors, administrators, staff) can improve their students’ attitudes towards school by contributing to an environment that reinforces their well-being and self-esteem.

Ideally school size should be reasonable, which will encourage students to participate. Where school size cannot be (controlled), however, adults still should take care to build an environment in which the student feels welcome as an individual.

When students feel like the school is a place in which they can belong, they will be less likely to seek unhealthy alternatives outside of school.

Schools should recognize the importance of continuity to their students, and should do everything possible to minimize disruptive changes. One approach to this challenge would be to increase the gradespan of a school from K-6 to K-8 or K-12. Students in such schools would have greater opportunity to know their teachers.
Teachers who see their students at school even after they have (moved forward in grade) also are better able to detect when a student may be having personal problems they might not openly share. Children generally respond apprehensively to change. Having an ongoing relationship with an adult at school can help a student to get through changes (for example, moving from one grade to another) more easily.

Simply providing school activities does not help all students to participate in those activities. A school’s student population should be taken into consideration when planning the number and the types of activities that will be available. For example, most high schools have a single Varsity football team, usually consisting of 20-30 players. In a school of 3000 students, therefore, only about 1% will be able to participate on the football team. The same applies to other sports as well. It seems reasonable, therefore, for a large school to have more than one team for a particular sport. Any student with the appropriate skills to qualify for a sport should have the same opportunity as anyone else. Some school activities seem designed only for certain groups. This is especially true for team sports, in which males continue to be dominant. Moreover, school activities sometimes exclude cultural groups. For example, Asian students are very unlikely to join a cheerleader squad. A school’s demographic constituency should guide administrators in planning school activities.

The most important area in which a school can contribute to the well-being of its students is personal relationships with peers and with adults. Personal relationships are much more important to most students than academic success. If a student does not have some kind of positive interpersonal experience at school, he or she will easily abandon school to search for this somewhere else. Schools should take great care to
encourage students to develop and to maintain meaningful relationships. In the words
of one respondent, students should feel as though they can “kick it with their friends
whether they are at school or not.”

Sometimes a relationship with a single adult at school can be the key factor in a
student’s decision to stay in school or to drop out. Having an adult with whom a
student can share both problems and successes is critical to their well-being. This will
help students to see their school as an accepting and supporting system. All teachers
and other adults in the school system should undertake regular formal training in
counseling skills. Beyond such training, however, adults can take individual initiative in
this area simply by making the effort to treat each student individually and fairly.

Adolescents today are experiencing far more pressures and problems than the
teenagers of a generation ago. In addition to the usual economic pressures, teens today
are faced with alcohol and other drug abuse, suicide, depression, isolation, loneliness,
feeling disconnected, eating disorders, gang behavior, violence, precocious and
widespread sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, family problems and so on. These are
some of the factors that are causing a steadily increasing number of high school students
to leave school. The school itself should not be an additional contributor to the high
school dropout phenomenon. On the contrary, schools have both an opportunity and a
responsibility to become a place where students can find relief from the other pressures
they experience. In many cases, school is the only place where a student might find an
adult who cares for them. This is what students are desperately searching for: they
want attention, encouragement, and feedback; they want someone to be there for them.
Administrators and educators, therefore, can make a difference.
References


Appendix

Survey

1. I like seeing teachers at school that I had when I was younger.
   
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree
   
   □  □  □  □

   Explain.

   How can we improve this situation?

2. I like to stay at the same school for as long as possible.

   Strongly Agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree
   
   □  □  □  □

   Explain.

   How can we improve this situation?

3. I have as much fun with friends at school as I do when I am not at school.

   Strongly Agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree
   
   □  □  □  □

   Explain.

   How can we improve this situation?
4. My friends like to go to school.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<td>□</td>
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</table>

Explain.

How can we improve this situation?

5. I feel like my school is there to help me no matter what I might encounter.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tr>
<td>□</td>
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Explain.

How can we improve this situation?

6. There are school activities that I am interested in.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tr>
<td>□</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Explain.

How can we improve this situation?
7. Any activities that I am interested in are available to me.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

□       □       □       □

Explain.

How can we improve this situation?

8. I look forward to going to school.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

□       □       □       □

Explain.

How can we improve this situation?

9. I have a strong relationship with an adult(s) who cares for and supports me at school.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

□       □       □       □

Explain.

How can we improve this situation?
10. Teachers at school encourage me to be the best I can be.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

☐    ☐    ☐    ☐

Explain.

How can we improve this situation?

11. My school values the things I do at school.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

☐    ☐    ☐    ☐

Explain.

How can we improve this situation?

12. Changing schools has had a positive effect on how well I do in school.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

☐    ☐    ☐    ☐

Explain.

How can we improve this situation?
13. I like to go to a school with a lot people.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
☐               ☐        ☐             ☐

Explain.

How can we improve this situation?