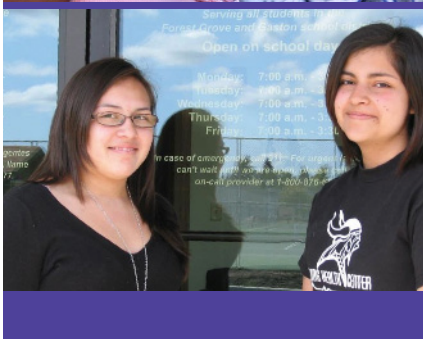


Center for School, Health and Education

AT THE
American
Public Health
Association



Reducing High School Dropout: Developing Solutions Tailored to Boys and to Girls

In December of 2010, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) launched Healthy People 2020, a science-based, 10-year national agenda for improving the health of all Americans. For the first time since the agenda was created 30 years ago, Healthy People 2020 targets high school graduation as a key element and goal for promoting population health. Recognizing the interdependent impact health and education have on one another, Healthy People 2020 includes the following objective as one of its Leading Health Indicators: “increase the proportion of students who graduate with a regular diploma four years after starting 9th grade.”¹

Others are also paying closer attention to the mutual investment that public health and educational entities have in achieving graduation for all students. The work of the National Coordinating Committee on School Health and Safety (NCCSHS), for example, a collaborative of six federal agencies and nearly 100 non-governmental organizations, is guided by the vision that all children in the nation will be healthy and achieve academic success.²

The American Public Health Association (APHA) adopted a policy statement in 2010 that calls for collaborative work across sectors to improve high school graduation as a means of eliminating health disparities.³ APHA’s own recently established Center for School, Health and Education was created to advance school-based health care as a comprehensive strategy for preventing school dropout and

improving graduation rates for K–12 students. There is increasing evidence of a collective will to build stronger collaborative approaches to keeping students in school, well, and on track to graduation.⁴

This issue brief was prepared to underscore the importance of developing interventions that are tailored to the different reasons boys and girls drop out of school. It provides evidence to support the proposition that gender matters both in the reasons students drop out of school and the interventions that are most likely to keep them well, in school, and motivated to learn. Though many of the dynamics surrounding school dropout are shared between boys and girls (see following page), factors that are particularly important to boys or to girls are highlighted on the pages that follow.

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COMMON REASONS BOYS DROP OUT OF SCHOOL

Disciplinary Issues

Every year, 3.3 million students in the United States are suspended from school.⁵ Boys are more likely than girls to be expelled, suspended, or receive other disciplinary actions for behavioral issues.⁶ According to a national survey conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics of students who dropped out of high school (henceforth the “NCES survey”), just under one-quarter (22%) of male students reported that they were suspended and 15% were expelled from school, compared with 9% and 3% of females, respectively.⁷

Another recent analysis found that male students were suspended at a rate roughly twice that of female students (32% vs. 17%, respectively) and expelled at twice the rate as well (4% vs. 2%).⁸ According to the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights, male students, who comprise about half the student population, represent 74% of expelled students.⁹ The Schott Foundation reports that students who have been suspended are three times more likely to drop out of school by 10th grade than students who have never been suspended.¹⁰

Misbehavior outside of school, such as property crimes, selling drugs,

theft, and assault, pose a serious threat to successful graduation as well. According to a study conducted by the National Center for School Engagement and Johns Hopkins University’s The Center for Social Organization of Schools, boys tend to “get incarcerated for ‘real’ crimes (drugs, stealing cars, gang violence, etc.);...girls may get arrested for petty theft, domestic disturbances, even truancy, which are more likely to trigger involvement with social services or truancy court than the juvenile justice system,” enabling them, unlike boys, to continue to attend school.¹¹

The likelihood of being removed from school and the classroom is disproportionately greater for students of color. African-American males are particularly vulnerable to being suspended or expelled: one in five African-American boys received out-of-school suspension compared with roughly one in ten White males and one in ten African-American girls.¹² As the U.S. Office for Civil Rights reports, “African-American students are over 3½ times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their peers who are White. Over 70% of students involved in school-related arrests or referred to law enforcement are Hispanic or African-American.”¹³

Why Do Students Drop Out of School?

Russell W. Rumberger’s 2011 book, *Dropping Out: Why Students Drop Out of High School and What Can be Done About It*,¹⁴ provides an extensive review of the literature on why students drop out of school. As is evident in Rumberger’s work and the broader literature, students leave school for a complex set of reasons, many of which can be traced back to their early experiences in school. Examples of key factors found to be related to high school dropout include the following:

School characteristics, such as the quality of teachers, level of expectations of students, school climate, adequacy of resources and support services, disciplinary policies and practices, school size and location, student-teacher ratio, and student composition

Family characteristics, including socioeconomic status, parenting practices, parent engagement in students’ learning and in schools, family structure, school mobility, homelessness, and violence and abuse in the home

Student characteristics, including:

- **Educational performance**, such as failed courses, test scores, grade retention, and academic achievement
- **School engagement**, including:
 - Behavioral engagement, such as attendance/ absenteeism, disciplinary issues, involvement in school-related activities
 - Cognitive engagement, such as investment and motivation in learning

- Emotional engagement, such as feelings about being in school, relationships with teachers, peers, learning

- **Behaviors outside of school**, including risky behaviors, violence, extent of out-of-school work
- **Psychosocial attributes, attitudes**, such as goals, self-perceptions, and resiliency
- **Health status**, such as freedom from chronic disease or acute illness, self-assessments of health and well-being
- **Demographic characteristics**, such as race and ethnicity, age, gender, immigration status
- **Early adult responsibilities**, such as managing pregnancy and parenting

Community characteristics, including poverty, unmet needs, inequities in the quality and availability of services and opportunities, such as child care, health care, transportation, employment

District, tribal, state, and federal policies, such as exit exam requirements, incentives to retain low-performing students, policies and practices that perpetuate inequity, racism, and disparities in health and well-being

Combined factors from the above, including composite measures of risk factors, typologies, and structural models of dropping out

“Well over three million children, K–12, are estimated to have lost instructional “seat time” in 2009–2010 because they were suspended from school, often with no guarantee of adult supervision outside the school. That’s about the number of children it would take to fill every seat in every major league baseball park and every NFL stadium in America, combined.”

Losen, Daniel J., and Gillespie, Jonathan. “Opportunities Suspended: The Disparate Impact of Disciplinary Exclusion from School.” August 2012.

“An African-American teenager recently told William R. Hite, Jr., the incoming school superintendent in Philadelphia, that there are more adults working in his high school who could arrest him than could help him fill out applications for college financial aid.”

“That story, shared recently with an audience of educators, advocates, and state and federal policymakers, punctuated an issue of increasing concern: the persistent vulnerability of Black boys.”

Maxwell, Lesli. “African-American Males in Policy Spotlight.” August 2012.

Employment to Support Their Families or Start a Career

The NCES survey found that more males than females indicated that they dropped out of school for any employment-related reason (41% vs. 28%, respectively) and that they left school because they got a job (34% males vs. 20% females).¹⁵ Male students who seek employment are more likely than females to report that they did so because of the need to support their families and/or to start a career.¹⁶

Being Held Back Because of Course Failure, Poor Academic Performance, Low Credit Accumulation

Poor academic achievement serves as a powerful predictor of dropout for both boys and girls. Course failure and being held back a grade, particularly in 9th grade, is a key risk factor for all students.¹⁷ More boys receive poorer grades and are held back in 9th than are girls.¹⁸

The NCES survey and another large-scale survey commissioned by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (henceforth, the “Gates survey”) found that over one-third of students reported that they dropped out because they were failing in school.^{19,20} The NCES survey found that somewhat more males (40%) than females (35%) indicated that they dropped out because they were “getting poor



grades or failing in school.”²¹ The Gates survey reports that the majority of these students believed that successfully passing from one grade to the next and the requirements for graduation were too difficult. Most of these respondents believed that their schools were not doing enough to help them when they had trouble learning.²²

“Two-thirds of the Ds and Fs given out in school go to boys. Boys are one-third more likely to drop out before finishing high school. Eighth grade girls score higher in both reading and especially in writing than boys do, and by 12th grade that gap has widened. Indeed, the average 11th grade boy in the U.S. writes at the level of the average 8th grade girl.”

Thompson, Michael. “Why Do So Many Boys Not Care About School?” January 2011.

Absenteeism

“There are clear warning signs for at least one to three years before (students) drop out that these students are losing interest in school....Students described a pattern of refusing to wake up, missing school, skipping class, and taking three-hour lunches—and each absence made them less willing to go back....Consistent with national data, absenteeism is the most common indicator of overall student engagement and a significant predictor of dropping out.”

Bridgeland, John M., Dilulio, John J., and Morison, Karen Burke. “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts.” March 2006. Page 8.



Chronic absenteeism is a key indicator of disengagement from school and an important predictor of dropout. Although the NCES survey reports that roughly the same proportion of males (44.1%) and females (42.7%) indicate that they dropped out of school because they missed too many days of school,²³ the reasons boys and girls miss school can differ, as described throughout these pages. According to researcher Robert Balfanz and his colleagues, the “ABC’s” of dropout—attendance, behavior, and course performance—can be used to predict high school graduation as early as the start of middle school.²⁴

“(Students) talked of the downward spiral of failure, from boredom in the classroom and occasionally skipping class, to long absences from school, engaging in risky behaviors, and becoming part of a sub-culture that thinks it is cool to drop out. As one student in our dropout study shared, ‘The streets would call me.’ Many students in our discussions in the four communities often found the world outside of school far more interesting and engaging than the world within.”

Bridgeland, John M., Balfanz, Robert, Moore, Laura A., and Friant, Rebecca S. “Raising Their Voices: Engaging Students, Teachers, and Parents to Help End the High School Dropout Epidemic.” March 2010. Page 11.

Disengagement From School

According to the Gates survey, the leading reason most students identified for having dropped out was that classes were not interesting (47%)—students were bored and disengaged from learning and other aspects of school life.²⁵ Just under half of all respondents (42%) indicated that others with whom they spend time were not interested in school. According to the NCES survey, males were particularly likely to indicate that they dropped out because they did not like school (40% versus 32% of females).²⁶

Disengaged students share common patterns: they perceive the school as

being unsupportive and/or irrelevant; they are not psychologically attached to school or invested in learning; they are more likely to be socially isolated and uninvolved in school-based social activities; and they are less likely to feel as though they have a sense of “belonging” to the school.²⁷

“Dropping out itself might be better viewed as a process of disengagement from school, perhaps for either academic or social reasons that culminates in the final act of leaving.”

Rumberger, Russell W. “Dropping Out: Why Students Drop Out of High School and What Can Be Done About It.” Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2011. Page 151.

Other reasons boys provide for dropping out in greater proportions than girls include: not liking school (40% of boys vs. 32% of girls), not getting along with teachers (28% vs. 22%), and changing schools and not liking the new one (15% vs. 7%).²⁸

Among students surveyed who had dropped out of school, “just two-fifths (41%) had someone in school to talk with about personal problems. More than three out of five (62%) said their school needed to do more to help students with problems outside of class.”

Bridgeland, John M., Dilulio, John J., and Morison, Karen Burke. “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts.” March 2006. Page v.

COMMON REASONS GIRLS DROP OUT OF SCHOOL

Pregnancy

Pregnancy is a leading risk factor for dropping out among girls. According to the NCES survey, just over one-quarter (28%) of females left school because of pregnancy, and 12% did so because of marriage or plans to marry, compared with 3% for males.²⁹ Some estimates suggest that almost half of the females who dropped out of high



school did so because of pregnancy and parenting responsibilities.³⁰

In addition to the challenges of keeping up with school while being pregnant, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) describes practices or policies in some schools that discourage pregnant students from staying in school:

“Since 1972, when Title IX was enacted, it has been illegal for schools to exclude pregnant and parenting students from school. Despite this fact, many schools fail to help pregnant and parenting teens stay in school, and some actually exclude or punish them. Girls from around the country tell the same stories: When they got pregnant or had a child, a principal, counselor, or teacher told them they’d have to leave school. In many cases, pregnant and parenting students are told outright that they can’t stay in school or must go to an alternative school, which all too often offer substandard educations. Sometimes the discrimination is more subtle. Schools refuse to give excused absences for doctor’s appointments, teachers refuse to allow make-up work, or staff members exclude them from school activities based on “morality” codes or make disparaging, discouraging and disapproving comments.”³¹

“More than any other group of high school dropouts, girls who leave due to pregnancy report that they would have stayed in school if they had received greater support from the adults at school.”

“..When schools make an effort to support pregnant girls in their education, they can have a significant impact in lowering their dropout rates.”

Mangel, Linda. “Teen Pregnancy, Discrimination, and the Dropout Rate.” October 2010.

Parenting

Being a young parent of a newborn or child while in school creates significant barriers to staying on track for graduation. The NCES survey found that roughly four times the number of female as male students indicated they dropped out of school because they became a parent (25% vs. 6.2%, respectively).³² The Gates survey found that 33% of females who dropped out of school reported that becoming a parent played a major role in their decision to leave school, as opposed to 19% for males.³³

Caregiving Responsibilities

Greater proportions of girls than boys report that they dropped out of school for family-related reasons (45%

vs. 25%, respectively), according to the NCES survey.³⁴ Girls are more likely than boys to be expected to take care of the home, younger siblings, and/or older relatives when their parents are unable to do so themselves.³⁵ Some evidence suggests that Latinas are especially vulnerable to being pulled out of school for family caregiving at rates higher than for other girls or for their brothers.³⁶

Employment to Support Self and Parenting Needs

Although both boys and girls identify employment-related reasons for dropping out, the reasons tend to differ. Greater proportions of girls than boys work to “earn spending money or to pay for the expenses of parenting.”³⁷

Students who left school for personal reasons (such as needing to get a job, because they became a parent or had to care for a family member) “were most likely to say they would have worked harder if their schools demanded more of them and provided the necessary support.”

Bridgeland, John M., Dilulio, John J., and Morison, Karen Burke. “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts.” March 2006. Page iii.



Vulnerability to Harassment at School

In a study conducted by the American Association of University Women, girls were more than twice as likely as boys (44% vs. 20%) to report that they feared being sexually harassed at school.³⁸ More girls than boys fear that someone will hurt or bother them at school, as well as report that this fear discouraged them from going to school and fully participating in their classes. Among students who reported that they experienced sexual harassment at school, greater percentages of girls than boys indicated that they:

- Did not want to go to school (30% vs. 15%, respectively)
- Wanted to stay home from school or cut a class (22% vs. 10%)
- Did not talk as much in class (30% vs. 18%)
- Found it hard to pay attention in school (24% vs. 15%)
- Found it hard to study (20% vs. 13%)
- Had trouble sleeping (20% vs. 9%)
- Doubted whether they have what it takes to graduate from high school (7% vs. 4%)³⁹

Some research indicates that families of Latinas may be especially likely to keep their daughters from going to school if they fear for their daughters’ safety.⁴⁰

Other reasons girls provide for dropping out in greater proportions than boys include not being able to keep up with schoolwork (35% females vs. 30% males) and believing that they could not complete course requirements (29% females vs. 23% males).⁴¹





TAILORING INTERVENTIONS TO GENDER-BASED DIFFERENCES: THE ROLE OF SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH CENTERS (SBHCs)

SBHCs are ideally positioned to implement and coordinate gender-based interventions to reduce the effects of health and social barriers to graduation. For example:

- By being on-site, they can conduct school-wide assessments of physical, social, emotional, and systemic reasons that can derail boys and girls from the path to graduation. Through maintaining multi-disciplinary on-site staff who are experienced in working with gender-relevant issues, SBHCs can help all students manage the range of challenges they face in staying on track to graduation.
- Because of their close and ongoing relationships with students, the school, and the community, SBHCs can implement and coordinate youth-friendly programs and services that are finely tuned and tailored to align with the particular needs of girls and boys within that school, within that community.
- Because SBHCs are on-site and can become trusted advocates for students, they are well-positioned to monitor gender-based risks to graduation and to follow-up on unaddressed needs as they emerge, in real time.
- By serving as a safe haven for students, SBHCs can foster a culture of caring in the school, helping to remove gender-based barriers to school engagement, connectedness, and attendance, paving the way to graduation.
- Through working within the school, SBHCs can serve as advisers and supporters to teachers and principals on establishing gender-relevant policies and practices that promote positive feelings and behavior throughout the student body.
- Through developing partnerships with youth-serving community organizations, SBHCs can help to assure comprehensive, coordinated, and integrated care that is relevant to the needs of boys and girls.
- Through addressing a range of physical, mental health, social, and emotional issues that can interfere with the way boys and girls learn, SBHCs support students in ways that strengthen resiliency and teach strategies for managing the broader environmental stresses they face each day.

“Many parents and teachers acknowledged that, for the dropouts they knew, a lack of social, emotional, and academic support compounded the barriers students face and contributed to their ultimately dropping out.”

Bridgeland, John M., Balfanz, Robert, Moore, Laura A., and Friant, Rebecca S. “[Raising Their Voices: Engaging Students, Teachers, and Parents to Help End the High School Dropout Epidemic.](#)” March 2010. Page 10.

While there has been some recent progress, a great deal more needs to be learned about the factors that drive and mediate the different pathways boys and girls take to graduation or to dropping out.⁴² What policies, practices, and school resources encourage or mediate forces that push or pull boys versus girls out of school, for example? What role does race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status play in influencing girls’ and boys’ decisions to drop out of school? How should dropout prevention strategies be adjusted accordingly?

While there are bits and pieces of answers to questions such as these, research on school dropout has only begun to tap the surface in explaining why and how gender matters in keeping boys and girls on track to graduation. From their close work with boys and girls in

schools, SBHC providers can advance schools' and teachers' understanding of the importance of gender in designing school-wide interventions aimed at supporting graduation. SBHCs also serve as an important voice in advocating for gender-relevant research, policy, and practices in the ongoing efforts to control the national dropout epidemic.

About the Center

The Center for School, Health and Education at the American Public Health Association advances school-based health care as a proven strategy for preventing school dropout. School-based health centers have the capacity to benefit all students in a school by addressing barriers to learning such as bullying, hunger and distress. They keep students healthy and in school.

Through partnerships, policies and advocacy, the Center links the educational and public health communities to ensure that all students—particularly those facing social inequities—are supported to graduate.

For more information, please visit www.schoolbasedhealthcare.org.

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RTI International National Center for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Institute of Education Sciences. "Late High School Dropouts: Characteristics, Experiences, and Changes Across Cohorts Descriptive Analysis Report." June 2009.

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