

***Improving High School Graduation Rates: A Social and Academic Risk
Targeted Approach***

Graduate School of Public & International Affairs
Major Research Paper Final
Deadline: Jul 23, 2012

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Abstract

High school dropouts have poorer outcomes, such as higher unemployment and lower earnings levels, than those who complete high school. At the broader level, the social impacts of high school dropouts render costs in the form of reduced productivity and increased dependence on income support programs. Social and academic risk factors, notably higher in low-income neighborhoods, increase the probability of students deciding to drop out of high school prior to graduation. Specialized “niche” programs target students based on socio-economic or racial status as a means to improve education outcomes. However, these programs leave many students who need help behind because they are limited in their reach. With the goal of reducing drop-out rates for all those at risk, this paper will propose the implementation of a system-wide social and academic support program through high schools.

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1. Introduction

High school dropouts are a significant problem facing Canada's education system and require pressing attention from policymakers and educators alike. The Hospital for Sick Children's Community Systems Resource Group (2005) finds that as of 2004: "In Canada, it is currently estimated that 12 percent of students do not finish secondary school."¹ But why should policymakers and educators be concerned with youth prematurely leaving school without a high school diploma? In order to answer this question, it is important to identify the ramifications of high school dropouts. Dropping out of high school renders costs at both the individual and societal level. At the individual level, the greatest return on education is the realization of equality of opportunity: "...that all young people have a fair opportunity to flourish in an open and law-abiding society."²

At the collective level, high school graduation is a critical step for social and economic growth. High school graduation allows equality of opportunity, as a high school diploma is the requirement for post-secondary education opportunities and meaningful entry into the workforce.³ Dropouts are costly due to the resulting social impacts, such as reduced productivity and increased dependence on income support

¹ Community Health Systems Resource Group, The Hospital for Sick Children, "Early School Leavers: Understanding the Lived Reality of Student Disengagement from Secondary School Final Report", Prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, Special Education Branch, Toronto, Canada, May 30, 2005, 3

² Mark Holmes (1998), "The Reformation of Canada's Schools: Breaking the Barriers to Parental Choice", McGill-Queen's University Press, p. 49

³ John Richards (2011), "School Dropouts: Who Are They and What Can Be Done?", CD Howe, Jan 2011, 1

programs. Unemployment rates are higher amongst high school dropouts than their graduated counterparts.⁴ Lastly, investment in high school education helps to reduce crime rates and outweigh the costs of public subsidization.⁵ For example: “Lochner and Moretti (2004) estimate that a one percent increase in high school graduation rates would save the U.S. economy nearly \$2 billion from reduced costs associated with criminal activity.”⁶ Therefore, education policy should be prioritized because of the cost-benefit principle underlying investments in education.

The challenge here is to determine the factors that increase the probability of dropping out of high school and construct responsive and effective policy solutions that target students at the individual level to avert these trends. The purpose of this paper is to stress that social risk factors, especially family income and low education achievements of parents, play a significant role in contributing to academic risk symptoms, such as absenteeism and poor grades. These social and academic risk factors precede the decision to drop out of high school. Since social risk is the underlying cause of academic risk, it is imperative to address social risk factors in order to improve graduation rates.

⁴ Jason Gilmore, Statistics Canada, Trends in Dropout Rates and the Labour Market Outcomes of Young Dropouts” Nov 3 2010 <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-004-x/2010004/article/11339-eng.htm>

⁵ W. Craig Riddell (2007), “Human Capital”, in *A Canadian Priorities Agenda: Policy Choices to Improve Economic and Social Well-Being*, Ed. Leonard, Ragan and St-Hilaire, 2007 IRPP, p. 21

⁶ Lance Lochner (2011), “Education Policy and Crime”, in *Controlling Crime: Strategies and Tradeoffs*, Ed. Philip J. Cook, Jens Ludwig and Justin McCrary, University of Chicago Press

Alternative schools have arisen in response to the problem of high school dropouts by addressing the factors that increase the probability of dropping out. Beginning in San Diego with the Preuss School for low-income families, the trend of using “niche” programs to target specific cohorts of youth has also been experimented within Canadian schools in recent years. Sheppard Public Elementary School within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) introduced a “black-focused” curriculum to help students of African and Caribbean descent specifically. Similarly, proposals were presented to turn the DBSN Academy into a school specifically tailored for students from low-income families. In a similar fashion, programs such as Pathways to Education have also developed as a response to this issue to provide support to students in low-income neighborhoods.

Despite the attractiveness of these “niche” schools and programs, they are inherently weak in their approaches. Since they target students in terms of socio-economic or racial status, they are based on the principle of exclusivity. While policymakers can learn from the strengths of these programs, relying on these models as a means to combat dropouts is misled. This is because they have limited reach in improving education outcomes. They do not accommodate all students in need of their supports. They also lead to segregation based on socio-economic or racial status and thus, further disadvantage already marginalized groups. Instead, a holistic approach that targets students based on risk of dropping out would allow for more effective education policy.

Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to conceptualize a multi-faceted policy approach to decrease the probability that students will drop out. The proposal here is an “education support program” that is offered through the schools themselves, targeting students at the individual level to improve their educational outcomes. It consists of a combination of academic, psychological and professional support programs that target both the social risks and academic risks that inhibit high school graduation. This will ensure that students graduate with a high school diploma and go on to post-secondary education (PSE) or the workforce. The aim is that such a program could be applied first in Ontario and then across the provinces in order to improve high school graduation rates nationally.

2. The Importance of High School Education & the Problem of Dropouts

2.1 Returns on Investments in Education

High school education is critical to the well being of Canadians on both individual and collective scales. Investments in high school education bring social returns to both the individual and the larger society. There are private benefits such as employment eligibility and higher earnings. For example, a high school diploma is a necessary pre-requisite for the pursuit of post-secondary education (PSE) and the professional opportunities that follow. It is also the minimum requirement for an efficient labor force.

Through a study conducted at the University of Toronto that looked at the effect of compulsory schooling laws over time in Canada, Oreopoulos (2006) found that:

“...students with additional schooling are more likely to speak two languages, more likely to work, and are less likely to be low-income, unemployed, and in a manual occupation.” Therefore, high school education aids in improving employment opportunities and increasing earnings at the individual level.

Investments in education can also have distributional consequences on a broader and long-term scale. For example, education can help reduce income inequality. Increasing the number of skilled workers to meet current demands would help to prevent an increase in income inequality between skilled and unskilled workers. Knowledge spillovers from education generate social benefits such as reductions in crime, improved health outcomes and intergenerational effects.⁷ This helps to reduce public costs of crime, health care and social support programs for example. Lastly, investments in education also allow for equality of opportunity by improving living standards and social cohesion as a result of increased productivity and economic growth.⁸

2.2 Implicit and Explicit Costs of Dropping Out

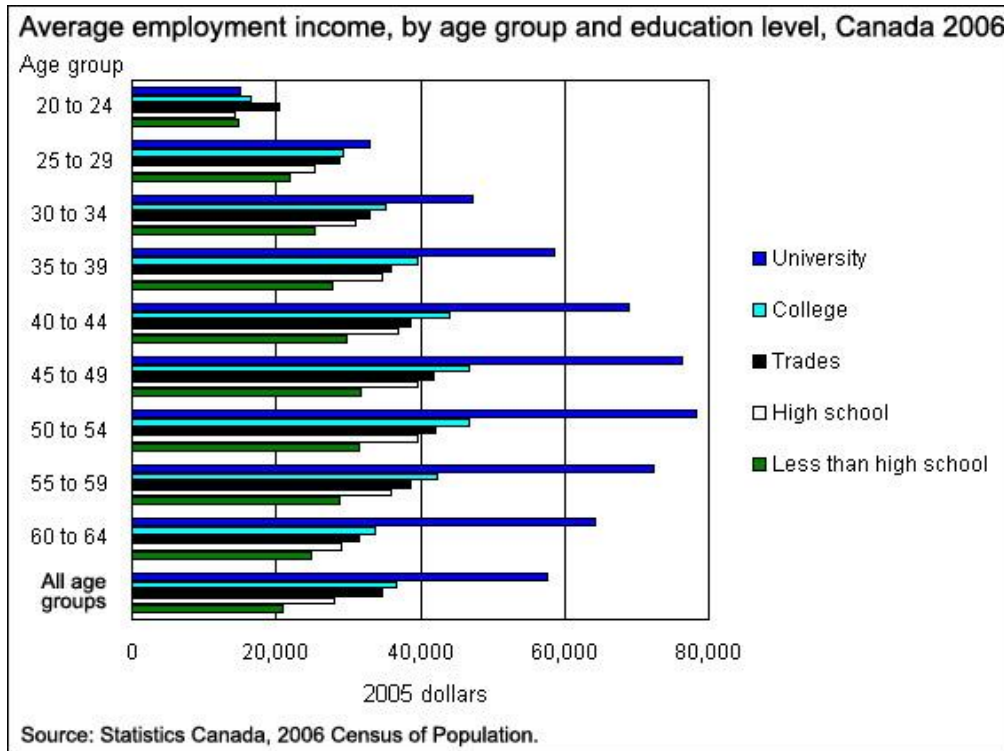
Those who fail to graduate with a high school diploma are significantly disadvantaged throughout the remainder of their adult lives. Statistics Canada’s “Labour Force Survey” (2012) documents labour market outcomes through employment and unemployment estimates and finds that high school dropouts who are able to find employment earn on average \$70 less per week than their graduated peers (See Fig 1 below). The survey also finds that unemployment rates are higher amongst high school

⁷ Riddell (2007), p 21

⁸ Ibid, p 15

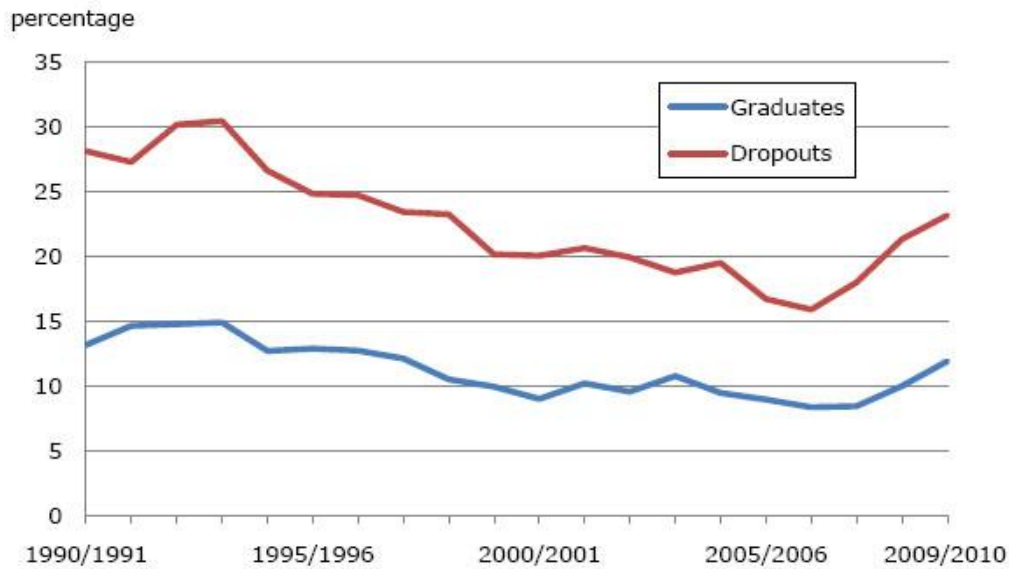
dropouts than their graduated peers (See Fig 2 below). This gap widened during the recent economic downturn in 2008/09, where the unemployment rate for dropouts (18%) was more than double that of high school graduates (8.4%).

Figure 1⁹



⁹ Statistics Canada (2011), “Learning Resources – Average Employment income, by age group and education level Canada 2006”, Date Jun 16 2011, Accessed Jun 20 2012 http://www.statcan.gc.ca/edu/edu02_0019a-eng.htm

Figure 2 Unemployment rate, high school graduates and dropouts aged 20 to 24, 1990/1991 to 2009/2010¹⁰



Lastly, high school dropouts are more likely to depend on income support programs and place an overwhelming burden on the system. To be sure: “...85 percent of income assistance is spent on persons who have not completed high school.”¹¹ Furthermore, high school dropouts may go on to have children of their own, who may also leave school prematurely (research points to the strong effect that parent education has on children) and thus, a cycle of poverty is born.¹² This intergenerational transmission of poverty is costly especially given the burden this can carry on the income support programs.

¹⁰ Jason Gilmore, Statistics Canada, Trends in Dropout Rates and the Labour Market Outcomes of Young Dropouts” Nov 3 2010 <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-004-x/2010004/article/11339-eng.htm>

¹¹ Charles Ungerleider, “Failing Our Kids: How We Are Ruining Our Public Schools”. 2003 McClelland & Stewart Ltd 2003, p 32

¹² L. Jacques Ménard, ”Beyond the numbers, A matter of the Heart / Shoulders to the Wheel: What Quebec can do to Reduce the Dropout Rate”, 2009, p 8

If research confirms that returns to education are significantly high, then an individual who chooses to drop out of high school has done so because the cost of remaining in school exceeds any foreseen benefits.¹³ The opportunity cost of remaining in school is predominantly based on foregone earnings. *The Early School Leavers Report*, conducted by the Ontario Ministry of Education in conjunction with the Hospital for Sick Children (2005), is based on data gathered through youth interviews and community consultations. The report shows that in the case of low-income families, employment can be a very attractive alternative to school. One of the young men interviewed for the study expressed the following: “I had to drop out cause I couldn’t work, pay my bills and go to school...”

It is important to recognize that generally, students do not see dropping out of high school as an ideal outcome. Even in the face of adversity, youth have high expectations for their futures. Interviews of the youth participants of the Early Leavers Report study reflect this sentiment: “...although individual stories of youth disengagement were characterized by despair, collective accounts tended to generate stories of hope and possibility.” Therefore, empowering students with the necessary resources to excel can help to ensure that they do not run the risk of dropping out.

2.3 The Problem of Drop outs in Canada

Dropout rates continue to be the highest in Quebec (11.7%), Alberta (10.4%), Manitoba (11.4%) and the territories (31.9%). Statistics Canada’s “Labour Force Survey” (2012) found that the high school drop out rate amongst young adults aged 20-24 outside

¹³ Riddell (2007), p 16

of big cities was nearly double of those living within cities between 2007-2010. There also continues to be a difference in drop out rates between young men (10.3%) and young women (6.6%). While Statistics Canada finds that dropout rates across Canada have been falling since the 1990s, the pace of this decline has slowed in recent years and it continues to be a problem.

In 2009, the Milton Association released its first national report of its *What Did You Do in School Today* research initiative. The report is based on data collected between 2007-08, which surveyed a total of 93 schools and 32,322 students varying across the provinces. The research finds that student disengagement, a product of factors within and outside the classroom, increases the probability of dropping out and constitutes a significant problem across Canadian schools. For example, student participation declined, as attendance rates fell from 90% in Grade 6 to 40% in Grade 12. This disengagement may help to explain the slow pace of decline in drop out rates in recent years.

Ultimately, high school dropouts are a significant problem and will have lasting social and economic repercussions over the long term if not adequately addressed and resolved. To be sure, Canada's future is dependent on an educated and healthy workforce, in order to allow for further national development and continue to compete within the global economy.¹⁴ Therefore, these statistics are troubling and raises the following question: What should we as policymakers do to offset these trends and ensure that youth are receiving the education necessary to progress on with their adult lives? In other

¹⁴ Ken Osborne, "Education: A Guide to the Canadian School Debate – Or, Who Wants What and Why?", 1999 Penguin Canada Toronto, p 19

words, how do alter the cost-benefit perspective of high school students in order to reduce the probability of dropping out?

3. Social and Academic Risk

This section will identify the factors that may motivate students to drop out of high school. There is consensus throughout the literature that students who leave school prematurely do so for a multitude of reasons.¹⁵ Often, these motivating factors exist outside of the classroom, such as changes in social values, level of education of the parents and changes in family income for example.¹⁶ These social and economic factors are what can be collectively termed “social risk”. This is then manifested within the classroom as “academic risk”, exhibited through school-related problems such as absenteeism, poor grades and disruptive behavior.¹⁷

According to The Early School Leavers Report (2005), students facing both social risk and academic risk can be identified as “high risk” youth, defined as: “...one who is unlikely to graduate on schedule with the skills and self-confidence necessary to have meaningful options in the areas of work leisure, culture, civic affairs and relationships.” Since social risk frequently precedes academic risk, it is the opinion of the author that

¹⁵ Community Health Systems Resource Group, The Hospital for Sick Children, “Early School Leavers: Understanding the Lived Reality of Student Disengagement from Secondary School Final Report”, Prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, Special Education Branch, Toronto, Canada, May 30, 2005, p 5

¹⁶ Ken Osborne (1999), p 125

¹⁷ Valerie E. Lee and David T. Burkam (2003), “Dropping out of High School: The Role of School Organization and Structure”, *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol 40 No2 Summer 2003, p 367

targeting the sources of social risk is the best approach to decrease the probability of dropping out., especially for students in low-income neighborhoods.

3.1 Family Income

Firstly, family background shapes a child's motivation to stay in school. The OCED (2010) PISA report stresses that socio-economic status and family background have a direct impact on a student's academic performance. For example, parents that are accomplished professionals or benefit from a higher income bracket may invest more into their children's education as well as serve as positive role models. There is often a trade-off between family resources and the number of children. This is a concern especially for poorer families. Sweetman and Dicks (1999) find that lower fertility is correlated to higher education outcomes. This is because parents with fewer children are able to invest more time and resources into their children's education.

3.2 Parents' Education

Finnie, Laporte and Sweetman (2010) use data taken from three Statistics Canada surveys that collectively analyzed the transitions of youth from school into the labour market. They find that the education level of the parents is also a significant factor that influences whether students decide to drop out. This is more critical again in the case of young men, who are 14% more likely to drop out. Students with highly educated parents and still decide to drop out, are more likely to return to school in time. According to analysis by Sweetman and Dicks (1999), research suggests that where a father figure is

lacking or where the mother is not home (due to long working hours for example), children's educational achievements are negatively affected.

3.3 Peer Influence

Lastly, peer influence plays a pivotal role in the lives of high school students. For example, OCED (2010) PISA survey results strongly show that attending school with peers of higher socio-economic status positively impacts the academic performance of youth, regardless of socio-economic status. Students who are advantaged or whose families value education may help to create a "culture of education". High-risk students may then develop a "taste for education" because their peers value education. When students are surrounded by peers who excel academically, expectations of academic performance are strengthened: "Students at high risk of dropping out usually fare better in schools where most students are not at risk and where expectation of academic success prevail."

4. Alternative Education: 'Niche Programs'

Having identified the socio-economic challenges of low-income neighborhoods, the normative question becomes: How *should* high schools be structured to address these issues in order to decrease the probability of dropping out? "Alternative" high schools and educational programs have turned up throughout Ontario as an attempt to isolate and effectively deal with the learning issues of high-risk youth. These "alternative" learning structures can be termed "niche schools" because they target a specific demographic of

youth. Though the following schools from Ontario are elementary schools, there have been propositions to carry these models into the high schools. They also provide critical learning lessons to determine whether “niche” schools are the appropriate policy response to the issue of high school dropouts.

4.1 Low-Income Schools

The first “alternative” school of its kind was established in San Diego, California. The Preuss School is both a middle school and high school that specifically supports students from culturally diverse and low-income families. Its aim is to enable its students to go on and graduate from college (a first for their families).¹⁸ In order to achieve this objective, the Preuss School has developed a college-prep focused curriculum. It also has a longer school day, extended school year and smaller class sizes. Overall, this school provides an intensive educational experience for its students.

Does this model work? Consistently ranked as one of the best schools in the U.S. by Newsweek Magazine, Preuss continues to boast an 80% graduation rate and it continues to shine as an example of academic and policy excellence.¹⁹ The Preuss School is a charter school, jointly administered by the San Diego Unified School District and the University of San Diego. As a result, it relies heavily on community donors for funding. It has been critically acclaimed in Newsweek Magazine due to its success at improving

¹⁸ The Preuss School, “Fact Sheet”, 2012, accessed Jun 8 2012
<http://preuss.ucsd.edu/about/fact-sheet.htm>

¹⁹ Kate Hammer, “Proposed school for low-income students ignites controversy”, *The Globe and Mail*, Feb 27 2011, Accessed May 5 2012
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/ontario/proposed-school-for-low-income-students-ignites-controversy/article1921764/>

the academic performance amongst its students and thus, could serve as a model for improving high school graduation rates.

In the Niagara school board district, Empire Public School was scheduled to re-open in September 2011 as DBSN Academy, a specialized school for students of low-income families. The school is located in Welland, a community traditionally characterized by very high unemployment and poverty. Extra support such as tutoring programs and longer days were designed in order to meet the needs of its students. In addition, a group mentorship program brings together teachers with groups of 20 students each to discuss the challenges students are facing at school and at home.²⁰ Due to fears of segregation and stigmatization, enrollment requirements were changed to students whose parents do not have a high school diploma or PSE.

4.2 The “Black-focused” Curriculum

There have also been attempts to target high-risk students based on demographics such as community or ethnic groups. Canada’s first ever Africentric elementary school, targeting youth of Afro and Caribbean descent, was established in September 2009. Sheppard Public became Toronto’s first “black-focused” school in response to the poor academic performance, alarming drop out rates and gang violence that came to characterize Toronto’s black neighborhoods. The murder of 15-year-old Jordan Manners in 2005 ignited a sense of urgency amongst the community. By 2008, the Toronto District

²⁰ Victoria Gray, “DSBN Academy: a mid-term report card”, *The Niagara Falls Review*, Dec 30 2011 Accessed Jun 15 2012
<http://www.niagarafallsreview.ca/ArticleDisplay.aspx?e=3421246>

School Board (TDSB) approved a proposal to set up a publically funded “black-focused” school.

The TDSB’s decision was unsurprisingly met with both opposition and support. For example, an article in *The Globe and Mail* argued that racial segregation in schools would undermine the diversity and multiculturalism upon which Toronto is based and would be detrimental to the well being of its students.²¹ In contrast, parents are pleased that the school has allowed for a nurturing and empowering environment: “Parents say their children are thriving. They feel a sense of belonging, have found role models in their teachers, and gained self confidence.”²²

In 2011, a proposal was put before the TDSB for an Africentric high school and received approval. As it currently stands, the board is still deciding where the school will be based. The momentum for the school was based on the success enjoyed by the students of Sheppard Public. Students’ averages on standardized tests have exceeded provincial averages. Like its elementary school counterpart, the high school has also been met with similar criticisms of racial segregation and the destructive implications it would have on social cohesion in the community.²³

²¹ Marcus Gee, “Africentric school goes against everything city stands for”, *The Globe and Mail*, Date Nov 28 2011, Accessed Jun 15 2012, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/africentric-school-against-everything-city-stands-for/article4183997/>

²² Kate Hammer, Africentric high school is approved, but it still needs a home <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/africentric-high-school-is-approved-but-it-still-needs-a-home/article4183785/>

²³ Marcus Gee, “Africentric school goes against everything city stands for”, *The Globe and Mail*, Date Nov 28 2011, Accessed Jun 15 2012,

4.3 Pathways to Education

It is worthy to bring Pathways for Education into this discussion. Though not a high school itself, Pathways for Education provides a blue print for constructing effective education policy. Pathways for Education provides the academic, financial and social support necessary for students from low-income communities to graduate from high school and continue on to PSE.²⁴ The community-based program began in the Regent Park neighborhood of Toronto in 2001 as a means to improve the well being of the entire community through educating and supporting its youth. It has since spread to numerous communities in Ontario, Manitoba, Quebec and Nova Scotia.

Pathways to Education's program model offers mandatory tutoring support by four nights a week. Group, career and specialty mentoring is offered to the students of the program. Each student is also teamed up with a Student-Parent Support Worker (SPSW). The SPSW monitors the student's academic progress and communicates with the student's school and teachers. Most importantly, the SPSW acts as a liaison between parents and teachers and fills the void where parents may be incapable of advocating on behalf of their children's needs. Lastly, the financial component of the program is designed to combat any financial barriers preventing students from accessing PSE. Students are provided bus tickets and lunch vouchers. Students are also given a \$1,000

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/africentric-school-against-everything-city-stands-for/article4183997/>

²⁴ Pathways to Education, "Pathways to Education: About Us", Accessed Jun 5 2012 <http://www.pathwaystoeducation.ca/about-us>

bursary per each year of participation in the program, for a maximum of \$4,000, which is then applied to PSE tuition.²⁵

Pathways to Education has been very successful. In the Regent Park community, Pathways to Education has contributed to a 70% decline in the high school drop out rate. Participation rate is 90% and 80% of participants have gone on to attend PSE.²⁶ The Boston Consulting Group (2011) conducted an evaluation of Pathways to Education in 2011. The results show that Pathways to Education's community-based program works in helping to reduce drop out rates and reinforce the cost-benefit analysis that is at the heart of investments in education. For example, Pathways to Education incurs \$5000 in costs per student per year. However, the societal return far exceeds that amount. An estimated \$45,000 is generated as a result of (but not limited to) higher economic growth rates from a more educated work force, increased government tax revenue and decreased government spending on social support programs to name.

5. Setbacks of Niche Programs

5.1 The Problem of Exclusivity

A "black-focused" or "low-income" school may have perverse consequences. Segregating students along racial or economic lines may exacerbate differences and impede social mobility. Isolation from society at large may negatively impact personal

²⁵ Pathways to Education (2006), "Pathways to Education: Introduction and Program Overview", *Pathways Overview*, Oct 21 2010

²⁶ Pathways to Education, "Program Results", *Pathways to Education*" accessed Jun 5 2012 <http://www.pathwaystoeducation.ca/results/program-results>

and professional growth and it also may serve to consolidate stereotypes and differences between youth. Furthermore, in diverse cities like Toronto, focusing on a specific ethnic or socio-economic group can create problems of alienation from other groups and does not adequately prepare students for their adult lives. For example, students in a “black-focused” school are unlikely to work in a “black-focused” professional environment and will need to learn to work with other types of people. The same concerns can be applied to any other type of niche school.

Grouping “like” students together would then seem misguided. The TDSB (2012) conducted a study that followed a cohort of Grade 9 students (2006-2011) focusing on graduation outcomes. The data shows differences in graduation rates across racial groups. Students identified as Black and Latin had the highest drop out rates, at 22.8% and 20.5% respectively. If the research suggests that peer influence plays a significant role in students’ decisions to prematurely leave school, then it would appear that segregating students who are susceptible to high drop out rates would not be conducive to improving graduation rates. Rather, as per Ungerleider (2003): “The loss of high-ability students from a school tends to lower the performance of the students who remain...”

5.2 The Value of Cultural Pluralism

The value of cultural pluralism in a student’s academic and professional growth should not be discounted. As supported by sociologist Kevin Gosine at the University of Brock, student body diversity is critical to the personal and academic development of

children. Interacting with peers of various backgrounds is important to students and the school community: “The public schools are where young people from different backgrounds learn to live together. They are the crucible of integration.”²⁷ Segregation may impede their capacity for intercommunication and relationships with other students from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Arguably, schools like Sheppard Public School may strengthen racial segregation and forms unfavorable grounds on which other cultural or ethnic minority groups may argue for special educational privileges as well.

5.3 Funding Challenges

Lastly, funding for such schools and community-based programs carries significant implications. Firstly, specialized schools may negatively affect funding for other public schools. University of Calgary education Professor Darren Lund warns of the “draining” effect that specialized schools and programs can have on other schools within boards due to a disproportionate allocation of funding.²⁸ This funding shift may cause of diversion of resources such as skilled teachers and other capital away from the public school system, undermining other schools attempts to aid their high-risk youth.

²⁷ Marcus Gee, “Africentric school goes against everything city stands for”, *The Globe and Mail*, Date Nov 28 2011, Accessed Jun 15 2012, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/africentric-school-against-everything-city-stands-for/article4183997/>

²⁸ Erin Anderssen, “Why Inequality is growing in public schools” *The Globe and Mail*, Date Feb 16 2012, Accessed Jun 5 2012 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/parenting/education/school/why-inequality-is-growing-in-public-schools/article2341085/page1/>

Funding is also a significant issue when relying on community-based services, like the Pathways for Education program. Undoubtedly, the major weakness of Pathways for Education program is its explicit cost in the present. This significantly impedes the ability for it to be applied widely. Where private funding is concerned, future stability of programming can be undermined, negatively affecting education outcomes:

“...organizations...often grassroots and community-based, rarely know whether their modest funding will continue for much longer...we rob children of previous time in order to work on the next grant application.”²⁹

5.4 Weaknesses of Standardized Testing

Standardized test results are often cited in the media as evidence that these niche programs are work. However, standardized test scores should not be used as a measure of success. Firstly, these tests reduce learning to reading and math and neglect other areas of learning such as the arts, music and physical education. They also discount different methods of learning. Standardized tests also distort teaching priorities and allocation of resources because the focus on beating provincial averages, rather than on the quality of the curriculum and teaching.³⁰ Lastly, standardized test results neglect individual differences amongst students. They also do not measure whether extra support programs and segregating students are effective. As a result, they are a poor measurement of overall academic achievement.

²⁹ L. Jacques Ménard, "Beyond the numbers, A matter of the Heart / Shoulders to the Wheel: What Quebec can do to Reduce the Dropout Rate", 2009, 27

³⁰ Valerie Strauss, "The Complete list of problems with high-stakes standardized tests", *The Washington Post* Date Nov 1 2011, Accessed Jun 17 2012
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/the-complete-list-of-problems-with-high-stakes-standardized-tests/2011/10/31/gIQA7fNyAM_blog.html

5.5 Charter Schools – A Solution?

Day (2010) looks at charter schools as an attractive alternative to niche schools. Currently, only Alberta has charter schools. These schools are publically funded and are autonomous from school boards. Charter schools may be effective in low-income neighborhoods where their autonomy allows them greater flexibility in meeting their students' needs to improve their academic performances. However, limited room may mean that those in most need of attended may not be to enroll. A divide is also created between those who are accepted into the schools and those who have been denied enrollment, as well as those who go to other public schools: "...charter and voucher school options will increase segregation of students from different backgrounds and erode the public school's capacity for socializing students..."³¹ Therefore, the problem of segregation remains, discounting the use of charter schools as a means to address the problem of high school drop outs.

6. Recommendation: A Multi-Faceted Approach

The preceding discussion has identified the social risk for students in low-income neighborhoods that increase the cost of remaining in school and the probability of dropping out. While niche schools and programs may have very attractive elements, relying on these arrangements alone is not the best approach for effective policy due to their limited reach and their segregation of already marginalized youth. Rather, a new

³¹ Charles Ungerleider, "Failing Our Kids: How We Are Ruining Our Public Schools". 2003 McClelland & Stewart Ltd 2003, p 194

approach is needed. According to The Early Leavers Report (2005): "...There are three main reasons why current educational reforms may not have succeed: they are often episodic, they address symptoms rather than causes, and they are not systemic..."

This paper calls for a multifaceted approach that would see a systemic application of academic and social programming in Ontario high schools to address the factors that are causing dropouts. In short, these support programs include academic support, mentorship and psychological support, co-op opportunities and professional guidance. Investment in such support services can provide youth with a better understanding about the importance of their education and assist them in making healthy life choices through their adult lives.

High school education needs to be individualized. Specifically, what is needed is a new way of identifying high-risk students and understanding that aside from learning difficulties, social risk factors play a significant role in the lives of students, especially those in low-income neighborhoods. Viewing a student in isolation of his/her environment will not help to improve his/her chances of graduating. For example: "A child who is always late for school may receive constant criticism...A systemic approach would look for contextual explanations of the lateness."³² That is to say, identifying and targeting the factors that are causing tardiness is more effective at reducing the

³² Neil Dawson and Brenda McHugh (2000), "Family relationships, learning and teachers, - keeping the connections", in "Tomorrow's Schools – Towards Integrity", ed. Chris Watkins, Caroline Lodge and Ron Best, 110

probability of dropping out than simply punishing the student for his/her behavior.

Criticisms address the symptoms, not the causes of academic risk.

The Early School Leavers Report (2005) stresses that: “In order to be effective, programs must be comprehensive and directed towards all facets of a student’s life. As youth leave school prematurely for a multitude of reasons, services and supports must be flexible and customized to meet individual student needs.” Furthermore, the OCED (2010) PISA survey results highlight the need for youth to feel empowered, in control of their decisions and feel a sense of purpose when it comes to their studies and future professional possibilities. They need to understand the returns on their education over the long term.³³ Thus, a successful program would help to realize this goal by supporting students’ in dealing with their individual challenges, altering their cost-benefit perspective and thereby, decreasing the likelihood that they will choose to drop out.

6.1 Student-Parent-Teacher Program

It is the opinion of the author that the systemic implementation of the following components would achieve this objective. Firstly, parental involvement would be institutionalized into a program that requires participation on behalf of the teachers, parents and their children. The aim of such a program is to encourage parents to play an active and supporting role in their children’s education. Informing parents about the returns to their children’s education can achieve this, in order to “develop a positive

³³ J. D. Willms, S. Friesen, & P. Milton (2009) “What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement.” (First National Report) Toronto: Canadian Education Association. www.cpco.on.ca/newsletters/2010_11/.../WhatDidYouDo.pdf, p 5

attitude toward learning.”³⁴ Often, high schools do not extensively engage with parents or the wider community about the benefits of schooling or how the education system works.³⁵ This program would help to resolve that issue and would be particularly constructive for parents who lack a high school education themselves.

In situations where parents are unable or unwilling to participate, a mentor/social worker would be assigned to those students, such as the example of the SPSW program at Pathways to Education. There, the SPSW acts as a liaison between the student and the school and monitors the student’s progress and provides support and feedback when expectations are not met. Similarly, with the proposal presented here, the mentor/social worker would fulfill the role of the parent and collaborate with the teacher to ensure that the student’s needs are met.

Bi-weekly student-teacher-parent meetings would be scheduled in order to monitor students’ academic progress and ensure that they are receiving adequate support at home. Other activities that encourage parental participation would also be mandatory such as signing off on their children’s homework on a daily basis as well as weekly assignments that require both parent and child to complete together. In a recent article, NY Times Columnist Thomas Friedman points to a study conducted by the National School Board’s Association Center in the U.S which looked at the best arrangements for encouraging parent involvement. One of the more effective strategies was interactive

³⁴ L. Jacques Ménard, ”Beyond the numbers, A matter of the Heart / Shoulders to the Wheel: What Quebec can do to Reduce the Dropout Rate”, 2009, p 17

³⁵ Ungerleider (2003), p 103

homework assignment that requires collaboration between parent and student to complete.³⁶

Lastly, a parent volunteer program would be implemented, similar to the DBSN Academy, where parents are required to volunteer 15 hours a week to support their children and the school community.³⁷ The program envisioned here would not be mandatory but rather; parents would be encouraged to volunteer. Parents with higher educational achievements could volunteer for an after-school tutoring program. They could also help the planning and execution of social events at the school. Ultimately, the goal of such a program is to generate strengthen the interdependent relationship between student, parent and teacher by involving the parent in school activities as much as possible. Because parents may not be willing or able to participate, other tutors or support workers would have to be brought in to fill the void.

6.2 Mentorship Program

A mentorship program would be established to provide individual psychological and personal support. It would also help to fill the void where parents are absent in their children's education. The program would consist of mental health professionals as well as social workers that would offer psychological support to students dealing with issues

³⁶The Center for Public Education, "Back to school: How parent involvement affects student achievement (at a glance)," Aug 30 2011, Accessed Jun 17 2012
<http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Public-education/Parent-Involvement>

³⁷ Victoria Gray, "DSBN Academy: a mid-term report card", *The Niagara Falls Review*, Dec 30 2011 Accessed Jun 15 2012
<http://www.niagarafallsreview.ca/ArticleDisplay.aspx?e=3421246>

at home and at school. Rather than treating the student body as a homogenous whole, the program would be sensitive to individual situations. As a result, high-risk students with a higher probability of dropping out could be identified and helped accordingly.

The Check & Connect program with the University of Minnesota provides an example of the potential of a mentorship program to encourage disengaged students. The program works in public schools across Minnesota and brings together students and mentors in a one-on-one setting. Students are referred to the program if they exhibit symptoms of academic risk such as poor attendance or poor grades. For a minimum of two years, the mentor works with both the student and his/her family, helping to improve the family-school relationship and keeping the student engaged with his/her studies to graduation. Results prove that the Check & Connect program has been successful in helping to increase classroom attendance, improve academic performance and decreasing the likelihood of dropping out.³⁸

Like the University of Minnesota program, the mentorship program envisioned here would also consist of regular one-on-one meetings as well as larger group meetings. It would give students a chance to discuss issues they may be having at home in confidentiality as well as talk with their peers. Mentors would be able to determine what resources or services should be offered to the student in order to succeed. Former B.C. Deputy Minister of Education (1998-2001), Charles Ungerleider, advocates organizing

³⁸ Institute on Community Integration, “Check & Connect Student Engagement intervention Model”, University of Minnesota, Date Feb 23 2012 Accessed Jun 13 2012, <http://checkandconnect.org/model/default.html>

student bodies into manageable groups which would be assigned a team of several teachers to pay particular attention to their needs. The belief is that such a structure would allow for better social engagement at school and improve the overall school experience of students.

6.3 Co-op Programs and Professional Guidance

A co-op component is essential to any support program. The goal of high school education ultimately should be to prepare students for the next stage. J. D. Willms, S. Friesen, & P. Milton (2009), in partnership with the Canadian Education Association, released its First National Report which looks at the ways learning experiences can be enhanced to improve educational outcomes. The report stresses the importance of ensuring that material taught at school is meaningful and relevant. Assignments should encourage critical thinking and have a real world application, outside of the classroom. As a result, students will graduate from high school well-equipped with the skill-sets to utilize information and enable them to participate in the workplace or continue on with their academic careers: “Literacy, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, analysis, research, communication and interacting with other people are important...School must teach them...in the context of rich and valuable subject matter.”³⁹

Co-op opportunities give students exposure to the workforce and insight into the ways in which their studies can be applied into the professional world. Former York

³⁹ Ken Osborne (1999), p 56

Region School Board Superintendent Jerry Diakiw has focused his research on improving education outcomes, especially for students coming from families of low socio-economic status. Diakiw (2012) strongly supports strengthening the connection between the high school environment and opportunities that exist beyond the classroom.” It can widen their understanding of what opportunities are available after graduating high school, thus discouraging them from dropping out. This is also valuable for those students who will not be going on to PSE.

The co-op program proposed here would allow students to earn a modest amount, which would help to alleviate the financial burden particularly facing students from low-income families. This would serve to motivate them to stay through to graduation. Schools would directly communicate with employers in various industries to coordinate placement opportunities. Students would enroll for the co-op program like a regular course, as takes place across high schools now. At the end of their term, students would receive monetary remuneration for their work. This experience would enable students to envision their future career paths and learn the value of earning an income.

To compliment their hands-on learning during co-op, students would also receive academic, professional and financial guidance back at school. Students would learn about PSE opportunities, how to effectively apply to university and college and also how to file for financial assistance for low-income students to attend PSE. They would learn valuable workplace skills such as learning how to write an effective resume and how to communicate with future employers and colleagues in a professional manner both

verbally and in print. Students would also receive financial advice and learn valuable life skills such as budgeting and the importance of savings.

6.4 Academic Support

For students exhibiting symptoms of academic risk such as poor grades and absenteeism, an academic support program would also be in place to help them excel. Lunch time and after-school tutoring services would be available on a daily basis. Schools would be open on the weekends to provide a safe and conducive learning environment. This would allow students the time and space to do homework in the company of their peers, in case they are unable to do so at home. Teachers and volunteers from the community would staff this program. As with the Pathways to Education model, recruiting college and university students as volunteer tutors would help to make this program cost effective.

6.5 Inclusive Programming

Lastly, this multi-dimensional program is inclusive not exclusive and therefore, would not target “niches”. As discussed, research points strongly against segregating students along socio-economic lines, arguing that it serves to exacerbate problems contributing to academic risk factors. In low-income neighborhoods or areas where students are dealing with significant socio-economic challenges, schools should be a safe environment. They should not be the site of segregation or marginalization. While support programs like those proposed in this paper should be sensitive to ethnic or demographic differences across students, they should by no means be ethnically or

demographically exclusive. Rather, a positive learning environment “ builds social cohesion and supports peoples desire to continue learning throughout their lives.”⁴⁰

Accessibility to such programs should be open to students of all ethnic or demographic backgrounds. As a result, the returns on such investments would be felt widespread across the student body.

7. Other Considerations

7.1. Effective Classroom Practices

In addition to implementing the programming presented here, the structure of high school classrooms overall must be improved. A study conducted by the University of Michigan in 2003 looked at the role that high schools play in influencing students’ decisions to remain in school or drop out. While individual characteristics or challenges may impact the likelihood of students dropping out of high school, the study found that schools themselves need to institutionalize responses to these issues because they are very influential in a student’s decision to stay or drop out.⁴¹ For example, research demonstrates that classroom learning has a significant effect on students’ potential for academic success:

⁴⁰ J. D. Willms, S. Friesen, & P. Milton (2009), p 35

⁴¹ Valerie E. Lee and David T. Burkam (2003), “Dropping out of High School: The Role of School Organization and Structure”, *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol 40 No2 Summer 2003, p 355

“Students are more likely to have positive records of attendance when classroom and school learning climates include the following: high expectations for student success; appropriate instructional challenge.”⁴²

There are been proposals for other ways of re-conceptualizing the “high school” to improve student outcomes. One of these examples is the movement towards 24-hour high schools, whereby access to resources and to teachers is increased in order to improve potential for academic success.⁴³ Diakiw advocates for changing the nature of schools in order to meet the growing needs of their students. Among his policy prescriptions Diakiw (2012) stresses the importance of moving beyond traditional conceptions of high schools. Rather, he favors innovative models that enable students to meet the challenges facing them outside of the classroom and better equip them for their academic and professional futures. Other changes may include smaller class sizes, which would allow for more one-on-one time between teachers and students and would help teachers identify high-risk youth. From there, a more targeted approach can be employed to help those students and prevent dropouts.

7.2 Financial Considerations

Financial considerations for a program of this magnitude have been notably absent thus far. Evidently, the resources required for this project are costly. Recent budget cuts as well as overworked teachers present a considerable challenge to the

⁴² J. D. Willms, S. Friesen, & P. Milton (2009), p 243

⁴³ John MacBeath (2000), “Schools for Communities”, in “Tomorrow’s Schools – Towards Integrity”, ed. Chris Watkins, Caroline Lodge and Ron Best, Routledge Falmer 2000, NY, New York, p 144

realization of this type of project. For example, a recent article in *The Toronto Star* brings attention to the extensive funding shortages in Ontario currently facing the Toronto and Peel school boards, Canada's top largest boards. Tightened school budgets would disproportionately affect schools in low-income neighborhoods and marginalized schools. Groups such as Social Planning Toronto are also concerned that these cuts will impede the ability of non-profit organizations to run after-school programming for youth as well.⁴⁴

The cost-benefit argument presented throughout this paper is based on the notion that investments in education yield extensive returns to the individual and society outweigh the cost. Furthermore, safeguarding equality of opportunity means that the most disadvantaged students must have the ability to attain a high school diploma. Public subsidization of education is a critical component of achieving this objective.⁴⁵ If ensuring high school graduation is the goal, then greater public subsidization of education programs that help to decrease dropping out trends is essential to guaranteeing returns to education over the long term.

7.3 Broader Social and Economic Policies

In their book entitled *Class Warfare: The Assault on Canada's Schools*, Barlow and Robertson (1994) discuss the problem of overlooking the broader social and

⁴⁴ Kristin Rushowy, "Toronto and Peel school boards prepare for biggest cuts since Harris year", *The Toronto Star*, Date Jun 13 2012, accessed Jun 13 2012 <http://www.thestar.com/news/education/article/1210468--toronto-and-peel-school-boards-prepare-for-biggest-cuts-since-harris-years?bn=1>

⁴⁵ Holmes (1998), p 49

economic dynamics that need to be addressed in conjunction with education policy. They argue that while school feeding programs help to alleviate child hunger at school, this does little to acknowledge why children are going to school hungry in the first place: “In the classroom attention is paid to poor children’s self-esteem, not the cycle of poverty.” As Ungerleider (2003) notes, policies that support low-income families such as affordable childcare services or that serve to eliminate the wage gap between men and women can vastly improve the socio-economic status of these families.

However, addressing these socio-economic policy issues becomes a matter far beyond education policy per se. Eliminating income inequality itself, for example, is a very costly endeavour. The objective of the policy recommendations presented here is to specifically target high school dropouts and decrease the probability that students will choose to drop out rather than solve problems like income inequality. Supporting students at the individual level is a more effective means to combat the social and academic challenges that drive dropouts. What may also be needed is a new conceptualization about how Canadian social, economic and education policy should be constructed in support of one another.⁴⁶

7.4 Measuring Success

Measuring education outcomes is essential to understand whether programming is effective in creating solutions to problems like high school dropouts. Data collection is important to meet this objective. The removal of critical surveys, like the long-form

⁴⁶ Ungerleider (2003), p 294

census in Canada, significantly impedes the ability of policymakers to have access to extensive data for policy.⁴⁷ Furthermore, measuring the effectiveness of a multi-faceted program like the one presented here can be challenging for a variety of reasons. especially because experience and achievement across individuals will vary. Lastly, returns on educational investments may only be truly realized in the long term. Despite these difficulties, the returns on education and the costs that society incurs as a result of dropouts is motivation enough to take lessons from the past and put it towards effective policy. The success of this program to lower drop out rates and the returns this has to society can only be realized over the long term.

8. Conclusion

The value of graduating with a high school diploma cannot be overstressed. It opens the door to PSE and workplace opportunities. As a result, it allows for higher standards of living and contributes to social and economic development. As Finnie, Laporte and Sweetman (2010) confirm:

“In an environment where schooling is more than ever a determining factor of labor market opportunities, high school completion is an important indicator of both an individual’s later economic prospects and society’s future prosperity.”

Therefore, ensuring that students are graduating from high school is essential to the individual student and to Canadian society as a whole.

⁴⁷ Richards (2011), p 6

Identifying the factors that increase the probability that students will decide to dropout and determining appropriate responses is critical to improving graduation rates. Socio-economic factors, particularly the education of parents, help to explain why many students choose to prematurely leave school, despite the benefits of a high school diploma. These social risk factors manifest themselves within the schools as academic risk, such as poor grades and low classroom participation. This is especially true for students from low-income neighborhoods or from families of marginalized groups. While niche programming such as low-income specific schools may appear to be a solution, these arrangements do not adequately address the causes of these symptoms effectively. Instead, they only reach a limited group of students and contribute to problems of alienation and segregation.

In contrast, an inclusive system-wide program offered through all high schools in Ontario is a more effective response. It would ensure that high-risk youth are identified and receive the necessary support to successfully make it to graduation: “A systemic approach offers the chance for teachers and associated educational professionals to develop a distinctly different method of thinking about, intervening with, troubled and troubling children at school.”⁴⁸ Consequently, teachers would be able to determine what issues are affecting the student’s academic performance and what type of support should be provided. For example, programs that stimulate parent participation can help to improve individual education outcomes by helping to foster support for education at home. Mentorship support and co-op/professional training can help students see the value

⁴⁸ Dawson and McHugh (2000), p 122

of their studies and the future benefits of their education. As well, by providing students with the resources to access work and PSE opportunities, youth can be empowered to make meaningful-decisions with regards to their lifestyle and career choices. If we agree that investment in high school education is fundamental to economic and social growth, then it is worth the cost in the present.

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