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# Dropout: Students leaving urban high schools prior to graduation

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I would like to dedicate this work to the young people who leave school without a diploma. I hope that my efforts have helped some individuals feel heard and I hope that in time, many more will be heard.

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### **Abstract**

Urban high schools in America are not generating the desired results; the low graduation rate in large cities must be addressed. Existing literature discussing the high school dropout issue is examined. Many factors contribute to school dropout, which has an impact on the individual and society. Several of the potential causes are examined and connections between multiple causes are noted. Quantitative and qualitative studies were used to create a complete view of this issue. Dropout prevention methods and programs are described, as is the role of school counselors in dropout prevention. A phenomenological study was also conducted to gain the personal perspective of individuals who dropped out of an urban school district. The specific goal of the research was to determine what factors contributed to students deciding to drop out of high school. Seven individuals participating in a General Education Diploma program shared their experience of dropping out of high school. Individual and small group interviews were conducted. The experiences reported were compared among each participant and were also related to the results of existing research. Results varied among participants, they reflected both the individual and the school community. Conclusions have been drawn and are reported as they relate to the role of a school counselor.

**Dropout: Students leaving urban high schools prior to graduation**

While students in all school settings are at-risk for dropping out, the percentage of students who drop out of urban school districts is much higher than those dropping out of suburban and rural districts (Hardré, Crowson, Debacker & White, 2007). Dropping out of high school is a process that takes place over an extended period of time (Wallis, 2007). The largest U.S. cities have the highest dropout rates; the average graduation rate in the 50 largest cities is barely over 50%, as compared to the 70% graduation rate in suburban schools (Dillon, 2009). The graduation rate for white students has been much higher than the rate for minorities. Across the country, only about 50 % of black and Hispanic students reach high school graduation, while their white counterparts achieve this milestone at a rate of nearly 70% (Wallis, 2007). Schools that are primarily made up of minority students are five times more likely to have students be held back at some point in their high school years. In 2007, it was reported that 47% of black students, and 39% of Hispanic students, attended schools where less than half of their classmates graduated (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007). The process often begins in the ninth grade, as students fail to accumulate the necessary credits to continue to the tenth grade. Students who have acquired few graduation credits often withdraw from school when they are legally able (Gegring, 2004; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004; Wallis, 2007).

School counselors should be leaders and advocates who promote collaboration and systemic changes when necessary for student improvement (Bodenhorn, N., Wolfe, E. W., & Airen, O. E., 2010). The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) explained that school counselors should enhance student learning by addressing the academic, career, and personal/social needs of all students (ASCA, 2005). School counselors are in a unique position to address many of the issues that urban youth face. It is possible for school counselors to create

school policies, as well as develop appropriate interventions (Bruce, A. M., Getch, Y. Q., & Ziomek-Daigle, J., 2009) that will enable all students to successfully complete high school. Bodenhorn et al. (2010) state that educational equality continues to be a national concern. The Education Trust (2009) reported that the achievement gap separating black and Latino students from white students has increased during the past three decades. Modern school counselors are trained in multi-cultural issues and are equipped with intervention techniques (Terry, 2008) to help urban, minority, students successfully overcome obstacles and complete high school.

Independent research was also conducted to examine why young people leave urban high schools prior to graduation and how are the causes related to the academic, career, and personal/social needs of each student. The phenomenological method was used to answer this question. Phenomenology was chosen to gain the personal perspective of several individuals who experienced the event of dropping out of high school. Lester (1999) stated that phenomenological methods are effective at drawing out the unique and personal perspectives of each participant. The researcher believed that this intimate information would be the most valuable in understanding why young people left high school without earning a diploma.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction**

The literature review used existing qualitative and quantitative studies to examine current data regarding high school non-completion. The reasons that students drop out of school are identified from previous research. Current dropout prevention methods that have been reviewed are acknowledged and the effectiveness of the techniques is noted. School counselors have

regular interactions with students. The ways that school counselors can impact the high school dropout rate is also discussed.

### **Circumstances Related to Dropping Out**

All students have different experiences throughout adolescence that may lead to the decision to drop out of high school. Finnan and Chasin (2007) found that students who drop out of high school have a variety of self-perceptions. Seventy percent of students who dropped out of an urban school in Wisconsin reported that they believed they had the ability to complete high school. Half of the young people reported that they dropped out due to boredom. Other students stated that they felt like they did not belong in school, and that these feelings were reinforced by others in school and in their personal life.

While withdrawing from high school is a short process, it is typically the culmination of several events that have taken place over an extended period of time (Finnan & Chasin, 2007; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; Wallis, 2007). Students who drop out are most often overage for their class and have accumulated very few graduation credits (Entwisle, Alexander & Olson, 2005; Wallis, 2007). Attendance, behavior in school, and academic ability are all predictors of dropout. Archambault, Janosz, Morizot and Pagani, (2009) found that students who demonstrate consistently unacceptable school behavior had the highest dropout risk of all the students in their study. In a longitudinal study, Schoeneberger (2011) found that the longer a student had poor attendance, the more likely the student was to drop out. One school in Philadelphia learned that 75% of their dropouts could be identified, based on attendance and class performance, as early as ninth grade (Legters & Balfans, 2010). Other factors which impact graduation include: family dynamics and influence (Englund, Egeland & Collins, 2008; Terry, 2008), peer influence (Ream

& Rumberger, 2008; Terry 2008), school environment (Lee & Breen, 2007; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), literacy (Wallis, 2007), special program status (Dunn, Chambers & Rabren, 2004; Matthews, 2006; Roessingh, 2004; Vargas & Bizard, 2010; Pascopella, 2003), perceived relevance (Dunn et al., 2004; Marquez-Zenkov, 2007), student employment (Drewry, Burge & Driscoll, 2010; Entwisle, et al., 2005; Lee & Breen, 2007), and the ninth grade transition (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

**Family dynamics and influence.** A student's family greatly impacts his/ her chance of completing high school. Parents are often considered to be the greatest factor in determining whether a student graduates from high school (Englund et al., 2008; Terry, 2008). Parents have the ability to motivate students to stay in school (Marquez-Zenkov, 2007; Terry, 2008). When parents support their children's efforts toward graduating, it can increase a student's academic aspirations (Terry, 2008). When parents are unable to support their children academically, students are at-risk for not graduating high school (Terry, 2008). Factors that impact families' abilities to support students include: lack of adequate support (Englund et al., 2008; Finnian & Chasin, 2007; Terry, 2008), parental status (Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Terry, 2008), and housing (Terry, 2008; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; Wallis, 2007). Finances can significantly impact each factor.

**Support.** Students, who drop out, often come from families who cannot provide adequate support for their children in relation to education; this lack of support can include negative talk regarding the need for schooling, not having educational enrichment materials in the home, or lack of adequate supervision after school hours (Finnan & Chasin, 2007; Terry, 2008). Even if a student has the ability to do well in school, the students' chances of completion are decreased if the student's family does not provide support (Finnan & Chasin, 2007). Young

people who perform well academically and have unsupportive parents pose a significant problem for educators; they are rarely identified as at risk for not completing high school and therefore, do not get the extra support that other at risk students may be receiving (Englund et al., 2008).

***Parental status.*** Most students who drop out of high school are raised in single parent homes (Terry, 2008). In some cases, single parents needed their older children to stay home from school to help care for younger siblings or to do house work while the parent was working. Socioeconomic status is also a predictor for the likeliness of dropping out of high school (Vargas & Brizard, 2010). Researchers found that some students had to work outside of the home to financially contribute to the household income and support the family (Ream & Rumberger, 2008). Working decreases time for studying and limits extracurricular opportunities for students; these factors decrease the likelihood of the student completing high school (Ream & Rumberger, 2008).

***Housing.*** Family mobility also impacts a student's chance of dropping out. If a family moves frequently, the children in that family will have a greater chance of not completing high school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; Terry, 2008). Loss of housing could make it challenging for a young person to continue with their education (Wallis, 2007).

***Peer influence.*** A student's peers can have an impact on the choice to drop out of high school (Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Terry 2008). Some students reported dropping out of school because they received verbal and physical abuse from their classmates. Students, who were subjected to verbal abuse and bullying, reported decreased self-esteem and indicated that stress (related to the abuse) made it too hard to pay attention in class (Drewry et al., 2010; Terry,

2008). Kemp (2006) also found that negative interactions with peers at school increased student dropout rates.

In addition to negative peer interactions, friends can also contribute to a student's decision to drop out. Former students reported that their dropout process started when their friends encouraged them to skip school (Drewry et al., 2010). Several students also reported being encouraged to drop out of school by friends who had already left (Terry, 2008). Students in low SES schools and neighborhoods are at greater risk, as they regularly socialize with other young people who are at risk for dropping out (Ream & Rumberger, 2008). Dropping out of high school becomes socially acceptable among peers who are at risk for dropping out. (Drewry et al., 2010; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Terry, 2008). The perceived social advantages of being streetwise outweigh the potential advantages offered by high school classes (Ream & Rumberger, 2008).

**Perceived relevance.** Many urban students believe high school should be a means to prepare for employment, but they are unable to make a connection between the curriculum and their career goals (Dunn et al., 2004; Marquez-Zenkov, 2007). Many students stated that they do not intend to continue their education past grade 12, as they were unable to see the relationship between their course work and their future employment plans, which decreased their interest in school (Christle et al., 2007). The researchers hypothesized that when students believe school is preparing them for their future goals they are more likely to maintain an interest in their education, which increases their chance of completing high school. Eighty percent of students who graduated from school believed that school was preparing them for their future plans. However, only 54% of students who dropped out have the same feelings of being prepared for their future (Dunn et al., 2004). Many students believed that high school was good preparation if

their future plans were to attend college (Christle et al., 2007); students, who did not plan on attending college, did not see the relevance of high school.

**School environment.** Factors, such as student-teacher ratio and the quality of teachers, were also found to have an impact on whether students drop out of school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). It is believed that improving teacher quality in urban school districts could have a positive impact on the graduation rate in U.S. cities (Dillon, 2009). The challenge that urban districts face is that the better teachers tend to take jobs in suburban districts (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Vacancies in urban districts are often filled with teachers who are not able to adequately service students. Findings revealed that adults, in the school, also contributed to a student's decision to drop out (Lee & Breen, 2007; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Students who dropped out did not feel encouraged or supported, by the adults in the school, to succeed and accomplish their academic goals (Lee & Breen, 2007).

In addition to the abilities of faculty and staff, the academic atmosphere also impacts students' decisions to drop out (Christle et al., 2007). A study of high schools in Kentucky revealed that schools in good physical condition had lower dropout rates than schools in poor condition (Christle et al., 2007). Building size has also been identified as impacting dropout rates. Some studies have reported that the larger the population of a school, the greater the dropout percentage will be (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; Werblow & Duesbery, 2009). Other researchers, however, found no correlation between school population and the dropout rate (Christle et al., 2007). Finally, schools with professionally dressed staff have higher graduation rates than schools with casually dressed teachers (Christle et al., 2007).

**The ninth grade.** Lan and Lanthier (2003) found that between the eighth and tenth grade there was a significant decline in motivation for schoolwork for students who dropped out. Their research revealed that in the eighth grade, students (who would eventually drop out) had attitudes consistent with the national average. The school related attitude of future non-completers declined sharply between eighth and tenth grade, emphasizing the importance of the ninth grade year. In another study, students reported looking forward to high school because they would have more independence and greater say in their educational plan (Smith, Akos, Lim & Wiley, 2008). As students started making more independent academic choices, however, they did not anticipate the consequences of those decisions. For example, some students may have chosen not to challenge themselves by enrolling in a lower level math class, not realizing that one's math ability is one of the greatest predictors for college success (Smith et al., 2008).

Students in the ninth grade often have the lowest grade point averages, the most days absent, the most missed classes, and most behavioral issues within the high school population (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). The researchers hypothesized that ninth graders have the greatest struggles for two reasons: (1) the transition to a new building and increased academic challenges; (2) 40% of ninth graders in large cities repeat the ninth grade.

The struggles students have during the ninth grade transition can be academic as well as social (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Having a new social status may cause a ninth grade student to struggle with his or her identity (Smith et al., 2008). Many students have been accustomed to participating in extracurricular activities and find that their role within activities changes in high school. Very few freshmen make varsity teams or lead the school band. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) also pointed out that many students do not fully understand that they must earn

credits toward graduation; in middle school, students advance even if they fail a class, which is not the case in high school.

Researchers (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Smith et al., 2008) have found that the problems experienced in the ninth grade actually begin before students reach high school. While there are prevention programs in place to assist students struggling in the ninth grade, there is not enough energy spent on addressing these issues in the middle schools (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). The strongest predictors of dropout vary from one district to another. It is important that educational leaders determine the causes of dropout within their district as early as possible to initiate interventions before the barriers become too large (Legters & Balfanz, 2010).

**Literacy.** Many students transition into high school with low reading comprehension (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The New York City School District learned that the ninth grade students who struggled with reading skills were at the greatest risk of dropping out. Only 37% of eighth grade students in the New York City School District were proficient in reading (Wallis, 2007). Poor reading ability increases the chances of a student being retained in the ninth grade, which is another strong predictor of failing to complete high school (Lan & Lanthier, 2003).

Clark (2006) stated that when students enter high school the texts are more challenging and the reading expectations change. The skills and strategies that allow students to read and comprehend the higher-level material are not taught in high school. Clark also suggested that high school teachers were not typically trained in teaching literacy. The increased expectation without the necessary instruction leads to students not progressing in literacy. Middle school teachers have been identified as needing to do more to prepare students for the academic

challenges of high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Researchers (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot & Pagani, 2009; Marquez-Zenkov, 2007) have suggested that attempting to reinforce reading skills with traditional textbooks is not a successful solution. To improve literacy skills, some have argued that reading materials should be meaningful to the students (Marquez-Zenkov, 2007).

**Special programs.** Students enrolled in special programs are at risk for not completing high school. Students who are English language learners (Pascopella, 2003; Roessingh, 2004; Vargas & Bizard, 2010), enrolled in special education (Dunn et al., 2004), or are gifted (Matthews, 2006) are at risk for not acquiring high school credits, which increases the chances of dropping out (Entwisle et al., 2005; Wallis, 2007).

**Limited English Proficient.** Limited ability to use the English language has an effect on whether or not a student drops out of high school (Pascopella, 2003; Vargas & Bizard, 2010). English as a Second Language (ESL) programs remain underfunded and under supported in many urban districts (Roessingh, 2004). ESL learners are a group that is often over-represented in the non-completer population. Students must build their English skills in order to do well in the general education classes; however, students do not accumulate graduation credits for time in ESL classes. ESL students spend a great deal of time and energy in school and earn few credits (Roessingh, 2004). Earning less than the required number of credits to be promoted is a factor that increases the chances of dropping out (Entwisle, et al., 2005; Wallis, 2007).

**Special Education.** The dropout rates for students who have been classified as having special needs are similar to the general education dropout rates. When data for students with special needs are disaggregated, however, distinctions between special education categories

are revealed. It was determined that students with mental retardation were less likely to drop out than students with less severe learning disabilities (Dunn, et al, 2004). The researchers hypothesized that the significant supports which the students with mental retardation received reinforced school engagement. The reasons that students who were classified as having a learning disability cited for dropping out of school were similar to those reasons cited by students in general education classes; excessive absences and lack of school engagement were two of the most common reasons for dropping out (Kemp, 2006).

***Gifted learners.*** Students identified as gifted learners also drop out of school. While they are no more likely than general education students to drop out, they are less likely to be identified as at-risk because of their academic abilities (Matthews, 2006). Gifted students who dropped out experienced attendance and behavioral problems. Gifted students also left high school early to enter the work force or start taking college classes at a community college.

**Employment.** As previously mentioned, students who eventually drop out tend to repeat grade levels, and thus are older than their classmates. Given their age, they can acquire jobs that can compound the likelihood of dropping out (Entwisle et al., 2005). When students gained jobs traditionally held by adults, they often viewed work as an alternative to school. The ability to earn money and become self sufficient is considered more advantageous than completing high school (Drewry et al. 2010). If a person is regarded as an adult, based on the type of work they do, that person can then drop the student aspect of their life by withdrawing from school and move into adulthood (Entwisle et al., 2005).

Entwisle et al. (2005) found that the age at which urban students begin working is significant. Students, who began to work at age 15 dropped out of high school more often than

students who started working at age 16. The researchers hypothesized that sixteen-year-old students were likely closer to graduation and may be more committed to completing their education than the 15-year-old students. Younger students are less likely to see value in completing their education when they have already started earning money (Somers et al., 2009).

Lee and Breen (2007) found that most students who left school for full time employment reported that they had a positive experience. These students were employed at the time they left school and generally stated that they could not see a valid reason for staying in high school. Students thought that if they did not plan to attend college, there was no reason to complete high school. From their study, the researchers concluded that employment increased independence, responsibility, and confidence for the students who had dropped out of high school.

### **The Social Impact**

Education plays a major role in the financial status (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009) and legal circumstances (Pettit & Western, 2004; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009) of a person's life. The successful completion of high school greatly impacts the way in which young people influence social systems and institutions; more high school graduates are needed to help the U.S. economy expand (Jones, 2005).

**Financial effects.** The effects of dropping out of school are felt by both the individual and the community. The structure of the current U.S. economy favors those who have completed high school and have some form of post secondary education (Jones, 2005). The National Center for Education Statistics reported that median earnings were directly related to educational attainment for the years 1995 to 2009. People without a high school diploma tend to experience higher unemployment rates and, on average, work fewer weeks per year (Tyler & Lofstrom,

2009). The community also loses potential tax revenue that would be generated by the person who did not graduate from high school. High school graduates contribute, on average, an additional \$139,000 in income tax revenue throughout their lifetime than non-completers. The Alliance for Excellent Education projected that America would experience \$325 billion in economic growth if every U.S. student graduated from high school (Weaver, 2007). In addition to reduced tax contributions, students who dropped out of school also represent a large portion of those who utilize social services (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Ream and Rumberger (2008) predicted that the students who dropped out from the class of 2007 will cost the nation about \$300 billion over their lifespan.

**Criminal justice.** Getting arrested and involvement in criminal activity, while enrolled in school, has a negative impact on high school completion. Minority students are more likely to leave high school early, and to end up in prison than white students (Hirschfield, 2009). High school graduates are less likely to be involved in crime than those young people who do not graduate from high school (Pettit & Western, 2004; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). While the goal is for all students to graduate from high school, remaining enrolled in school longer results in better outcomes for students and society, even if a diploma is never achieved. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) estimated that if students were to attend at least one extra year of schooling, before dropping out, the murder rate would reduce by up to 30%. Violent felonies were also predicted to decrease, if at risk students' time in school increased, as Ikomi (2010) found a correlation between graduation rates and violent felonies.

### **Dropout Prevention Methods**

Young people in all societies receive some type of education; the U.S. is one of the few places that requires over 10 years of formal schooling (Weissberg, 2010). The basic high school system was developed over 100 years ago. Education in the U.S. was originally designed to educate about 10% of the population, while other young people were expected to join the workforce. Currently, schools have been reformed and curriculum has been redeveloped in an effort to keep every young person in high school until they earn a high school diploma. If the current goal of educating all young people is going to be achieved, the system must be redesigned to meet the needs of young people preparing to enter a technology based job market (Gehring, 2004).

Jones (2005) stated that a new curriculum is necessary to accommodate students who wish to gain employment after high school. Some programs focus on the individual, while others attempt to institute new policies or promote systemic change. One common approach to keeping students in school was to create multiple small schools within a single building (Pascopella, 2003; Wallis, 2007). By turning one large school into eight small schools, all with a focus on a specific career field, one Chicago school was able to greatly reduce the dropout rate. Chicago Vocational High School went from 70% of students dropping out to just 8% of students dropping out over a six year time period (Pascopella, 2003). As previously stated, students are more likely to stay in school when they feel a strong connection between their school work and career options. By creating a curriculum that allowed students to see how the skills they learned in high school would enable them to enter the work force, they were more motivated to stay in school and complete their course work (Finnan & Chasin, 2007; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004).

Young people will put forth greater effort when they deem a task valuable (Archambault et al., 2009). Increasing the perceived utility of high school for students can help keep them on an educational path, and may also improve behavior and the overall school experience. Student's perceptions of the utility of coursework are a significant predictor of academic achievement and motivation. Classroom lessons that allow students to make connections between academics and their post-secondary goals were hypothesized as necessary (Walker & Greene, 2009).

Involving outside agencies to help address the personal needs that students have is also a common approach to reducing the number of students who drop out. Programs such as Good Shepherd Services in New York City, and Communities in Schools in Atlanta, identify students who are at risk for not completing high school and match them with a mentor. This mentor attempts to help the student overcome social and personal barriers that might get in the way of graduation (Pascopella, 2003; Wallis, 2007).

Vargas and Brizard (2010) found that many students who graduated from the Rochester City School District in 2009 benefited from having a consistent adult in their lives. The adults projected a belief in the student's ability to be successful and expected the student to graduate from high school. The adult also modeled good behaviors for the student to observe. Students who can relate to an adult at school are more likely to view school as a caring environment and will likely increase their commitment to school (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004).

National studies reported that students who identified a supportive adult at school were less likely to drop out than those who were not able to identify such an adult (Christle et al., 2007; Dunn et al., 2004). When students were able to build a positive relationship with a

teacher, they were more likely to complete school (Walker & Greene, 2009). In one urban school district, students revealed that the relationships they had with their teachers were the most significant factor in their decision to attend, and complete, high school. These teachers supported the students, and were also demanding. The students in this district responded well when high expectations were set for them. The students in this district also reported that having someone to speak with was important. Feeling listened to was identified as another factor in one's likelihood to complete high school (Marquez-Zenkov, 2007).

Students who feel that they belong in school show more signs of understanding in the classroom than students who were disengaged. It is important for teachers to be aware that these feelings can be altered. With proper interventions, students can gain a sense of belonging and improve their academic standing. Making students feel welcome in the classroom is something that teachers can control and utilize to improve the quality of learning that takes place (Walker & Greene, 2009).

### **Arguments against Dropout Prevention Programs**

Weissberg (2010) stated that increasing retention rates and increasing academic standards for public schools are contradictory ideas. Making school more challenging will naturally increase the number of non-completers. As previously stated, there is a financial cost associated with students not graduating from high school, but the smaller number of students in school also means less public spending on education (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Fewer students would require fewer teachers as well as fewer busses, school computers, and less paper consumption. Weissberg asserted that billions of dollars are spent on programs to decrease dropout, but the financial gains of all students graduating may not exceed the expenditures.

Many students who dropped out were disruptive in their classes and occupied a great amount of the teacher's time (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). When those students were not in the classroom, the teachers were better able to serve the students who were dedicated to their studies (Tyler & Lofstrom; Weissberg, 2010). Weissberg (2010) argued that the students who stay in school benefit from others dropping out; as the number of high school graduates increases, the value of the diploma decreases.

While students dropping out of school may have some societal benefits, it is unlikely that these benefits could outweigh those associated with increased graduation rates (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). It remains true that not every student will graduate from high school, and the argument of quality over quantity will continue to be emphasized by those who resist the plan to help all students complete high school (Weissberg, 2010). The fact that is overlooked by this argument is that not all students have the same opportunities for academic success. Many students possess risk factors beyond their control. Students who drop out of high school are likely to have a single parent or divorced parents (Terry, 2008). Students who are male, black, or Hispanic have also been identified as being at greater risk of not complete high school (Schoeneberger, 2012; Vargas & Brizard, 2010; Werblow & Duesbery, 2009). Poverty, as well as the neighborhood one lives in also contributes to the dropout issue (Vargas & Brizard, 2010). Students face different risk factors. School personnel cannot fix many of the obstacles urban youth face, but appropriate interventions and protective programming can help ensure that each student has a fair opportunity to gain his or her education (Christle et al., 2007).

### **The Role of the School Counselor**

The American School Counseling Association (2005) stated that school counselors should be addressing the academic, career, and personal/social aspects of students' lives. Many of the factors that are contributing to the dropout crisis are closely related to these three domains. Working directly with students and promoting systemic changes are methods that school counselors are able to employ so that each student can be successful in school. School counselors have the ability to effectively intervene when student actions, behaviors, or life circumstances, are identified as being counterproductive to completing high school (Terry, 2008).

Traumatic events can impact a student's decision to drop out of high school (Legters & Balfanz, 2010; Wallis, 2007). Lee and Breen (2007) found that the students in their study did not believe that they could reveal personal information to their teachers. School counselors should increase their presence in the school, making themselves a known resource for students who wish to discuss personal matters with an adult. Individual counseling conducted by school counselors can help young people work through various crises and interpersonal problems that may occur in their lives. Building caring relationships, a strength of modern school counselors, can lead to a stronger connection between the student and school (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004).

Techniques from solution focused therapy have proved to help at risk students stay on the graduation path. The miracle question, and scaling questions, in particular, were factors in helping students create academic goals and plans of action (Franklin, Streeter, Kim & Tripodi, 2007). Hardré et al., (2007) found that developing student learning goals was statistically significant in predicting student engagement in school. School counselors can help at risk

students stay in school by assisting them in creating their own educational goals. Students who report being involved in their education continue to graduate at a much higher rate than those who do not feel like they have a strong voice in their educational process (Archambault et al., 2009).

It must be made very clear to students as they transition into high school that they have to pass all their classes every year in order to reach graduation within four years (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The ASCA National Model (2005) explains that individual student planning meetings should take place, and include parents or guardians, to ensure that each student understands his or her academic progress. School counselors can help make sure that each student is set on a path to graduation early in the student's high school experience. In addition to individual meetings, classroom presentations conducted by school counselors must inform students of their school district's graduation requirements. The school counselor must work to help students develop a plan and take ownership of their own academic progress.

Educational leaders and other stakeholders must be identified and involved in designing and implementing dropout prevention tasks (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). It would be beneficial for school personnel to do their own studies to determine the reason, or reasons, students disengage from school in their district. Schools could then implement the best prevention method for the specific issues that exist within their district. When staff throughout a school district work together, students can be identified early and can be monitored and engaged in prevention programs throughout their school career. The ASCA National Model (2005) stated that collaboration among school counselors, teachers, parents/guardians, administrators, and community members is necessary. The combined efforts and support will allow for systemic

changes to be developed and successfully implemented in order to reduce the number of students dropping out of school.

### **Summary**

Leaving high school early has a powerful, negative, impact on the individual (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), as well as, the community (Hirschfield, 2009; Pettit & Western, 2004; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). There are several factors that put students at risk for dropping out. Some risk factors, including attending an urban school (Dillon, 2009; Jones, 2005; Wallis, 2007) or experiencing poverty (Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008) cannot be controlled by school counselors. Other risk factors, including disengagement from school (Archambault et al., 2009; Walker & Greene, 2009) and behavioral issues (Archambault et al., 2009), can be decreased when they are identified early and intervention techniques are employed (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). School counselors can, and should, be utilizing intervention techniques to reduce the dropout rate in urban schools.

Eschenauer and Chen-Hayes (2005) stated that school counselors must be practitioner-researchers. Due to the increased demand for data driven practices and accountability measures school counselors must examine what they are doing and evaluate the effectiveness of their actions to develop the best possible interventions. Due to No Child Left Behind and high stakes tests, every minute of class time is valuable for teachers. Teachers are reluctant to allow students to miss class time to visit the school counselor, which is why more data is needed to prove the effectiveness of school counseling programs (Eschenauer & Chen-Hayes, 2005). A better understanding of the causes of high school dropout is needed in order to develop the most

effective interventions for each school and to validate the school counselor's role in the educational process.

### **Method**

A phenomenological approach was used for this study to gain an understanding of the personal experience that individuals had when they dropped out of high school. To learn the reasons that young people drop out of high school interviews were set up with people who had previously left high school without earning a diploma. Personal interviews were selected as the ideal method because it was believed that this would allow the participant the freedom to describe their experience using their own words and the option to elaborate on certain situations that were deemed significant by the participant or the researcher. Interviews also allowed the researcher the opportunity to ask additional questions if needed.

**Participants.** The participants in this study were all attending a General Education Diploma (GED) course in the city where they dropped out of high school. Seven individuals participated in this study. Each individual choosing to take part was a black female. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 28 years old and all reported that they were of low socioeconomic status and that they qualified for the free or reduced lunch program when they attended high school. Each participant continues to live in the city in which they dropped out of school.

**Procedure.** Four GED classes were identified as having potential participants. The researcher attended each class to identify himself and explain the research project. Members of each class listened to an explanation of this research project, and then were invited to take part in an interview to share their experience of dropping out of high school. A total of 58 individuals

were presented with an opportunity to participate. The only condition participants had to meet was that they had previously dropped out of a high school in the specific school district being studied. It is unknown how many of the 58 individuals in the GED classes qualified as potential candidates based on this requirement. All class members were presented with the researchers phone number and email address so that they could make contact in private should they wish to conceal their participation from other members of the class.

In two situations, individuals stated that they would prefer to participate with a friend from the GED class. This request was granted, resulting in two conversations that took place between the researcher and two participants. The three remaining participants each took part in a one on one conversation with the researcher. In total, five separate conversations were had, with seven participants. The conversations took place in an unused classroom at the building which housed the GED program and were scheduled via telephone at the participant's convenience. Each person took part in a single interview. The interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes each.

Each participant was informed that the conversation regarding their drop-out experience would be audio recorded and would be confidential. Each participant was also made aware of the limits of confidentiality. All of the participants were asked for the same biographical information and were then asked to share their story of leaving high school. The reason or reasons each person left high school before earning a diploma was revealed in this process. The participant was encouraged to talk about whatever they were willing to share, while the researcher listened and helped to maintain focus on the research question when refocusing was needed. The researcher summarized and checked for understanding when necessary, to ensure

accurate interpretation of the statements given. Various follow up questions were asked to gain the best possible understanding of each participant's experience.

### **Results**

In order to examine the identified causes of high school non-completion each interview was transcribed and coded. Codes were selected based on common responses from participants and themes presented in existing research. Themes across participant's experiences were highlighted as well as statements that related to causes of drop out noted in the existing research. Each participant's story was unique, but similar circumstances existed for several participants.

**Peer influence.** Six of the participants reported that the actions of their peers had an impact on their decision to stop attending high school. Four of the participants stated that the social group they spent time with was made up of individuals who did not value school and that there was peer pressure to skip classes. "Being in the wrong crowd basically," was how one participant described her social situation. Missing the required seat time caused students to fail classes. The failed classes resulted in students not being promoted to the next grade level at the end of the school year. People in this group also stated that they felt obligated to act in a manner that was disruptive to their education. Disrespecting adults at school and fighting with other students were common practices that lead to missed class time and poor academic marks.

Two of the participants who discussed peer actions as motivation to leave school stated that other students in their classes affected their ability to graduate. Constant class disruptions from unfocused students, and the immaturity of other students, were cited as reasons to leave high school. One participant stated, "there's really no point in my coming to school if I'm not gonna get an education... kids there, they just come to school to hang out with their friends."

These two participants said that attending high school was a poor use of time, as they were not able to learn in the environment they were placed in.

Another aspect of the school environment that was impacted by one's peers was the violence that took place. Violence impacted four of the participant's decision to leave school. Of these four participants, two reported that being directly involved in the violence influenced their decision to leave school. One participant reported that, "you got friends in school, they bring that street life to the school so you got to hold your title and fight." These participants reported that they saw no value in school, as attending led to more fighting than not attending. The other two participants stated that witnessing violent acts made them uncomfortable in school. Fearing for their own safety was one of the reasons they decided to stop attending their high school. Both of the individuals who feared for their own safety reported that they had children and that this greatly impacted their feelings regarding their personal safety. One of the interviewees said that her child's father had already been shot and this motivated her to avoid potentially dangerous situations whenever possible.

**Parental influence and family.** Two of the participants reported that their family members had voiced an opinion in support their decision to leave school. These two participants said that their mothers actively encouraged them to stop attending high school. Both people stated that they were over age and under credit, and that their mothers believed that an alternative educational, or career preparatory, program would be more beneficial than continuing high school. One of these individuals said, "my mom told me to drop out ... she said she ain't with me goin' to school not getting an education." This participant was over age and under credit, so her mother told her to find an alternative program that could help her get a job instead of continuing to attend high school.

The four remaining participants reported having parents and siblings who did not graduate from high school and that this family trend influenced their decision. Two participants stated that they were encouraged to stay in school and two reported no encouragement to stay in school or drop out. Regardless of the advice received, participants stated that the actions of their family were seen as more impactful than their words. Despite being encouraged to stay in school, one participant stated, “my mom, if it wasn’t bingo it was work, if it wasn’t work it was bingo, she was never home.” This individual stated that her three brothers dropped out of school and that she simply wanted to be like them, which made dropping out of school appear to be a good decision.

**Pregnancy.** Two participants were pregnant at the time they dropped out. Both stated that being pregnant was a major factor in their decision to stop attending high school. One participant said that she was forced to start working in order to financially support herself and her new child. She said, “I couldn’t go to school and take care of him” and she added that she received little support from her family. The second participant explained that she became very emotional and experienced a lot of anxiety during her pregnancy and was unable to attend classes or complete school assignments. This person felt she should leave school while she was pregnant, but did not return after having her child. She stated that she felt embarrassed about returning to school after having a child because she would be older than the other students in her grade.

**Connection with adults at school.** Four participants had positive relationships with adults at school. All four of these individuals stated that they felt like their school counselor or a teacher cared about their academic success and encouraged them to attend school. One of the four also reported a strong relationship with a school administrator in the building. Despite

having these relationships, students reported that other factors were more powerful than the support of a school counselor or teacher. Another participant reported that she had a negative experience with her school counselor shortly before leaving school and said that this experience impacted her decision to stop attending. The two remaining participants reported neither positive nor negative relationships with teachers or counselors at school.

### **Discussion**

The results of this research reinforce the idea that each person experiences events in life differently. The experiences that the participants had were each unique, but there were some common themes that were identified. The study was successful in answering why the participants dropped out of high school. These themes noted have been addressed in previous research. Some of the stories told by the participants support existing research, while others contradict previous findings. The clearest finding from the present study confirms existing research by Drewry et al., (2010) Kemp, (2006) and Terry, (2008) which shows that the students in school impact each other's decisions. Peers can influence each other in positive and negative ways and also impact others without having direct interaction.

One of the most prominent themes that spread across each interview was the power of the school culture. It was clear that individuals in the interviews were affected by school culture and that the culture was developed by the students. For the individuals in this study, that culture was not one where they could be effective learners. Some of the participants in this study embraced the culture by engaging in fights, disrupting classes and skipping classes. Others reported that they rejected the school culture, but saw no hope in changing it, and that this resulted in their decision to leave school. Changing the culture of an institution would be a tremendous

undertaking, but it may be the only way to make significant improvements in the graduation rate. School counselors can bring attention to this situation and work in collaboration with other professions in an attempt to develop a culture of safety and learning in school.

The uniqueness of each person's experience demonstrates the need for individual meetings between students and the school counselor. According to the American School Counseling Association (2005) counselors should meet with every student on their caseload during the school year. These meetings should take place as often as possible. School counselors can then become better advocates for each student as they will have a stronger understanding of what each student needs to achieve their personal goals in school and outside of school. While this study showed that a strong connection with an adult does not increase the likelihood of completing high school, school counselors will be able to connect students with whatever resources are needed to help individual students obtain their goals. This can only happen if school counselors are seeing students on a regular basis.

Having a parent or immediate family member who did not complete high school has been established as a significant risk factor (Finnan & Chasin, 2007). This finding was confirmed by the present study. Although several individuals were encouraged to stay in school, they knew family members did not graduate, and those actions were more powerful than the advice given to the students regarding high school completion. School counselors must connect with their student's family to make sure family members are aware of the power they hold.

It is important to note that all seven participants reported that they feel regret about not completing high school when they had the opportunity. While it was not the aim of this study to learn this information, each person freely reported that they would prefer to have earned their

high school diploma. Several individuals added that they would like to encourage current students to remain in school and complete their education. This information may be useful in developing future dropout prevention programs, as individuals with personal experience may be utilized. This information should serve as motivation for current school counselors in urban settings to work closely with students at risk of dropping out.

**Limitations.** The addition of male and Latino participants would have made the results more reflective of the population being examined. Due to the time constraints of the research, it was not possible to continue inviting participants to interview until saturation was reached, which is the goal of phenomenological studies. Finally, participants knew that the researcher was pursuing a Masters Degree, which may have caused some biased answers, as participants may have answered questions in favor of continuing education thinking this would be pleasing to the researcher.

**Summary.** This research experience was very powerful. Several of the participants reported feelings of relief after the interview and two participants became emotional at times during the interview. The process seemed to be very therapeutic for the participants, which was gratifying for the researcher, regardless of the results generated. One participant requested additional counseling and was referred to the counseling center at the Rochester Educational Opportunity Center. The research process motivated the researcher to continue this line of work, as it seemed beneficial to the participants, and may be helpful for other non-completers.

High school non-completion affects everyone in the community. It is a problem that will continue to exist as long as people allow it to. All community members must take part in addressing the needs of young people in order to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to

complete high school. School counselors are in a unique position to connect with individual young people in school and learn about the needs of each student. Educators and community members must work together to make schools a place where everyone can be successful.

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