

Pairing Motivational Interviewing with Adventure-Challenge Education

A Promising Strategy for Improving High School Retention

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The Challenge

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) are faced with an alarming dropout rate, with nearly the same number of students leaving school as graduating (Sadovi, 2008; Civic Committee, 2009). Graduation rates vary among schools, from 95% for selective high schools to less than half of that for neighborhood high schools in high poverty communities (ISBE, 2009). This problem extends to middle school as it is estimated that 18% of these students leave school before they finish 8th grade (CPS, 2007).

This attrition has consequences for both the students involved and for society. Students without high school diplomas cannot enroll in postsecondary education, tend to be less healthy, more likely to become teen parents, more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system, and more likely to need welfare assistance than high school completers. Because 60% of jobs require some post-secondary education, students who do not complete high school have limited opportunities for employment and are not able to pay taxes at rates high enough to meet the needs of society (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003). It is estimated that the cost to Illinois taxpayers is \$185,000 for every high school dropout (Malone, 2007).

More important than the financial value of education or cost to society when it is lacking is the role schools play in creating people who are fully developed as human beings and as democratic citizens (Tyack, 2004). According to data from the Chicago Public Schools Office of Research, Evaluation and Accountability (2009), 52.5% of CPS graduates enroll in four-year colleges. From their analysis of graduation rate trends, Heckman and LaFontaine (2007) have concluded that this decline in high school graduation and the accompanying negative effect on college attendance and completion is reflected in declining skill levels in America's workforce. We must address this issue!

Contributing Factors

Because the reasons students leave school vary, interventions need to address a number of factors. Tyack and Cuban (2004) concluded that, "Current state and federal strategies place the full burden upon schools and schools alone to remedy low academic performance,...expecting schools to solve severe social problems and then blaming students, teachers, and administrators for failing to remedy those very same problems." Stearns and Glennie (2006) further observed that, "dropout reasons vary by age, grade, ethnicity, and gender as well. Ninth graders and students aged 16 and younger are more likely than advanced and older students to leave school for disciplinary reasons." According to researchers at the Education Rights Center at the Howard University School of Law, there is a disproportionate overrepresentation of students of color and males having to face disciplinary measure in schools. The dropout rate is highest among students of color. "The effect of suspension and expulsion resulting from such disproportionate or unnecessary discipline is cumulative and often has serious, far-reaching consequences for students. These consequences include . . . increased likelihood of dropping out..." (Education Rights Center, 2008-09). Being suspended or expelled is a significant school-related reason for dropping out, at least for male students of color (Karp, 2009). In the newly released National Center for Educational Statistics report on Late High School Dropouts (2009), 22 percent of males in the sophomore cohort, who should have graduated in 2004 but who dropped out between 2002 and 2004, said they were suspended from school and 15 percent said they were expelled. (Students who leave high school after the spring of 10th grade are considered late high school dropouts.) The words we use in naming the problem are also important. Current terminology places the blame on students or their families rather than on society or schools. For



example, students who are considered likely to fail or leave school are considered at-risk of educational failure, something for which they or their families can be blamed, rather than marginalized, something that society does to them. Similarly dropouts, places the focus on the students rather than pushouts, which focuses on how schools and society treat students so that they eventually decide to leave. This problem is supported by a study conducted by VOYCE (November 2008), a collaborative of Chicago students, that was recently funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Communities for Public Education Reform. When 740 students responded to questions about their understanding of the reasons for dropping out of school, most initially blamed students themselves. According to the report, it took looking at the data very closely for the students to understand that systemic issues facing education and stemming from adult behaviors and public policy significantly impact dropping out of school.

Chicago Teachers' Center Programs Improve Retention and Graduation Rates

For over two decades the Chicago Teachers' Center (CTC) at Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) has helped schools address issues of student retention and graduation. In 1987, CTC was awarded a Hispanic Dropout Prevention Research Grant from the Ford Foundation with the purpose of examining the factors that led Latinos to leave school. Since then, schools receiving support from the Chicago Teachers' Center have shown positive results over the years. For instance, CTC's Bridges to the Future Program worked with classes identified by teachers as their most difficult. The program involved the use of experiential learning, cooperative learning and adventure-challenge education strategies. In June 1993, the evaluation of this program determined that seniors who had been program participants during either their junior or senior year had a substantially higher graduation rate than did students who were not in the program, 75.1 percent for all seniors and 88.5 percent for project seniors (Radinsky, 1995). In 1998 CTC began supporting several public high schools in creating smaller schools-within-schools or blocked programs, demonstrating how these structures could help create safer and more supportive environments that would result in improved retention. Funded by several U.S. Department of Education programs, among them the Dropout Prevention and School/College/ University Partnership Programs, CTC helped schools by focusing on the transition between middle school and high school, enhancing relationship-building and the sense of belonging and support available to students, and supporting professional development and structural changes in schools to encourage engagement and retention. Beginning in 1999, this support for schools continued through the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), a major federal initiative to increase graduation from high school and enrollment in college of low income and first generation students. In fact, from 1999 to 2006, graduation rates for GEAR UP high schools increased from 59.5% to 84%. This program has given CTC the opportunity to utilize the strategies that were effective in our prior efforts and pilot new initiatives to further improve retention.

Two Successful Strategies that Work Well Together

Identifying practices that result in improved student retention have been the focus of school researchers

for many years. Practices that have proved successful include activities that increase school attachment and feelings of belonging coupled with substantial student support such as small school structures. These structures increase personalization and foster a caring environment, and incorporate challenging and engaging courses that integrate the arts, parental involvement, relationship building and challenge courses (Wehlage et al., 1989). In this brief we will focus on two strategies that the Chicago Teachers' Center has found to contribute to increased retention and graduation—motivational interviewing and adventure-challenge education.

Compelled by the idea that the lack of retention is as much a pushout issue as a dropout one, Chicago Teachers' Center was encouraged to pilot a new initiative in 2005 by administrators at Clemente High School. Our staff was asked to work with students in the in-school suspension classroom to address their behavior problems. The punitive model that was being used was ineffective in changing behaviors and many of the students who served in-school suspensions were dropping out. In response, we designed a program that employs motivational interviewing paired with adventure-challenge education strategies to address these issues.

In motivational interviewing, a trained interviewer assists students to explore their status in meeting their long or short-term goals, explicitly examining the discrepancy between current behaviors that may be hampering the achievement of their goals and possible changes. The interviewer uses a "menu of strategies" (Miller and Rollnick, 1991; Rollnick et al., 1992) with reflective (active) listening being pivotal. For example, the interview might begin with the question "As you think about your future, how are things going for you here at school?" The conversation involves multiple reflections to capture the way students perceive their situations and helps them to focus on a specific behavior they are ambivalent about changing. Techniques include using affirmations and open-ended questions to help elicit self-motivational statements around specific behavior change(s). Students will often decide on alternative behaviors they would like to substitute for current behaviors, as they are helped to explore their motivation for change. This is done with a great deal of empathy for each student's situation, which reinforces the student's autonomy in deciding to change and the ability to do so (Atkinson & Woods, 2003). Motivational interviewing is an evidence-based practice for behavior change developed for use in addictions, mental health and corrections settings and more recently adapted for use in education (Miller & Rollnick, 1991, 2002; McNamara, 1992, 1996, 1998; Rutschman, 2009). In a meta-analysis, motivational interviewing had twice the effect related to behavior change in African-American or Latino groups (Hettinga, et al. 2005) as in populations in general.

The motivational interview in this model is preceded and followed by specific and intentional adventure-challenge strategies (adventure education; adventure based counseling) that begin by improving students' mood, self-regulate and enhance self-efficacy. The activities build trust among students and interviewers before the interviews take place and allow individuals to experience the outcomes of making different choices in a group. To create a climate of trust, enhance intrinsic motivation recognize students' autonomy, the "challenge by choice" philosophy along with an agreement about safety and respectful communications (full value contract) is presented with cooperative games used to

practice these (Schoel et. al., 1988; Frank, 2004). Activities to explore behavior in a group include opportunities to solve problems and meet challenges. In these activities, the interviewers are at once participants and facilitators. This entire process is followed by an opportunity for each participant to reflect on what he/ she has learned. According to the important meta-analysis of adventure education and Outward Bound research conducted by John Hattie and his colleagues from Australia in 1997, many students who participate in these activities gain in self-efficacy and their ability to self-regulate. Furthermore, these gains can be expected to continue into the future. Using motivational interviewing and adventure-challenge education in lieu of punishment requires a philosophical shift about behavior change, one that honors students autonomy and believes that if students are listened to and not coerced, they generally choose the behavior that is best for their long-term interest. In the spirit of valuing each member of the community, combining motivational interviewing with adventure education creates a restorative discipline practice, the effectiveness of which can be measured in increased student retention as can be seen in the evaluation of the Chicago Teachers' Center's Alternative to In-School Suspension Initiative. In our work there has been as much as a 10 percent difference in retention the following semester when comparing students who were randomly selected (n: 195) to participate in the intervention and those who were not (n: 492). This effort has been done for four years at several high schools with partnership programs with CTC.



Recommendations

In order for learning to take place, students must consider schools to be safe learning environments. This means we must re-examine how discipline is carried out in school, while keeping students engaged and attached to the school. A philosophical shift by the adults in school is required; one that will seek to restore relationships when conflict occurs. Schools must institute practices that will assist students to explore behavior changes of benefit to them, thereby improving retention. Based on this groundbreaking work of the Chicago Teachers' Center, we recommend that schools:

- Increase the use of motivational interviewing paired with adventure-challenge strategies to help students reflect on what would be best for them and on behaviors that will help them achieve what they want for themselves in the future.
- Implement community-building efforts like adventure education, group work and teambuilding to improve relationships among members of the school community and to increase students' feelings of safety and sense of belonging.

Contact Information

To find out more about this and related work at the Chicago Teachers' Center contact R-Rutschman@neiu.edu or contact Richard Rutschman at (312) 563-7156.

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For more information,
contact
Richard Rutschman
Senior Program Manager
Chicago Teachers' Center
312-563-7156
r-rutschman@neiu.edu

