

SUMMARY: EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS: UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED REALITY OF STUDENT DISENGAGEMENT FROM SECONDARY SCHOOL

It is currently estimated that 12% of students do not finish secondary school in Canada. In Ontario, up to 25% of students may not graduate. There are many factors contributing to students leaving secondary school prior to earning their diploma. The Hospital for Sick Children, Laurentian University, the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, and the Ontario Ministry of Education completed a study on early school leavers which included a literature review, a socio-demographic data analysis, and an in-depth qualitative study. As a part of the qualitative study they interviewed 193 youth who either left high school without their diploma or are at risk to do so, as well as conducted focus groups with parents and educators.

Literature Review

The results of the literature review concluded that the most common reasons for disengagement from school are related to school risk factors as opposed to outside influences. Some of these risk factors include:

- ineffective discipline system
- lack of adequate counselling/referral
- negative school climate
- passive instructional strategies
- disregard for student learning styles
- lack of assessment and support for students with disabilities.

Students are more encouraged to stay in school if they have a high level of school engagement (both social and academic), a high level of parental involvement in all areas of the student's life, and if the student keeps moderate levels of employment (10-15 hour per week). The literature review also concluded that from the information that does exist there is very little evidence to show that early school leaving intervention and prevention programs are actually effective. Virtually none of the information available is able to link outcomes from these programs directly to a reduction in early school leaving although the literature does indicate that programs are most effective when they have a broad focus that includes academic, social, and supportive activities. Schools, agencies, and programs must provide opportunities for youth to make important choices, to support them in the consequences of their decisions, and on reflecting on lessons learned and successes achieved.

Youth Interviews

The results from the student interviews concluded different trends for different groups of youth. The study concentrated on the challenges for males vs. females, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered youth, aboriginal youth, youth in rural areas, Francophone youth, first and second generation immigrant youth, visible minority youth, and third plus generation youth. The key risk factors for youth leaving school early include but are not restricted to

- low social class
- minority status
- adult status
- disabilities

- risk-taking behaviour
- low levels of engagement
- negative teacher-student relations
- lack of support/outreach
- negative school culture
- school culture conflicts

The key protective factors include but are not restricted to

- moderate employment
- educational advantage
- healthy lives
- alternative education
- tutoring and support
- school and class size

Parent/Guardian Focus Groups

There were five parent/guardian focus groups conducted with parents of students who had left school early or were at risk to do so. These groups all indicated that the greatest risk factors are bullying and lack of protection offered by educators. The lack of supervision and staff to overlook the student's activities was another major concern. The parents also indicated that teacher's attitudes contributed to student absenteeism and uncaring attitudes towards school. These parent groups recommended providing flexible and alternative programs that are able to meet the unique needs of individual students. Many parents indicated that they were unaware that their child was in any trouble at school until it was too late and therefore recommended more and ongoing communication between parents and teachers throughout the school year.

Educator Focus Groups

Eight educator focus groups were conducted with educators from across the province. They indicated that some of the main school-related risk factors for youth included

- racism
- teachers not properly trained as cultural competency workshops are not adequate
- feeling of alienation and stigmatization
- school not being culturally appropriate for native or immigrant students

Educators also cited mental health problems, drug abuse, and marijuana as being critical problems. The educators recommended

- enhanced cultural competencies
- more involvement of the community in the schools
- giving priority to hiring teachers from diverse cultures and natives
- hiring more staff in all areas of the school
- eliminating zero tolerance
- critically examining the co-op programs and making the placements more relevant

Educators also suggested implementing a course at teacher's college on how to teach at risk students. Finally, educators recommended better representation of technical schools as a viable post secondary school option for students.

General Recommendations

Some of the recommendations for the education system surrounded three areas; be more understanding, be more flexible, and be more proactive. These recommendations include (but are not restricted to)

- recognizing the impact of various forms of racism
- discrimination and bullying
- accepting different lifestyles and life plans
- listen to what students have to say
- take into account the adult roles of youth
- develop disciplinary alternatives to suspension/expulsion
- include a broad offering of extra-curricular activities
- seek ways to increase parent involvement in schools
- find ways to use school facilities for homework help and mentoring

The report also outlines recommendations for parents and for other youth which includes the recommendation to just stay in school.