School Dropouts: Who, Why, and What Can Be Done

Dropping out of school does not typically happen overnight. Usually, there are months or even years of clear warning signs. If school personnel are attentive and informed, they can have a strong, positive influence on the future of these students. Consistent encouragement and strategic support can make the difference between engagement and withdrawal. Paraprofessionals, given the nature of their relationships to students, are in an ideal situation to strategically and successfully reduce dropout rates.

Who Is Dropping Out?
Estimates of dropout rates vary depending on the definition of dropping out that is used. Regardless, trends emerge across all studies. The national average shows that about 11.2% of 16–24-year-olds have dropped out of high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). In this same age group, Minnesota has a similar dropout rate of 11%.

Darnell Logan, Check & Connect monitor, and Mike Pettis, Check & Connect student. See article on page 6.
Several categories of students have a significantly higher risk for dropping out—

• **Students with disabilities** drop out at three times the average rates (Wagner, 1992).
• **Students receiving special education services** make up over 25% of the students referred for truancy (Wagner, 1992).
• **Within special education, students with emotional and behavioral disorders** drop out at the highest rates (by some estimates as high as 62%), followed by **students with learning disabilities** (about 36%) (Wagner, 1992).
• **Students of minority groups** are also dropping out at alarming rates. In Minnesota in 1999, over 36.4% of African American, 34.7% of Native American, and 31.2% of Hispanic students dropped out of high school (For Euro-Americans in Minnesota, the rate is 8.2%) (Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning, 1999).
• **Students who are from a lower socioeconomic background**, regardless of their race, drop out at higher rates than students from middle-income homes.

Although some populations of students are more likely to drop out of school, dropouts come from a wide variety of backgrounds. The following facts debunk commonly held stereotypes (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) —

• Sixty-six percent of all dropouts are white.
• Sixty-eight percent come from two-parent families.
• Forty-two percent attend suburban high schools.
• Sixty percent have C averages or better.
• Seventy-one percent never repeated a grade.
• Eighty-seven percent have an English-language home background.

**Why Do Students Drop Out of School?**

As stated earlier, students do not suddenly drop out of school. School disengagement often begins early and there are usually several indicators of withdrawal. For example, significant differences in behavior, grades, retention rates, and achievement scores are already evident by the time students reach third grade (Finn, 1989).

Some of the factors that influence student success are clearly beyond the influence of education professionals — demographic characteristics and family history fall into this category. However, there are some factors that can be changed through timely and appropriate intervention efforts (i.e. attendance, participation in school activities, and study habits).
When asked about their reasons for withdrawal, students give a variety of responses. Some of the most common reasons are identified in studies by Eckstrom, Finn, Wagner, Wehlage and Rutter, & Wheelock (as cited in Evelo, Sinclair, Hurley, Christenson, & Thurlow, 1996) —

- They dislike school because it is boring or irrelevant to their lives.
- Social problems with peers and/or school staff — they do not feel liked or that they fit in, etc.
- Unfair or limited disciplinary policies (suspensions and expulsions).
- Low academic achievement, poor grades, or academic failure (repeating a grade).
- Economic issues such as a need to support family.
- Pregnancy and/or teen-aged parenthood.

The Cost of Dropping Out
When a student drops out of school, there are serious implications for the individual and for society —

- About 75% of youth involved with the juvenile justice system have dropped out of school (Catterall, 1987). Youth not in school are often unsupervised and getting into trouble.
- There is a higher correlation between dropping out of school and ending up in prison than there is between smoking and lung cancer — 82% of adults in prison today dropped out of school (The demographics of school reform, 1990).
- Students who drop out of school are 6.5 times more likely than high school graduates to become teen-aged parents.
- Youth who have dropped out of school have a 40\% higher unemployment rate than those who have completed high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). Additionally, dropouts earn about $60 a week less and will earn approximately $200,000 less over the course of their working lives than those who have completed high school (Nichols & Nichols, 1990).
- Overall, the economic costs to society include allocation of tax dollars to crime prevention, correctional, social services, job training, and adult education programs. The estimated annual cost of providing for dropouts and their families is $76 billion per year or approximately $800 annually per taxpayer (Joint Economic Committee, 1991). In view of these factors, successful dropout prevention efforts are a wise investment of resources.

What Can Be Done?
Successful strategies for intervention can often be incorporated into existing programs, routines, and practices with little or no cost. For example, something as simple as the school principal greeting students by name, daily, can have a significant impact on students’ feelings about school. Given the nature of their relationship to the students they work with, paraprofessionals are in an ideal position to put into practice some of these effective strategies. Paraprofessionals can be proactive and increase student retention by —

- Keeping close tabs on strong indicators of disengagement such as poor attendance, escalating behavior struggles, and academic difficulties. The paraprofessional is often the staff in charge of daily record keeping and may notice changing patterns early. Bringing these concerns to the attention of the teacher and school administration can help to circumvent a downward spiral.
- Being creative in developing ways to help students feel connected to their schools. For example, students with chronic health problems that cause them to validly miss extended periods of school can easily become disconnected. Sending them get well cards...
Check & Connect is a program developed by the University of Minnesota in collaboration with the Minneapolis Public Schools to address the problems of truancy and school disengagement among middle and high school students. Parents, educators, community members, and students have been actively involved in the evolution of Check & Connect over the past ten years, and their efforts have been guided by four key assumptions —

1. Leaving school prior to graduation isn’t an instantaneous event.
2. Solving the dropout problem requires a multi-component effort of home, school, community, and youth.
3. Students must be empowered to take control of their own behavior.
4. Schools must be designed to reach out to families in partnership with the community.

Based upon these assumptions, a program was established that focuses on “check”ing the indicators of school engagement and the early warning signs of school withdrawal, such as absenteeism or course failure. In addition, it emphasizes students’ “connect”ion to the school and others, building relationships and acknowledging that trust and familiarity are developed over time through ongoing efforts.

One of the biggest strengths of this program is the long-term nature of the relationship that is established between the monitors and students. Ideally, the same monitor follows a student over grade levels and settings for at least two years, providing consistency and continuity in their educational careers and lives.

What Are the Key Features of the Check & Connect Model?

- **Prevention**: Focusing on the early warning signs of withdrawal that can be altered through intervention.
- **Persistence**: Structuring the program to create long-term connections between schools, youth, and families, regardless of mobility.
- **Relationship building**: Promoting mutual trust and positive communication through a relationship focused on education and built over time.
- **Capacity building**: Promoting the acquisition of problem-solving and communication skills of students, parents, and educators.
- **Individualization**: Systematically focusing on the educational needs of each student.
- **Efficiency and adaptability**: Building upon existing resources and networks within the systems of home, school, and community.

How Does Check & Connect Work?

Students with high rates of absences and other attendance problems are referred to the Check & Connect program. Support is provided by a person referred to as a monitor or Check & Connect worker. These individuals, who are employees of the public schools or the University of Minnesota, follow students over time and use data driven intervention strategies individualized for each student.

Student levels of engagement are measured by attendance and academic, social, and behavioral performance. These factors are checked regularly and used to guide whether monitors respond with the basic connect intervention strategies offered to all students in the program, or add immediate, individualized, intensive connect strategies.

Basic intervention involves a monthly conversation be-
between the monitor and student regarding the following factors —
• Student progress in school.
• The relationship between school completion and the indicators of engagement.
• The importance of staying in school.
• Review of problem-solving steps to resolve conflict and cope with life’s challenges.

Intensive interventions are individualized and based upon a combination of factors:
• Individual needs of the student.
• Past efforts of the student, parent, and school to engage the youth in school and learning.
• Availability of supplemental resources in the home, school, and community.

These strategies, which are not unique to Check & Connect or new to education, are often met with less resistance when used by the monitors because they are known and trusted by the students, parents, and staff and are consistently available over time.

Has It Been Effective?
Check & Connect has produced tangible, positive results in its original field test and three subsequent replication studies. In each, nearly three-quarters of the students involved for at least two years have shown significant increases in school engagement. The number of students with chronic attendance problems (absences, tardies, and skips) was reduced by an average of 30%. Academic achievement is currently being investigated in the replication studies, but it has proved quite promising in the original study, where 68% of the Check & Connect students were earning credits and on track to graduate within five years, compared to 29% of similar students in a control group. Most importantly, the students involved are less likely to have stopped or dropped out and report feeling connected, valued, and invested in the academic process (see “Check & Connect: A Word From the Students” on page 6).

What Can Educators Learn From the Check & Connect Program?
It is essential that paraprofessionals work with other education personnel to do the following as part of a conscious effort to keep students engaged with school —
• Acknowledge students’ progress daily, especially in areas such as participation and attendance.
• Provide opportunities for success in schoolwork by making accommodations in the classroom.
• Find out whether parents need suggestions, resources, or supports to help with student learning at home.
• Use curriculum relevant to students’ future endeavors.

Check & Connect not only makes a difference in students’ lives, it also serves as a model and mantra for educators in general. To prevent students from slipping through the cracks, educators need to check on the progress of their students and connect with them in a real, consistent manner. To make a difference, check and connect!

Contributed by Mary Sinclair, Principal Investigator and Project Director of the Check & Connect Program, in cooperation with Angela Swanson, Paralink Editor.

Do you have an idea for an upcoming Paralink?
Tell us about it!

Fax: (612) 624-9344
paralink@icimail.cole.d.umn.edu
Check & Connect:
A Word From the Students

Numbers, theories, programs, and rationale... but how do we know it works?!?!

To those of you who learn more from examples and human faces, the pictures below and on the cover speak volumes. I recently had the opportunity to meet two students involved in the Check & Connect program: Ebony Gilmer, a senior at a high school in Minneapolis, and Michael Pettis, a graduate from a Minneapolis high school. Both students have been involved with the Check & Connect Program for four years.

During our conversation, Ebony and Mike shared their experiences, views, and feelings about their monitors and the program as a whole. As evidenced in their expressions, their reports were glowing.

Life Before Check & Connect

When asked about their academic careers before Check & Connect, both students admitted that they were at serious risk of failure and/or dropping out.

Ebony met her monitor, Deborah Westberry, shortly before she was expelled from a Minneapolis high school. She fully admitted that, at that time, she had an attitude problem, was disrespectful to her teachers, and did not cooperate in class. Deborah described Ebony affectionately as a “firecracker.”

When asked the same question, Mike expressed the wish that he could have met his monitor, Darnell Logan, in fifth grade. At that point in his life, he believed he had a disability and knew he would have benefited greatly from having someone like Darnell to tutor, support, and push him.

Throughout his middle school years, he wasn’t dedicated to his coursework and, in his own words, “was slacking academically.” Mike describes himself as a people person, however, and actually looked forward to going to school every day to see people. He was, quite simply, unmotivated to learn.

During his eighth-grade year, Mike left home for almost 12 months because of a disagreement with his mother. He was in desperate need of a meaningful connection to someone and something.

New Beginnings with Check & Connect

After her expulsion, Ebony transferred to a different high school and continued to work with Deborah. Initially, she was placed in a special education classroom and felt unfairly judged by that placement. She believed the teachers had an inaccurate image of her and her abilities and
knew that she was going to have to work hard to change that image. Deborah was instrumental in helping Ebony to do just that by believing in her —

“Deborah changed me by staying on me, talking to me, getting me motivated. She was open, cool. She wasn’t stuck up. She would tell me the truth. She cared about me. She believed in me. She knows I can do it. I don’t think she’s like a teacher. She’s a friend. I look up to her.”

In addition, Deborah helped Ebony to realize that she could take control of her schooling: “Deborah let me know that I could attend my I.E.P. meetings. She told me it was important.” Ebony began to change her attitude by changing her actions: “I started talking to the principal, joining clubs, and getting involved in my classes.”

When Mike first met Darnell, he didn’t want him around. But, as Darnell was persistent, Mike gave in: “I realized that he wasn’t going away. So I got with the program... I still remember his asking me one question: ‘Where do you want to be four years from now? How are you going to get there? You’d better handle it.’ Nobody’d ever asked me that before.”

Mike described Darnell as an older big brother —

“I had no male role model, no dad, no brother. I didn’t have a positive force. Darnell was what I needed... Darnell teaches me more than parents do. He’s like my second parent — my ‘learning’ parent, helping me to grow. I recognize that he’s an adult and my friend.”

Before getting too sentimental, however, Mike added with a wry smile that he couldn’t consider Darnell a father figure because “he looks so young and drives too sporty a car — he even thinks he can play basketball.”

According to Mike, Darnell kept him on target academically by “being on me.” He recounted Darnell’s persistence with a hint of feigned annoyance: “Darnell used to call me to get me going, saying, ‘Get out of bed. Get to school.’” In addition to Check & Connect, Mike also firmly believed that his becoming a Christian had a large influence on his attitude toward life. With a confidential smile, he admitted that he had started attending church to “play basketball at first. But then I got involved.”

Final Reflections
Looking back, Ebony credited many of her academic successes to her relationship with Deborah: “I wouldn’t be in school today without Deborah’s intervention. When I met Deborah, I felt like I wasn’t going anywhere, but now I’m getting straight A’s.”

Deborah returned the compliment and stated frankly: “Ebony did a lot of hard work on her own. She made the difference.”

Like Ebony, Mike believed that Darnell had a long-term impact on his life: “He wants to see me succeed... He’s prepared me for the world. They thought I’d end up in a gang or prison or dead. Now, I’ve even made ‘A’ honor role. If I see any of you again, I will be taking care of business.”

Even now that Mike is in college, Darnell continues to check on him. “I graduated and he’s still there for me. It means a lot to me... The relationship we built still endures. I can tell that Darnell loves the people he works with.”

When asked what she thought of the Check & Connect program, Ebony stated simply, “The monitors go out of their way... they put action behind their words” — something Ebony, too, has learned to do in her own life.

Mike echoed similar sentiments in an almost profound summary. “The monitors taught as well as learned; they talked as well as listened; they went as far as they could go; we went as far as we could go. When we didn’t go as far as we could, they still went as far as they could go.”
Mark Your Calendars Now for These Upcoming Conferences!

**2001 Special Education Coordinators and Educators Conference**, February 26-27, the Northland Inn in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. (Deadline for registration: February 18th). The Minnesota Council for Exceptional Children and the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning invite you to attend this year’s Coordinators and Educators Conference. This year’s breakout sessions provide a great opportunity to learn about areas of interest and best practices relating to special education. For more information, visit the MN CEC Website at http://www.cpinternet.com/~mcec/Conference.htm or contact: CEC, 1221 Birchwood Dr., Proctor, MN 55810 (218-624-4271) or Kathy Klone at CEC, 2367 Hidden Valley Lane, Stillwater, MN 55082 (651-439-6781).

**The Council for Exceptional Children’s Annual Convention**, Kansas City, Missouri, April 18-21, 2001. In addition to the latest in professional development opportunities for teachers, administrators, and related service providers, the convention and expo will feature an address by keynote speaker Beverly Sills. Preconvention registration rates are available through March 16th. Get the latest information by visiting the CEC website: http://www.cec.sped.org/conv/index.html or by contacting: CEC, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20181-1589 (1-888-232-7733).

**The 9th Annual Statewide Conference for Paraprofessionals**, Hutchinson, Minnesota, May 4-5, 2001. The goal of this conference is to provide paraprofessionals with an opportunity to learn about new and different strategies to assist in their jobs and to network with other paraprofessionals. The registration fee is $50 per person. This includes refreshments, lunch, and materials. This year’s keynote speaker is the Hmong cultural consultant, comedian, and storyteller, Tou Ger Xiang. By attending this conference, paraprofessionals will earn Continuing Education Units. This conference was initiated by the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, and is sponsored by the Institute on Community Integration (UAP) at the University of Minnesota, Ridgewater College, AFSCME, ECSU, MVASNP, MSEA, and Education Minnesota. For more information, visit the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium Website at http://ici2.umn.edu/para. Registration brochures are coming soon!

**The 20th National Conference on the Training and Employment of Paraprofessionals in Education, Rehabilitation, and Related Services**, Madison, Wisconsin at the Monona Terrace Convention Center, May 9-12, 2001. Attendees will gain knowledge of new dimensions in the roles, preparation, supervision, and career mobility for the paraprofessional workforce. For further information regarding registration, content, or the opportunity to present, please visit the website at http://www.nrcpara.org/call.htm or contact Marilyn Likins, Co-director, National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals at Utah State University, 435-797-PARA or email: mlikins@utah.uswest.net.
Nomination Reminders

Para of the Year Nomination Information

Now is your chance to nominate an outstanding person for Para of the Year! Please include the following information—

Part 1
1. Name of Para
2. Where employed
3. Work address/phone
4. Number of years as a para
5. Number, type, and age of students/clients served
6. Name of Nominator
7. Nominator’s address/phone

Part 2
1. Exemplary work skills such as —
   • Communicating effectively
   • Listening attentively
   • Taking initiative
   • Understanding his or her role in the school community/work setting
2. Unique characteristics —
   • Contributions to the school/work environment
   • Differences made in the lives of students or clients
   • Professional development
3. Include statements of support from students, parents, teachers, and/or peers

Applications accepted until March 30, 2001

Mail or fax this information to —
Angela Swanson, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 111 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Drive SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455, Fax (612) 624-9344.

New Para/Teacher Team of the Year

Please take the time and nominate a positive instructional relationship for new Paraprofessional/Teacher Instructional Team of the Year award! Please include the following information —

Part 1
1. Name of the Para/Teacher Instructional Team
2. Where employed
3. Work address/phone
4. Number of years employed as a para/teacher
5. Number, type, and age of students/clients served
6. Name of Nominator
7. Nominator’s address/phone

Part 2
1. How this para/teacher team exhibits a positive, effective working relationship including —
   • Clear and open communication
   • Respect for each other and students
   • Shared educational philosophy
   • Understanding of team role definition and expectations
2. Characteristics or qualities that set this team apart —
   • Contributions to the school/work environment
   • Differences made in the lives of students?
3. Include statements of support from students, parents, teachers, administration, and/or peers.

Applications accepted until March 30, 2001

Mail or fax this information to —
Angela Swanson, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 111 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Drive SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455, Fax (612) 624-9344.
Celebrate Paraprofessional Week!

February 5-9 is Minnesota’s Paraprofessional Week

Mark your calendars!  Plan ahead!
It's time for thank yous.  To be said.

Let’s take advantage of this opportunity to make this week one of appreciation and fun.

Resources

Web sites

The National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals — http://www.nrcpara.org
Founder and director Anna Lou Picket established the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services (NRCP) in 1979. The purpose of the NRCP is to build paraprofessional partnerships that address preparation, management, supervision, deployment, and career opportunities for paraprofessionals. Visit the new website today!

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network — http://www.dropoutprevention.org/
This organization provides resources that enable a new or enhanced appreciation for the importance of a quality education and high school diploma. National Dropout Prevention Center, Clemson University, 209 Martin Street, Clemson, SC, 29631-1555, 864-656-2599.

Resource Guides

To order, send a check or purchase order to: Publications Office, Institute on Community Integration, 109 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455.

For more information about Check & Connect, contact Mary Sinclair at sincl001@tc.umn.edu or Camilla Lehr at lehrx001 @tc.umn.edu. They can also be reached at: Institute on Community Integration, 111 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455.

Advice for Educators — Paraprofessionals: Take Heed!

After commenting on why they felt the program worked in their particular cases, Ebony and Mike offered some final advice to educators.

Ebony urged new teachers to listen to their students and not to judge them. “Know your students. Talk to them. Entertain them.”

Mike focused on the issue of respect. “If you show respect, you’ll get it. Talking tough will get tough responses. If you're lenient, the students will be lenient with you.”

In addition, he addressed the tough issues of race and socioeconomic status by stating, “Teachers are coming to new territory — they need to learn about us. Negotiating is important.”

Despite his criticisms, Mike was quick to add a buffer of encouragement, flashing what had become his trademark smile. “I think the younger teachers are doing a good job.”

For Michael Pettis and Ebony Gilmar, Check & Connect provided meaningful connections to real people that cared, supported, and challenged them to grow. It was active, sincere, and human, putting principles into practice.

Does Check & Connect work? While a picture can say a thousand words, their pictures simply say “Yes.”

Contributed by Angela Swanson, Paralink Editor.
from the class and school newsletters are easy ways to let a student know they are still a valued part of the classroom.

- Teaching students problem-solving strategies and working with them to set realistic, relevant goals.
- **Finding the best in each student**: focusing on building success, being on the lookout for small positive steps in reaching long term goals, and acknowledging a student’s hard work.

Overall, school personnel can work together to facilitate a sense of community by —

- Creating a positive school climate for parents as well as students.
- Facilitating the building of a strong support system by bringing resources to the attention of families and school staff and connecting students with mentors or tutoring programs.
- Being aware of alternative school settings which may be better able to meet the unique needs of a student.
- Being knowledgeable and respectful of cultural differences.
- Encouraging parental involvement.

Paraprofessionals: The Hands That Hold

As the paraprofessional who is working directly with the students, you can play a key role in keeping them in school. Never underestimate the power of your position: you can be the one who reaches out and pulls a student back into the net of school participation. You can be the tie that binds.

**Resources**


**Contributed by Donna Patterson,** Coordinator, Minnesota Paraprofessional Training Project at the University of Minnesota. Donna dropped out of high school at age 15, but went on to obtain her teacher certification in Special Education for Emotional and Behavioral Disorders and complete her Masters of Education.
2001 Paraprofessional/Educational Assistants Inservice Network Meetings

The 2001 Paraprofessional/Educational Assistants Inservice Network Meetings will be held on February 20, March 13, and April 17, 2001, from 4:30–6:30 p.m. The meetings will be available at four different sites in the East, West, North, and South metropolitan areas. They are sponsored by the Metro SPLISE, Metro ESCU, and Regional CSPD and provide an informal setting for paraprofessionals to learn together and share ideas and practices. Core competencies will be addressed and certificates of attendance for 2 hours will be available at each meeting. No registration or fees required — just sign in at the network meetings. For more information, contact Cathy Macdonald at 612-706-0801, ext. 107.