Equity Dispatch

Who's Not Coming Back to School? The Pushout

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IMPACT: *Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity*

Philosophers have long conceded...that every man has two educations: "that which is given to him, and the other that which he gives himself. Of the two kinds the latter is by far the more desirable. Indeed all that is most worthy in man he must work out and conquer for himself. It is that which constitutes our real and best nourishment. What we are merely taught seldom nourishes the mind like that which we teach ourselves."

--Carter G. Woodson, The Mis-Education of the Negro

Educate

Words like "epidemic" and "crisis" are often used in reference to the number of U.S. students – disproportionately Black, Hispanic, American Indian and students with disabilities – who do not receive a high school diploma (NCES, 2012; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008; Orfield, 2004; Rumberger & Lin, 2008). While these outcomes are indeed a crisis that must be addressed, the conversation about how to resolve the crisis often focuses on characteristics of *dropouts* – the term used in reference to students who do not receive a high school diploma - and which strategies might keep them in school. Similarly, research on dropouts frequently attempts to pinpoint variables associated with high school leaving, such as low grade point average in eighth grade, number of suspensions, and number of days late to school without excuse (Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). By drawing attention to these individual behaviors and characteristics, such studies can easily lead to deficit thinking about particular students, families, and/or racial, class, or

Equity Spotlight

Dr. Timothy Knight is a 21-year veteran of the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department (IMPD). For eight of his 21 years with the police agency, Dr. Knight investigated homicides and other violent crimes. During time,

ability groups (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). In other words, typical dropout research can lead to negative judgments about an individual's intelligence, motivation, or family supports. Similarly, dropout prevention and intervention strategies are typically evaluated in terms of their effectiveness in preventing individual students from leaving school. As such, research on these strategies does little to critically examine the experiences of marginalized high school students and fails to ask whether the interventions simply make staying in school the lesser of two evils (Weissberg, 2010) or authentically address students' concerns.

Fortunately, a growing number of researchers and advocates have reframed the issue, looking at how educational systems are organized to *push out* particular groups of students, including students of color, pregnant and parenting teens, and students with disabilities (Dei et al, 1997; Luna & Tijerina Revilla, 2013), or *subtract* resources from individuals and communities by promoting assimilation (Valenzuala, 1999). Pushout discourse draws attention to system factors such as inadequate and unequal school funding (Baker & Corcoran, 2012), the dismantling of bilingual education programs (Crawford, 2007), the devaluing of content and skills families find meaningful (Timm & Borman, 1997) and frequent, derogatory verbal or behavioral acts, known as microaggressions, by teachers and administrators (Luna & Tijerina Revilla, 2013), that make persevering to obtain a high school diploma either impossible or less attractive to students and their families. Similarly, subtractive schooling brings to light the ways that schools deprive students – particularly immigrants - of important social and cultural resources through an assimilationist curriculum (DeVillar, 1994; Luna & Tijerina Revilla, 2013). Both call into question an educational system that is not responsive to students' needs or backgrounds.

Ultimately, pushout and subtractive schooling framings require us to ask, "For whom is a high school diploma and what purposes does it serve?" Over the past several decades, states have introduced new barriers to high school diplomas – including minimum competency tests, more rigorous graduation requirements, and exit examinations - to appease growing concerns about national competitiveness (Holme, 2013) and to "restore value" to high school diplomas in the eyes of employers and university officials (Grubb & Oakes, 2007). Such rationales suggest that the value of a high school diploma lies in its ability to signal a particular kind of competence and productivity to post-secondary institutions and employers (Martorell & Clark, 2010). Accordingly, in many states, diplomas are differentiated from certificates of completion and students thought to be less capable of college-level work are tracked and granted a lesser credential (Shifrer et al, 2013). In nearly all cases, students and families have very little say in what constitutes a meaningful high school experience or what the requirements for a high school diploma should be; when this happens, a high school diploma becomes a "crude compromise, based on inadequate debate" that "crowd[s] out personalized and engaged learning" (Wiggins, 2011, p. 29). A step forward would be for individuals within each local context to assess and reimagine the high school experience and its corresponding credentials with students and families playing a central role in the conversation (Wiggins, 2011; VOYCE, 2008).

Where the total transformation of a student's high school experience is not possible, individual educators can create critical spaces in which students can engage in responsive, liberating learning and teaching. Required, standards-based subjects can be responsive to students' lived experiences and assist them in developing sociopolitical consciousness and a sense of agency; to do so, teachers may need to redefine their role from that of 'expert' to that of 'teacher-learner' (Gutstein, 2003). At the same time, teachers must help students make strong connections between classroom experiences and success in life through pedagogical methods such as

Dr. Knight collected, analyzed, and reported on violent crime data to the Indianapolis Violence Reduction Partnership (IVRP). Through his studies, he discovered that instances of aggravated assault and homicide were, more often than not, intracommunal in nature; in other words, murders and aggravated assaults occurred within intraracial contexts. Dr. Knight also discovered that, in the city of Indianapolis, 86% of the violent crimes were committed by African American males and that defendant and victimology reports revealed a relationship between low education, violent behavior, and victimization.

To address the problem of poor education and subsequent violent behavior among African American males, Dr. Knight initiated the launching of the O.K. Program in Indianapolis - the first initiative of its kind in the state of Indiana. Through the program, six components of the host community - schools, students, law-enforcement agencies, religious institutions, businesses, and volunteer groups - are organized to provide wrap-around services and accountability tools to African American males.

The Indianapolis chapter of the O.K. Program yielded its first graduating class in 2010. According to Dr. Eugene White, the former superintendent of Indianapolis Public Schools, the 2010 graduating class at Arlington High School (where the program operated) boasted the largest number of African American male graduates in five years, due in great part to the O.K. Program. Thirty-two of the 2010 graduates were O.K. Program students. Currently, thirty-one of them are currently in college and two of them are pre-med students. We commend Dr. Knight for recognizing the marginalization of African American male youth and uniting the community in an effort to bring about positive outcomes for these young men.

student-led projects (Shultz, 2008) as well as through explicit attention to the function of education in society at large (Ware, 2006).

Educational advocates can also convene stakeholders to look analytically at access to diplomas within their high school settings. Nationally, discernible patterns of credential granting exist by race, gender, income, ability, and nationality (NCES, 2012); are these also present locally? How are students assigned to degree tracks, and do all tracks offer comparable opportunities to participate in post-secondary education? How well do courses align with students' own visions for their future? Have pushouts been tapped as a vital source of narrative data for critique of the existing system? Each of these questions prompts us to look beyond the who to whys that focus on the system rather than the individual student.

On their own, students often fail to realize the systemic nature of school problems and internalize the belief that they are to blame for school failures (Luna & Tijerina, 2013; VOYCE, 2008). Without the guidance and support of advocates to transform the system, they may engage in self-defeating resistance—the behaviors we typically see, interpret, and track before labeling them as dropouts, including defiance, failure to complete assignments, and truancy. These are symptoms of a systemic problem that will only be resolved when we stop pushing out and subtracting and begin inviting our young adults to the table to chart a course for their high school experience and determine for themselves the symbolic value of their high school diploma.

Have a question or comment about this article? Share it here!

Engage

The Our Kids (O.K.) Program of Indiana, a male-mentoring program, is an excellent example of a collaborative, community-wide effort to improve the educational outcomes of African American male students. This program has forged partnerships with Indianapolis Public Schools, the community, and the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department (IMPD) to address inequitable practices and policies within and beyond school walls that contribute to the pushing out of African American male students. Through

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Upcoming Events

Illinois
September 9
Mentor & Instructional Coach Learning Program
The Consortium for Education Change (CEC) & the New Teacher Center (NTC)
Lisle, IL

Indiana
September 26-28
Fall Council of Administrators of Special Education Conference
Indianapolis, IN

Michigan
August 17
Equality Fest
Harrisville, MI

Minnesota
October 17-18
2013 Education Minnesota Professional Conference
St. Paul, MN

Ohio
August 5-7
Ohio Education Summer Academy
Columbus, OH

Wisconsin
August 20

these relationships, this program has achieved exemplary results and has effectively dismantled the school-to-prison pipeline for its participants.

The O.K. Program was brought to Indianapolis in 2006 in response to the high dropout, incarceration, and homicide rates of African American males in Marion County (O.K. Program, 2011). At the time, as many as 55% of the homicide suspects, and 65% of its homicide victims were African American males (O.K. Program, 2013). And while Black males made up only 9% of Indiana's total population in 2009, they represented 19% of the unemployed and 38% [between the ages of 21-50] of the incarcerated (Indiana Commission on the Social Status of Black Males, 2011). The results for program participants are strikingly different; of the 32 graduates in the O.K. Program of Indiana, 31 have gone on to college and one has entered the military. Of the 4,800 graduates nationally, only one has been incarcerated. Nationally, 90% has gone on to college, 8% has entered the military and 2% has chosen a vocation.

The success of the O.K. Program can be attributed, at least in part, to the group's use of critical reflection and action to navigate and dismantle the blighted conditions that African American males experience. In other words, this program radically empowers participants to recreate their own future while simultaneously addressing the historical injustices of the past. The program's results demonstrate the power of this model, and we commend the O.K. Program for its efforts to assist push-outs in reclaiming their education.

Empower

Something to Read!
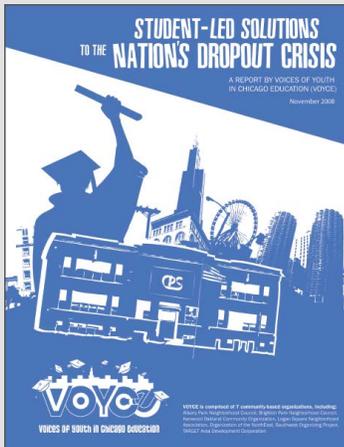
This report is based on a study conducted by Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE), a youth collaborative movement led by students of color from communities across the city of Chicago. These students attempt to resolve social justice issues by advocating particular policy solutions, such as granting in-state tuition for undocumented students, securing the construction of new schools to relieve overcrowding, and developing schools as community learning centers.

This document outlines key findings and policy recommendations that VOYCE student leaders believe have the potential to affect the dropout rate. VOYCE's key findings include:

• Students in Chicago Public Schools have internalized the problem of the dropout rate and believe that they are the ones to blame for the failures of the school system.
• Dropping out is not something that students plan or anticipate. It is something that happens slowly over time.
• While teachers, parents, and students agree that relevance in curriculum is critical to students' engagement in school, students feel that relevance is
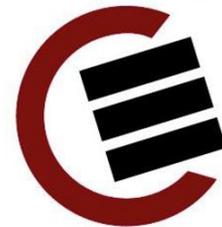
largely missing in their schools (VOYCE, 2008).

Something to Watch!

Schools are often unaware of their obligations to pregnant and parenting teens. Pregnant and parenting students have specific rights to assure them equal access to the school programs and extracurricular activities. In this video, Lara Kaufmann, Senior Counsel at the National Women's Law Center, explains the rights of pregnant and parenting students in school. In particular, Lara outlines some of the implications of Title IX legislation, which prohibits schools from sex discrimination, including pregnancy or related conditions. Additional information can be found at http://www.nwlc.org/dropout.

Something to Do!

The Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC) "challenges the systemic problem of pushout in our nation's schools and advocates for the human right of every child to a quality education and to be treated with dignity." Visit the Dignity in Schools website to to learn more about its approach to the dropout crisis. While you are there, you can listen to authentic student narratives in the School Pushout Story Bank, sign the Resolution for Ending School Pushout, or use guidance documents to critically analyze and change school discipline policies that contribute to diploma access gaps. Ready to go even further to support the work? Start a local chapter in your setting.

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