

Listening to and Learning From Disconnected Youth: Nov. 2012 Update

Update on Our Initial Study: The *Washington Student Oral Histories Project (WSOHP)* is in the final stages of an initial study aimed at helping us to better understand and address the problems of student disengagement and dropping out. In the spring our team gathered in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 29 youth who had dropped out or had been seriously truant over an extended period of time. Using sophisticated qualitative analysis software, we are now completing coding and analysis of the interview data and plan to release some preliminary findings at the start of 2013. In early 2013 we will also be developing and disseminating representative profiles of the youth we've interviewed via our web site (www.wsohp.org). Along with study results, these high interest "stories" will be an additional vehicle for engaging multiple audiences around the topic of student disengagement and dropout prevention.

Sneak Peak--Some Preliminary Findings: Here are some preliminary findings generated by our analysis of the interview data thus far:

● *Serious family and personal issues almost always accompanied school problems:* The literature on at-risk youth has long recognized a connection between individual and family risk factors and school problems, and our exploration strongly confirmed this connection. Virtually every youth we interviewed admitted to having a serious mental health, substance abuse, early pregnancy, disability or family problem and could articulate how the outside problem affected them at school. Take, for example, the student¹ who described a toxic home life and how it derailed him emotionally and then academically.

I was a good student in elementary school. But when I started middle school my parents were fighting all the time. After awhile they didn't talk to each other; it was so tense an atmosphere at home that they didn't even seem to want to talk with me. Then when I was in eighth grade, my mom suddenly moved away and I didn't see her any more. I was so upset, I started drinking and smoking all the time, including at school. I would be sitting in my classes totally stoned and trying to follow, but that didn't work well. And then I started skipping classes because I couldn't follow what was going on and couldn't do the work.

● *Dramatic shifts in attitudes toward school in middle school:* It was striking that almost all youth we interviewed started out with a generally positive disposition towards school. In elementary school they had fond memories of teachers and peers and looked forward to going to class. However, for most youth, this positive attitude melts away by middle school, and they embark on a pathway leading to course failure, serious truancy and dropping out.

● *Youth mourned the loss of personal connections with their teachers:* Students generally liked and felt a personal connection to their elementary school teachers, but that connection was mostly lost in middle and high school. Many youth reflected that this absence of connection deeply affected their sense of belonging at school, their motivation to do the work and their academic performance. A common refrain was "my elementary teachers cared about me as a student; my teachers later on...not so much."

● *Students became truant and started on a pathway towards dropping out years before they actually left school.* For some youth, dropping out occurs within a relatively compressed time frame. They start failing classes, getting into trouble and skipping school and within a year or so are gone. However, this is not necessarily the most common pattern. We frequently encountered youth who started having problems in elementary school and began serious skipping in middle school. They missed significant chunks of school for many, many years, sometimes maintaining a half-hearted participation until 11th or 12th grade.

Implications: What do preliminary interview findings suggest about tackling the drop-out problem?

● The youths' personal stories confirm that dropping out is not so much a well-defined event as a long-term process of disengaging from school, which can start as early as elementary school. Therefore, tackling the dropout issue is not simply a problem to be addressed at the high school level: Rather, the entire school system needs to develop an integrated approach to identifying and supporting struggling

¹ This is a composite profile based on more than one interview excerpt. Personal details have been combined and altered in order to protect student identities.

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students across the k-12 continuum. Early warning systems, for example, need to be deployed starting in elementary school.

- Even with a strong early warning system, timely school intervention alone may fail to divert a youth from dropping out. Hidden mental health, substance abuse or family problems may be driving the student behaviors and such problems often require help from the broader community. The idea of schools and communities working in close collaboration to identify children's needs and provide timely supports and services is not new; many models for such partnerships already exist, but are not yet in widespread use.

- At the secondary level, schools need to pay more attention to the social and emotional context in which learning is taking place. The feeling of being anonymous, unwanted or unimportant often is a contributing factor in a student's downward academic spiral. In order to encourage and retain struggling students, it is not enough to have good teachers who are subject matter experts. Teachers, counselors and the school as a whole must also be able to convey interest in and support for students, even when those students themselves appear to be uninterested.

New Funding to Support Additional Interviewing: Funding from the *Washington State Partnership on Juvenile Justice* (Office of Juvenile Justice, DSHS) supported data collection and analysis activities for the initial study. Now, thanks to a grant award from the *Washington Educational Research Association (WERA)*, the project will expand to include collection of oral histories from up to 26 more youth who have dropped out. Our goal in this second phase of interviewing is not only to enlarge, but also to diversify our study sample to include youth living outside the Seattle area and in more rural communities. As we did in the first phase, we will work with partnering sites who will help us identify and recruit eligible youth.

About the Project: WSOHP is a university-community collaborative started in late 2010, which blends academic inquiry with a pragmatic research orientation. The project benefits from the combined institutional support of its three sponsors listed below:

- *Paragon Education Network (PEN)*, a non-profit education change organization dedicated to improving teaching and learning. Co-founder Barbara Waxman, PhD, will co-manage the project with senior associate Deborah Feldman. <http://paragoneducationnetwork.org/>
- *The Goodlad Institute for Educational Renewal*, which is affiliated with UW Bothell. www.uwb.edu/research/centers/goodladinstitute
- *UW Bothell Education Program*. WSOHP's lead researcher is Antony Smith, PhD, who is Assistant Professor of Education at UW, Bothell, where he teaches and conducts research related to literacy and effective professional development models. www.bothell.washington.edu/education/about/faculty/smith

Community Partners: The project involves many community, as well as institutional partners. It has received commitments from multiple youth-serving agencies willing to assist with identification of study sites, recruitment of youth participants, dissemination of project results and other forms of in-kind support.

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