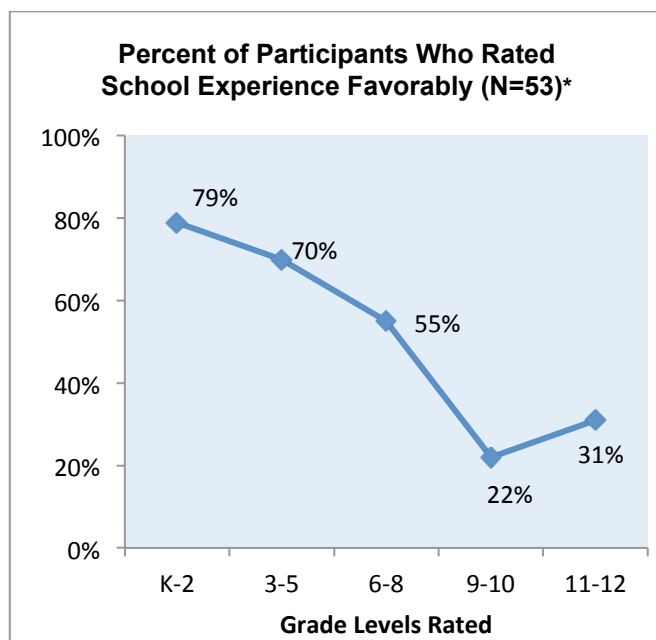


WSOHP Research Brief, January 2015

Listening to Disconnected Youth: What We Learned

In 2012 and 2013 the Washington Student Oral Histories Project (WSOHP), a research collaborative affiliated with UW Bothell, interviewed a diverse group of over 50 Western Washington youth, ages 16-22, who had dropped out before graduating from high school. The interviews focused particularly on the youths' perspectives on their school experiences and how these experiences may have influenced their disengagement and dropping out process. The project has produced a series of reports, which you can find at www.wsohp.org, along with additional information on the project, including study background, participants and methodology. This summary highlights a few key findings from our study, which have important implications for school policy and practice in the era of Common Core.

1. Almost all youth enjoyed school through elementary—then they tumbled! We began each interview by asking the youth to rate the various stages of their schooling and then discuss their ratings with us. We found that the overwhelming majority of these youth (who later encountered so many difficulties in school) actually started their school careers on a decidedly positive note. As show below, a high percentage of study participants enjoyed elementary school, but their collective ratings plummet in middle and high school. *Note: Some interviewees had returned to a new educational setting after dropping out, which explains the slight uptick in ratings for grade-11-12 (on the far right of the chart).*



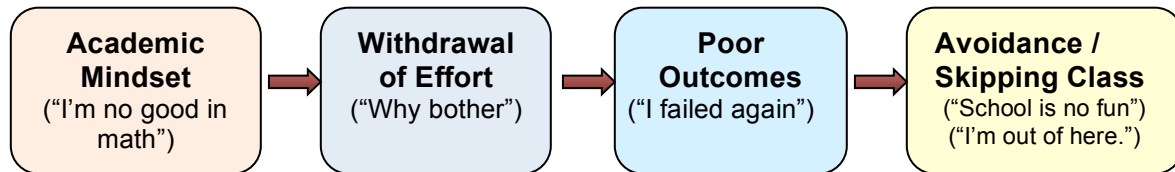
* Favorable ratings defined as a “4” or a “5” on a 1-5 rating scale.

Early positive feelings about school were associated with four important themes: 1) *positive personal relationships with teachers*, 2) *academic supports*, 3) *positive peer relations* and 4) *engaging learning activities*. By middle or early high school these positive themes had largely vanished from youth narratives.

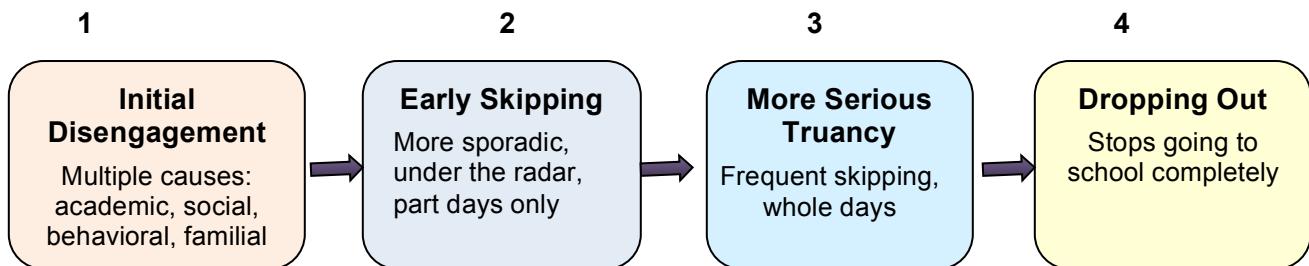
2. Middle school math was a huge tripwire for many students. We found a strong connection between struggles with math and disengagement from school. Math learning challenges, math anxiety and dislike of anything having to do with math dominated youths' conversations about their academic

experiences after elementary school. Middle school math, particularly algebra, often seemed to function as a kind of academic tripwire over which struggling students stumbled and then never quite recovered.

3. A negative view of capabilities contributed to early disengagement from school. Having a negative mindset (about math or other academic subjects) clearly played a major role in initiating behaviors that lead to skipping school, which, in turn, eventually lead to serious truancy and/or dropping out. A sequence of steps leading to skipping appears to be:



4. Youth tended to follow 4 overlapping phases in their pathways to dropping out. Looking beyond their widely varying personal accounts, we discovered that the majority of youth tended to follow a fairly predictable pattern of behavior leading to dropping out. This dropping out process consisted of four distinct, but often overlapping phases, beginning with some form of *initial disengagement from school and/or from learning*. As depicted below, subsequent phases included: an *early skipping phase*, *serious truancy* and, finally, *dropping out*.



We were astonished to learn how very long the entire dropping out process could take for some students. About a third of interviewees were “**slow faders**”—they manifested both attendance and academic problems as early as 5th or 6th grade and yet hung in (often in half-hearted sort of way) until 11th or even 12th grade. They typically said they left school because of how few credits they had amassed, despite years in high school.

5. Interventions were often too limited and too late to help. Since we interviewed youth who had already dropped out, by definition, this was a group for whom interventions had not worked. Nonetheless, their descriptions of school and parental reactions to their truancy revealed some interesting themes. For example, youth often worked diligently to keep their parents in the dark about the extent of their skipping. They intercepted “robo” calls and letters from the school, lied and made excuses to both parents and schools in ways that delayed interventions. Moreover, a number of youth reported limited or no initial school response to their early acts of truancy. As the excerpt below illustrates, they might continue regular skipping for days or even weeks before a significant intervention occurred.

It was weird [that no one at school responded to my regular truancy]... There were times when I didn't go for like a whole week. I'm really surprised that my counselor didn't do anything... She knew who I was, I guess. I don't know.

By the time the school resorted to more serious interventions, such as a family meeting or threatening court intervention, the youth often had already gone far down a path towards dropping out—skipping regularly, failing classes, and solidifying their status within a peer group composed of other skippers.

6. Negative social experiences encouraged truancy. When we asked open-ended questions like “What was going on that made you not want to be at school?” a surprising number of youth in our study brought up negative social encounters at school. They sometimes characterized what we might think of as bullying or harassment as “teasing,” so they didn’t feel entitled to speak up about it to school personnel, and their problems remained hidden. But the often-daily negative encounters took their toll:

I feel like if it were safer [at school] I definitely would have showed up more. The bullying, you know, it was a big part of me not going.

And in some cases, when youth did manage to confess to authorities about the bullying, they felt nothing changed; they continued to feel unsafe and unprotected at school. Their solution—start skipping, skip more often or don’t go to school at all.

7. Mobility created added vulnerabilities. Many students we spoke with came from highly mobile households in which family configuration and residence frequently changed. As a result, it was not uncommon for these students to have attended six or more schools upon entering high school, instead of two or three. Particularly at the secondary level, youth who transferred to a new school often reported feeling lost, socially isolated and miserable, as described by this youth who left school after 9th grade:

The beginning of the school year and throughout December was horrible. I hated [the new] middle school...I would call my mom [from school] and be like, “Can you come for me?” And at lunch, I hated it. Like, I would be by myself, and I don’t know... It was kinda sad.

Feelings of intense unhappiness interfered with the transfer student’s ability to connect socially with teachers and other students, dampened motivation and decreased academic efforts. Moreover, new students’ social anxiety over being excluded and labeled a “loser” sometimes impelled them to join up with a negative peer group. The new peer group then reinforced truancy and other counterproductive behaviors, including drinking, drug use and criminal activity. We highlight the mobility issue because the student transfer process is something schools can directly influence through small, proactive interventions designed to increase the transfer student’s sense of being cared for and belonging.

We acknowledge that many other factors not covered in this brief frequently contributed to the student disengagement process. These include *additional school-based factors*, such as the classroom learning context and discipline policies, as well as *individual factors*, such as substance abuse, mental health issues, and family problems. These and other issues are more fully explored in our four-part report series [Pathways to Dropping Out](#), (direct link: <http://www.wsohp.org/project-reports--updates.html>) and in our most recent analysis, [“I’m No Good in Math:” Student Perspectives on Math Struggles and Dropping Out of School](#).

Questions or Comments? Please visit our website www.wsohp.org to learn more about this study.

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