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Reducing the Dropout Rate in Urban Public High Schools

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Research Question:

What are the major factors that contribute to Hartford public high school students continuing their education through until graduation? According to the students, is the school system helping to facilitate their resilience?

Significance:

As an educational studies major here at Trinity, my classes have given me many opportunities to work with the Hartford public school system and in the classrooms over the past three years. Experiencing the problems that occur in the school system firsthand and the increasing media attention that educational problems and governmental policies have been receiving were the factors that drove me to research this particular topic. In many urban schools across the country, the retention rate for keeping high school students until graduation is extremely low. Low-income urban students of color drop out of high school in proportions of forty to sixty percent (Fine 8). The case is no different in Hartford public high schools. In recent years, the Hartford public school district has had the highest dropout rate in the state, with some schools averaging fifty percent of students who enter high school not graduating (Bowler 1). If students are not able to complete high school, what options are these students, who have been failed by the school system, left with in terms of their future? There are serious economic consequences for students who depart early from high school (Fine 23). Without a high school diploma, many of these former students are forced to work in positions of unskilled labor with low salaries, no benefits, and little job security (Seidman 3). Having this type of occupation, coupled with their lack of education, training, and skills, leaves these individuals with little opportunity for advancement to higher paying jobs and an elevated social status. Since low-income students disproportionately attend dropout-prone schools, dropping out of high school

only helps to further perpetuate the cycle of low social and economic status that these individuals have been accustomed to experiencing (Fine 23).

Since high school retention is such an important issue in education and a problem that is plaguing numerous urban school districts today, many of these school systems are implementing programs to help students complete high school and receive their diploma. Resilience in education is being promoted in many districts, in hopes of keeping at-risk students in school. The program helps students overcome adversities in their lives that would have been contributing factors to them dropping out of high school. This is not the case with all districts though. Some regions with high drop out rates represent this exodus as if it were something quite natural (Fine 8). The administration in some regions feel that the reasons that students drop out of school are based on outside issues that are beyond their control. Therefore, these school districts do not feel any obligation to their students, and do nothing to prevent it from occurring in the future.

Thesis:

The major factors that contribute to Hartford public high school students continuing their education through until graduation are a relationship between the student and an adult mentor in the building that they feel connected with and the student's inner desire for a better future and success in life. According to the students, the school system is helping to facilitate students' resilience.

Methodology:

In order to answer my research question, I am taking an extensive look at one public high school in the city of Hartford with a high dropout rate. To determine the major factors that contribute to students continuing their education through until graduation, I conducted in-depth interviews with six juniors and seniors at the school. Each student was initially asked a series of

six questions, with follow up questions asked when necessary, in order to clarify their responses. The first question asked to the students was have you ever considered dropping out of high school. The second question asked had two-parts, asking what are your plans for the future and where do you think you would be in life without a high school diploma. The third question asked was what are the main reasons you have stayed in high school. This question was asked in order to get the student's initial reason for staying in school without any prompting. The fourth question asked was who was the most influential person that has supported you in continuing your education. The fifth question asked the students have any of the following factors contributed to you continuing your education: parents/family, friends, mentors, teachers, guidance/school officials, clubs, sports, and after school jobs. This question was asked in order to give students a chance to talk about factors that may have contributed to them staying in school, but that they did not mention earlier. The last question asked the students do you feel the school is doing an adequate job of keeping students from dropping out of school and what could the school could do to improve the current situation in your opinion. Six students were randomly selected by my contact in the school, with an equal distribution of males and females chosen for me to interview. All of the students selected were juniors or seniors, because my contact informed me that the majority of students that drop out of school do so in ninth or tenth grade. The interviews were conducted in a private office with only the student and myself present, in order for the student to feel comfortable to answer truthfully and without the possibility of anyone overhearing their responses. Student interviews lasted between forty-five minutes to one hour.

Interviews were also conducted with school officials in order to obtain information about what the school is doing to help reduce the dropout rate. Officials were also asked why they

believe students are staying in school and if they believe the school is doing an adequate job of keeping students there until graduation. The two school officials that I interviewed were the head guidance counselor at the school and the coordinator of the 21st Century Community Learning Center. The interviews with the school officials lasted between one hour to one hour and fifteen minutes. The interview with the coordinator of the 21st Century Community Learning Center was conducted in her private office and the interview with the head guidance counselor was conducted over the telephone. The interviews with the students will provide the information to answer my research question, while the interviews with the school faculty will provide background information about school programs and what is being done to keep students in school from an administrator's viewpoint.

Before each person participated in the study, they were required to sign an informed consent form. The consent form notified the participants of the purpose of the project and their option to withdraw from the study at any time. Letters were sent home to the parents of the participating students at the school's request, in order to inform them of their child's participation in the research project. There were no risks associated with my project, and deception was not involved in the research. In order to insure confidentiality, the name of the school is not included in this paper, and neither are the names of any of the participants. As an additional measure to guarantee confidentiality, I will keep all of the interview notes and sheets for two years then destroy them. Also, I will be the only person that has access to the raw data collected.

Evidence:

The first interview that I conducted was with the head guidance counselor at the school, who I will be referring to as HGC for the duration of this paper. HGC is one of eight counselors

that the school has on staff. Each counselor is randomly assigned students from every grade, and remains with these students for the entire time they are in the school. The counselors each have an average of two hundred and seventy students, with the head guidance counselor averaging seventy-five students due to extra responsibilities that the other counselors do not have.

According to HGC, the number one job of the counselor is to be the chief advocate of the student. They should stand up for the students if they are having problems with teachers or administration. The better the counselor knows the student, the more likely they are to stand up for them. With each counselor averaging two hundred seventy students, they really do not get a chance to know all the students very well. “The counselors know the students with the most and least problems, and the students in the middle get lost in the shuffle,” stated HGC. HGC believes that the reason that students do not continue their education through until graduation is that no one in the building reaches out to the students who are feeling overwhelmed or have problems at home. There are too many students in the building for the number of adults employed, making it impossible for every student to form a connection with an adult mentor in the building. HGC also stated that “the mobility of the population in Hartford contributes to the students feeling like people in the building don’t care about them.” HGC believes that the programs that are being instituted to keep students in school are a solution to the problem, but that they do not get to the root of the dropout problem. “There is something else going on with these students, outside of the school setting that makes them drop out,” stated HGC.

The second interview that I conducted was with the 21st Century Community Learning Center coordinator, who I will be referring to as LCC for the duration of this paper. The 21st Century Community Learning Center was implemented in the school in March of 2001, when grant money was given to the district to start additional educational programs. The grant pays

for the actual cost of the programs and the salary of the coordinator, but additional funds are needed to pay the salaries of the teachers who help run these programs. LCC will not use grant money to fund a program that does not have an educational basis. The goal of many of these new programs is to ultimately keep students in school until they graduate. This is due to the high dropout rate in the district and the fact that existing programs are not doing a good enough job of preventing students from leaving school early. LCC believes that there are a number of reasons that students continue their education through until graduation. “For some students, school is a safer, better place to be than their home. They [the students] know that to be successful and to get out of their current situation, they need an education.”

Through my interviews with HGC and LCC, I learned of a variety of programs that students at the high school may enroll in that are specifically designed to help facilitate their resilience. One of these programs is the Save Our Seniors (SOS) program. This is a program designed specifically for seniors that are at-risk for not graduating or dropping out. A teacher, guidance counselor, or other faculty identifies a student with a need, either possible loss of credit due to absenteeism or risk of failure in an academic subject, and recommends them for this program. The student, guidance counselor, and teacher must sit down together and formulate a plan of action that will keep the student in school. Once the plan has been agreed upon, all of the participating members in the meeting, in addition to the student’s parent and the principal, must sign a contract that the student is held accountable for. If a student has more than fifteen unexcused absences, they are not able to receive credit for their courses, even if they are earning passing grades. Students that are at-risk because of excessive absenteeism can earn back absences through various programs made available with the grant money. If they attend the Saturday Academy run by the school, one of their absences is taken away. Saturday Academy

runs from eight in the morning until noon. The students are required to do homework for the first three hours, while the last hour is reserved for an educational, enrichment program usually in the form of a guest speaker. Students can also earn back absences by attending vacation school, which is held during Christmas, February, and April break. There are many options in this program for students that are academically at risk for not completing high school. If a student is one class short of graduating and is already taking a full course load, they can enroll in an online class that is conducted and paid for by the school. There are also two types of tutoring that students in this program can receive. Students may be assigned a formal one-on-one tutor, who is a teacher or advanced student, which they make their own arrangements to meet with. Students can also be assigned to attend sessions at the homework club. Although this club is open to regular students as well, students in the SOS program are required by contract to attend every Tuesday and Thursday after school to receive assistance with their homework.

In addition to the SOS program, there are other programs that are designed specifically for at-risk student's needs. Since the school has determined that working is a contributing factor to students dropping out, they allow students that are employed to attend only a half-day of school. These students are still considered full time students because they are taking four credits, but they are granted permission for early dismissal so they can attend work. The school also offers an alternative program called afternoon school, which is currently in its trial year. This program is very flexible and is designed for students with a variety of problems. These problems include being overage, having no credits, feeling defeated by the school system, needing to work in the morning, teen mothers with daycare issues, or simply not being able to wake up and get to school early in the morning. This program is similar to an adult education program, which is also offered by the school, but participants are considered students of the high

school. LCC believes that this is an extremely crucial feature of the program because it is important to these students that they are a part of the school. “Being able to participate in school activities, particularly the prom and graduation, is one of the main reasons they are willing to participate in the program,” stated LCC.

The interviews with the school officials were extremely helpful in giving me information about the programs the school is implementing to help facilitate students’ resilience and the beliefs of some faculty on a major problem that is plaguing the school. After interviewing the school officials, I interviewed six students in the school, both male and female, in order to find answers to my research question. The students will be referred to as Student A-F for the duration of this paper.

Student A is an eleventh grade female that transferred to this high school at the beginning of her sophomore year. She has never considered dropping out of high school and hopes to attend college and then become an accountant in the future. If she didn’t have a high school diploma, Student A believes that she would be working in some kind of retail store for low pay and no benefits. When asked initially what are the main reasons that she has stayed in school, Student A responded “to make sure I have a good future and can get into a good college.” The most influential person that has supported Student A in continuing her education has been her mother. Student A stated, “she helps me with my homework, encourages me to do work and to stay in school.” One of the other major factors that has contributed to Student A continuing her education is a relationship with the 21st Century Community Learning Center coordinator, who she says is her mentor within the school. Student A stated, “I feel really close to her [LCC]. She took me under her wing and school would be harder if she was not here.” Student A proceeded to talk about how she feels comfortable with LCC and can talk to her about problems that she is

having in school or at home. LCC helped Student A become a tutor in the Homework Club because that was something she was interested in and even got her a summer internship in the field of study that she wants to pursue after graduation. “I’m stuck with a counselor who messes things up, like my schedule, and does not care about me,” stated Student A. LCC helps her straighten out these and other problems that she is experiencing. The two are so close in fact that they call each other “mother” and “daughter.” Student A is a member of the Ace Mentoring Club, the Computer Club, and a tutor at the Homework Center. “I really like being involved in these clubs because I am interested in these areas and enjoy doing them, but they also keep me busy and give me something to look forward to at the end of the day,” said Student A. In response to the question about if the student feels that the school is doing an adequate job of keeping students in school, Student A emphatically answered yes. “There are many programs here with the 21st Century Community Learning Center that weren’t at my other school and a great effort is being given by the coordinator [LCC]. The school is really trying to keep students here.”

Student B is a twelfth grade female who transferred to this high school at the beginning of her junior year from a New York City school. She has considered dropping out of school on more than one occasion. “I don’t like school anymore. I used to like it, but I became tired of it,” stated Student B. She plans on attending college after high school, but feels that she would manage without a high school diploma doing free lance work in writing or photography. When asked initially what are the main reasons that she has stayed in high school, Student B responded for other people, mainly her mother and sister, but also because people within the school get mad at her when she messes up. “The school singles me out, which makes me feel better, like people actually care about what I’m doing,” stated Student B. “I have a really close relationship with

LCC. If I need anything done, I know I can go to her and she will take care of it. It makes it easier to come to school knowing that I have someone like her here to help me,” said Student B. She responded that the most influential people that have supported her in continuing her education have been her mother, sister, and LCC. Student B is a member of the photography club at the school, which is something that she is interested in and wants to pursue after school. Student B is also a participant in the Save our Seniors (SOS) program and would most likely not be graduating without it. In response to the question about if the student feels that the school is doing an adequate job of keeping students in school, Student B answered yes, especially for her in particular. “I get a lot of attention from different people in the school, but I know that they can’t do that for everyone,” answered Student B. She also believes that the school has implemented many programs to help students stay in school, and that the students are aware of them, but it is not enough. “The student has to want to do them [the programs], which is not always the case with everyone,” stated Student B.

Student C is a twelfth grade male that has attended this high school since his freshman year. He has never considered dropping out of high school and hopes to play professional football, coach football, or have a job associated with football after graduation. If he didn’t have a high school diploma, he believes that he would be nowhere in life, working at McDonald’s or another bad job. When asked initially what are the main reasons that he has stayed in school, Student C responded “For my own good, to get somewhere in life, and to have a better future.” The most influential people that have supported Student C in continuing his education has been his mother and older brother. Student C stated, “she wakes me up for school, makes me go to school, and pushes me to succeed.” Student C has witnessed firsthand what happens when someone drops out of high school and uses that as motivation to continue school. “My older

brother dropped out of school in tenth grade and I don't want to be like him," stated Student C. He also wants to do something with his life that no one in his family has done before, which is to graduate high school. Student C stated, "I have lived in this city my whole life and I want to go somewhere else and experience something better." Student C is a member of the football and track teams and believes these sports are a motivating factor for staying in school. "I'm really trying to get out of Hartford, and football is giving me an opportunity to do just that," stated Student C. He needs a C average to stay eligible for the sport and also needs to attend school on game days in order to play, which are factors that keep him attending and doing well in school. Student C also talked about his relationship with his football coach, naming him as a mentor in the building. "He pushes me to do well in football and school. He is also helping me get recruited by colleges and receive scholarship money, because he knows how much I really want to get out of here," stated Student C. In response to the question about if the student feels that the school is doing an adequate job of keeping students in school, Student C answered yes. "It's not the school's fault; it's the students' faults. Everyone knows about the programs the school has, but they just don't go. Students don't want to stay because they can't handle it. Not everyone can handle it."

Student D is a twelfth grade male who has attended this high school since his freshman year. He has never seriously considered dropping out of high school, although the thought has crossed his mind. He wants to join the Navy after graduation. If he didn't have a high school diploma, he believes that he would be struggling in life, and working a menial job for minimum wage. When asked initially what are the main reasons that he has stayed in school, Student D responded "I have seen how my brothers have turned out without a diploma and I want something better than that, which keeps me focused on staying in school. I also want to be the

first in my family to graduate high school.” The most influential person that has supported Student D in continuing his education has been himself. Student D stated, “I make myself come to school and do my homework because I want a better future. I have firsthand experience of what my life would be like without a diploma, and I don’t want that for myself.” Student D is a member of the weightlifting club, which he said is an incentive to attend school. “I really like lifting weights and look forward to it every day,” stated Student D. Student D also named LCC as a mentor for him in the school that is helpful in fixing his schedule and that he can talk to if he has problems. Student D works twenty-five to thirty hours each week at an after school job at TJ Max that keeps him there until ten o’clock on many evenings. Although Student D said his job is flexible with school, it messes him up. He is tired from working so many hours and does not want to do his work when he gets home. Student D is participating in the SOS program and stated, “I would be failing without it. I would probably have to repeat this year or would have gotten thrown out.” In response to the question about if the student feels that the school is doing an adequate job of keeping students in school, Student D answered yes. “The school is really helping kids out. SOS, night school, they give you a lot of options. They [the school] are also always checking up on you.”

Student E is a twelfth grade male that has attended this high school since his freshman year. He has seriously considered dropping out of high school on many occasions due to family problems. Student E stated, “If I dropped out, I could help my parents out financially with the money I would get from a job. My father can’t work because of a sickness, and I wanted to contribute to my family.” He knows that he definitely does not want to go to a four-year college after high school, but is thinking about attending a technological school or taking classes at a community college. If he didn’t have a high school diploma, he believes that he would be where

his brother who does not have a diploma is, working a minimum wage job, living at home, and struggling with money. When asked initially what are the main reasons that he has stayed in school, Student E responded for himself. "I am going to be the only one graduating in my family and I want to feel proud of myself for accomplishing something that no one did yet." The most influential people that have supported Student E in continuing his education have been his mother and father. Student E stated, "They don't let me get involved in their problems. They don't blame me or put anything on me. They want me to go to college and push me to stay in school and get a career." Student E is a member of the mechanics club and talked about this as a motivating factor for coming in school. "I really enjoy being in that club and working with my hands," stated Student E. Student E also talked about LCC as a mentor within the school. "LCC is so understanding, you really feel like you can go to her with problems and talk about them. I go to her instead of guidance because she actually listens to me and fixes things," stated Student E. In response to the question about if the student feels that the school is doing an adequate job of keeping students in school, Student E answered not really. "The school suspends people over petty things, like tardiness and absences. They need to change their policies. There are people on the corner smoking weed and the school don't do nothing about them, instead they hassle the people that actually do come to school. Some of the programs do help students though."

Student F is a twelfth grade female that has attended this high school since the beginning of her freshman year. She has never considered dropping out of high school and hopes to be either a firefighter or an elementary school teacher after graduation. If she didn't have a high school diploma, she believes that she would still be living with her mom and would have the same type of job that she has now. When asked initially what are the main reasons that she has stayed in school, Student F responded "sports, my parents, myself, and to be successful later in

life.” The most influential person that has supported Student F in continuing her education has been her older brother. Student F stated, “I want to follow in his footsteps. I do everything that he did in high school. I am in the same clubs and sports that he was, and I even have his old job. I really want to go to the same college that he did.” One of the other major factors that has contributed to Student F continuing her education is the support that she receives from her parents. Student F stated, “My parents wake me up for school, give me a ride, and pick me up. If I had to walk, I would miss more days because I don’t like walking in the cold. My mom is really involved with the school, helps me with my homework, and helps me pick classes.” Student F also talked about her close relationship with her vice-principal as a reason that she stays in school. “He is really close to my family, so I feel connected with him on a personal level. He calls my house if I’m not there and is always checking up on me,” stated Student F. In response to the question about if the student feels that the school is doing an adequate job of keeping students in school, Student F answered no. “I don’t like the attendance or late policies that the school has. If you are late even by two minutes, you have to miss first period and sit in the auditorium. It doesn’t make sense because you are missing even more class with this policy. Also, the teachers here are extremely unfair. They make you not want to go to classes because they treat you badly.”

Interpretation and Analysis:

After gathering and analyzing all of the information from the student interviews, I have determined that the major factors that contribute to Hartford public high school students continuing their education until graduation are a relationship between the student and an adult mentor and the student’s inner desire for a better future and success in life. Although when initially asked what is the main reason that they have stayed in school the students responded to

have a better future, I do not believe that this is the underlying factor that makes them stay. Almost every student that attends school has been programmed to believe that staying in school is the only way to succeed in life. It only makes sense that students would respond that this is the reason that they stay in school, but if that were the case, then do the students who drop out not want a better future? After students gave their initial reason for staying in school, they began to discuss their schooling experience in depth, and this is where I believe the real answer to the question was found. Many of the students talked about an adult mentor in the building that they had a close relationship with and how they made their schooling experience better. The students talked about how they felt comfortable with their mentors, could talk to them about school or other problems, and how they fixed things that were wrong when no one else would. The students felt that someone in the building actually cared about them and whether they succeeded or not. Since they were always being checked up on, the students came to school and tried to do their best, so they were not letting that person down. The head guidance counselor also believes that a close relationship between the student and an adult mentor in the school is one of the main reasons that students stay in school. In this particular school, there are too many students in the building for the number of adults employed, making it impossible for every student to form a connection with an adult mentor in the building, which contributes to students not continuing their education through until graduation.

According to the students, the school system is helping to facilitate resilience. Almost all of the students believe that the programs that the school is implementing are helping students stay in school because they provide a troubled student with many different options to help them graduate. They know that students are aware of these programs because there are announcements for them on a daily basis, flyers posted for them all over the school, and teachers

can recommend them to the programs even if they do not know about them. The students noted that the problem is that although these programs exist, students do not want to participate in them. Although I believe that these programs are a great starting point in helping to facilitate students' resilience, they are not getting at the root of the problem. They help students that are at-risk for dropping out due to absences or academic problems, but what about the students that are having outside problems that cause them to depart from school early?

Since students responded that a close relationship with an adult mentor is one of the main reasons they stay in school, the district should implement mentoring programs in all of their schools. This could potentially prevent students who feel that no one cares about them or that used to feel disconnected from the school from dropping out. Additional staff would need to be hired so that the student/teacher ratio could be reduced, and each student would be able to form a close relationship with someone in the building. Based on the fact that most students that drop out do so in ninth or tenth grade, the district should start these types of programs in elementary or middle school to try to prevent the problem before it occurs. Although this may not end the dropout problem in Hartford or other urban districts, it may drastically increase the number of students that continue their education until graduation.

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