



SURVEY OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH: FOUR YEARS LATER
Conducted by

NH Department of Education
Workforce Opportunity Council/Youth Council
Dropout Prevention and Recovery Oversight Council

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND COMPARISON TO 2002 SURVEY
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SURVEY PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

In the spring and early summer of 2002, the Youth Council of the Workforce Opportunity Council in conjunction with the NH Department of Education conducted a survey of New Hampshire youth who had left high school before graduation, in order to gain an understanding of what factors contributed to their decision to leave. This same survey was released in January, 2006 to out-of-school youth enrolled in Adult Education Diploma, GED, or Workforce Opportunity Council funded out-of-school youth programs across the state.

The survey was developed by the Workforce Opportunity Council/Youth Council in conjunction with the NH Department of Education. In late 2005, the Dropout Prevention and Recovery Oversight Council sought to determine the reasons why students are dropping out of school. The three organizations agreed to distribute the 2006 survey to gather input from these youth. It is recognized that these responders recognize the value of an educational credential and have enrolled in related programming. The 2002 survey was mailed to past participants and distributed to current participants in programs funded by the Youth Council, along with one adult basic education program in Dover. These programs assist out-of-school youth to gain credentials and career-related skills. Over 800 surveys were mailed or distributed; 144 youth responded for an overall response rate of about 16%. Respondents were out-of-school youth who were either completers of alternative programs, current participants, or those who were actively seeking alternatives to high school. The 2006 survey was given to WIA Youth and Adult Education contractors for distribution to existing 2006 enrollees (WIA Youth - 186; Adult Education - approximately 1500). The

response rate was 19%. Many students did not answer all questions so the sample size for the questions varied.

In comparing the respondents between the two different survey results, we found significantly greater response to the 2006 survey with contrasting results between the two different surveys, potentially from the distribution process.

County	2002 Survey	2006 Survey
Strafford	71	38
Rockingham	23	61
Hillsborough	16	42
Sullivan	9	17
Belknap	8	37
Carroll	3	1
Grafton	3	2
Merrimack	3	42
Coos		7
Out-of-state		11
Responders left blank		83

Again, the responses were driven in part by where the programs are located and proportion to the number of students served.

Additional information about respondents includes the following:

- Nine percent (9%) less students aged 14-16 dropped out of school in 2006 than 2002. Age ranges from 14 to 16 shifted from 54% in 2002 to 45% in 2006; age 17 increased from 31% to 34%; and age 18 to 21 from 12% to 21%.
- The grade level at which surveyed youth left school varied. Nineteen (19) percent dropped out after completing grades 6-8 in 2002 dropped to 11% in 2006; 9th grade completers shifted from 24% in 2002 to 22% in 2006; 10th grade decreased from 36% to 34% with increase in dropouts occurring in 11th and 12th grade (12% to 21%).
- The majority (67%) had dropped out within the last two years in 2002 with 78% in the 2006 data.

KEY FINDINGS

Young people with higher achievement than that of the typical dropout, and who come from families with higher education levels, are leaving school.

The students surveyed do not follow the typical, national profile of the dropout, in terms of family background and academic achievement. Surveyed youth received higher grades and came from families with higher education levels than the national profile would suggest.

- More than half (58%) of youth completing the surveys reported receiving mostly C's or better on their coursework. Close to 20% were receiving A's and B's on their coursework. In 2006, 59% of the youth reported receiving mostly C's or better in their coursework. Eighteen percent (18%) reported majority of their grades were F's.
- 45% of youth reported that a parent obtained a high school diploma or GED, and almost one-quarter (24%) reported that a parent had achieved some level of postsecondary education. 2006 survey reflected 83% of the parents possessed a high school diploma/GED and 35% had achieved some level of postsecondary education.

There are significant transition years when young people are most in need of supports to stay in school.

A significant portion of surveyed youth dropped out between eighth and ninth grades or between ninth and tenth grades, which is consistent with national research. Almost one in five (19%) students surveyed never made it to the 9th grade, and almost a quarter (24%) completed ninth grade only. National research indicates that many students struggle with the transition to high school.¹ The 2006 survey sample of students reflects one third of students leave school before their sophomore year.

Students who make it beyond the hurdle of the transition to high school and complete several grades of high school are dropping out of school.

One in five students surveyed (20%) completed 11th grade and still dropped out in 2002 compared to 32% or one in three of the students sampled in 2006.

Youth who repeat a grade are more likely to drop out.

¹ Roderick, M. (1993). *The Path to Dropping Out*. Westport, CT: Auburn House; Legters, N.E. (2000). "Small Learning Communities Meet School-to-Work: Whole-School Restructuring for Urban Comprehensive High Schools" in *Schooling Students Placed at Risk: Research, Policy, and Practice in the Education of Poor and Minority Adolescents*, Erlbaum Associates, Inc; Legters, N.E. and Kerri Kerr (2001). *Easing the Transition to High School: An Investigation of Reform Practices to Promote Ninth Grade Success*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project.

The majority of youth (57%) repeated a grade. (57% in 2002 and 59% in 2006) Almost one in ten (9%) repeated two or more grades in 2002 with an increase to 11% in 2006. Over a decade of national research indicates that repeating a grade in school is a strong predictor of dropping out of school.²

Most of the youth surveyed tended to have had some knowledge of other educational options before they left school.

In 2002, 85% of students surveyed indicated that they had some knowledge of educational alternatives before they left school. This increased to 99% in 2006. One in four received information about alternatives from guidance counselors in 2002 compared to 32% in 2006. The 2006 data reflects that the source of additional information came from family (25%) or friends (28%).

Surveyed youth plans linking youth to continued education or employment at a higher rate than would be expected for students who have dropped out of school.

In 2006, perhaps because of their enrollment in programs funded by the New Hampshire Youth Council or an adult education program, 41% of survey students' plans are to continue working on obtaining their GED or diploma, employment reflected 32% of those surveyed, and 17% had plans of post-secondary education or advanced training. In comparing to 2002, significantly more students are planning to continue work on the GED/Diploma in the next six months than in the earlier survey. (The 2002 survey reflected 66% of youth planning to attend post-secondary education or training in the sequential six months, and 81% expected to work.)

Although students still identify failing grades, dislike of school, feelings of alienation from school, and poor relations with teachers and students as top reasons for leaving school, more students in 2006 identify failing grades and inability to graduate as a key factors.

The vast majority of students indicated that their reasons for leaving school were related to their engagement with the school community, their relationships with teachers and students, and overall academic success. In both surveys, youth express the need for better relationships with teachers and students, and a more positive and supportive school climate. The top three reasons given in 2006 were:

- I didn't like school (18.6%)
- I was failing school or not going to graduate (15.5%) and
- I didn't get along with teachers (10.6%).

² National Dropout Prevention Center, "Background on Retention Policy." www.dropoutprevention.org.

These findings are consistent with national research on the supports and opportunities that are critical to young people's success. However, marked improvement was found in a number of these areas:

- In the initial survey, one-third (33%) "felt they didn't belong at school" compared to 7.5% reported in the second survey.
- In 2002, 24% "didn't get along with teachers" and 22% "didn't get along with students." Data today reflects 10.6% and 7% respectively.
- 22% indicated that a teacher/administrator suggested that they leave in 2002; today that percentage was reported in less than 1% of the surveys.
- Almost half (49%) indicated that they "did not like" school in 2002 compared to 19% in 2006.

Students' responses to open-ended questions, summarized below, give further insight from youth as to what is needed to keep young people connected and engaged in school:

- *Create better relationships with teachers and offer more attention when students are having difficulty.* Many students indicated that more individual support from teachers would have made a difference in their decision to leave school. "I think it would have helped if I had an adult concerned about my situation," said one student. When asked what would help, these students spoke for many respondents: "Teachers listening more to students." "Have the teachers have one-on-one talks with students." "Have more teachers interested in helping students stay in school." Another, who attended several high schools over the course of three years, said, "I think it would have helped if I had an adult concerned about my situation who tried to help me stay in school, although I was a new student."

One student in particular made a plea for better guidance from adults: "For myself my life was at a stage where I didn't understand why things were going the way they were going. I was very confused about a lot of things, basically I was lost and no one tried to help me find the way. It would have helped if someone cared. I don't feel sorry for myself and I didn't then, I just lost my life during those years and I didn't know what to do about it or how to get one back."

- ***Build a sense of community.*** National research indicates that connectedness to a learning community is a powerful predictor of academic achievement.³ A consistent theme throughout the students' responses to open-ended questions concerned their feeling of belonging. "I felt like I wasn't meant to be there," said one student, echoing the statements of many others. When asked what they would change about school to make it more possible for students to stay, students spoke of school as "segregated" and "full of cliques." Many students referred to being harassed: "[I didn't like] the way I was treated by everyone and laughed at." "[There should be] zero tolerance for harassment." "Being humiliated in front of a big class is a horrible thing to happen."
- ***Treat students with respect.*** In their responses, several students implied that they had had problems that brought them to the attention of school staff, but they did not feel that they got the respect and support they needed to interact differently. "A lot of the teachers talk down to their students who may be 17, 18, or 19 years old. They are treated like they're in elementary school." "Tell them to stop following people around. I wanted to do better and change my ways, but when you've got people following me around most of the day, you know they don't believe you and now you're going to fail so you go back to what you were doing before."
- ***Offer more hands-on teaching and more individualized instruction, and provide additional help when students are struggling with course material.*** Students made a range of comments related to teaching strategies, ranging from specific requests for more hands-on and individualized instruction to complaints that school is "boring." Educators across the country are beginning to draw from research on cognitive development to identify classroom practices that support and challenge diverse learners; this research overwhelmingly indicates that decentralized, hands-on classrooms are most effective with adolescents with varying abilities.⁴

Many youth surveyed indicated that they needed more help when they were struggling with academic coursework. "Make it so everybody gets the help they need," said one student. Said another, "[I would have benefited from] the teachers having more time to help those in need." And another: "Teachers were not helpful. They didn't help me to learn." Another echoed, [I would address] "the way the school systems deal with helping kids who have problems instead of just shoving them away." "They didn't give me a chance to

³ Scales, Peter, and Nancy Leffert (1999). *Developmental Assets: A Synthesis of the Scientific Research on Adolescent Development*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

⁴ Daniels, H., Marilyn Bizar, and Steven Zemelman (2002). *Rethinking High School: Best Practice in Teaching, Learning, and Leadership*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

catch up. The alternative was to drop out and attain my GED.” Several students identified the need for more individualized instruction, and for smaller classes.

CONCLUSION

These surveys are attempts, by these organizations focused on dropout prevention and recovery, to gather information from young people themselves as to why they drop out of school. The responses clearly call for more research into students’ experiences in high schools across the state, particularly those youth who are not engaged in alternative education programming. The young people have pointed to a host of factors – relating to the school environment, the quality of the teaching, and their personal challenges – that contributed to their decision to leave school before graduation. These factors may vary across the state. We urge each community to undertake a process to gather this kind of information from their youth.

It is also worth noting that the experiences that these youth are seeking – more personalized learning environments where they receive the help that they need to succeed – can be found in the alternative programs in which they are enrolled. Against the odds, these dropouts are now on track to a high school diploma or GED and postsecondary education/advanced training or employment. In order to assist more young people to complete high school, communities might seek to incorporate more features of these programs into their high school offerings, or to secure funding to develop more alternative routes to graduation.

Workforce Opportunity Council/Youth Council

In 1999, the Governor established and certified the Workforce Opportunity Council (Council) as New Hampshire's Workforce Board under the Workforce Investment Act. The Council is chaired by a businessperson and has 43 members, of which 22 members are business representatives. The Council also includes top officials from agencies that oversee workforce development programs.

The mission of the Council is to promote life-long learning by partnering with businesses, agencies, and organizations to bring the state’s education, employment, and training programs together into a workforce development system that will provide the means for all residents of New Hampshire to gain sufficient skills, education, employment, and financial independence.

The Youth Council is established as a subgroup of the Workforce Opportunity Council to focus on the needs of youth as the emerging workforce and to link and expand a host of education reform and youth development programs as part of an overall workforce strategy. The Youth Council has set two overall goals to structure its work:

1. Increase the number of young people completing high school (including those completing GEDs) and reduce the number of young people dropping out of school
2. Increase the number of young people going into postsecondary education and/or skilled employment

DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY OVERSIGHT COUNCIL

The Council was created under NH RSA 189:59 to establish a dropout prevention and dropout recovery program in the department of Education. In 2005, legislature awarded \$350,000 for the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 respectively for dropout prevention and recovery programs in New Hampshire.