

THE STORY OF JOEY: WHY AMERICA CAN NO LONGER AFFORD TO IGNORE ITS AT-RISK STUDENTS

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MEET JOEY

Joey slouches into math class on Monday morning after a weekend of partying with his friends. Mrs. Kelly passes out the exam as students sharpen their pencils and put their books away. Joey groans; he'd skipped school all last week and didn't hear the announcement of the test for today. Then he sighs; it really doesn't make any difference. No matter how hard he tries, he just doesn't understand the math. He also has a hard time reading the explanations in the textbook. He'd asked Mrs. Kelly for some help, but she just dismissed him saying, "If you'd come to class once in awhile, you wouldn't need my help." When she turns her back to write instructions on the whiteboard, Joey sneaks out.

He thought about going home, but since his dad lost his job (he, too, dropped out of school), he's started drinking more; by now he'd be pretty drunk and pretty belligerent. His mom works two jobs to keep food on the table, but with six kids the money doesn't stretch very far. His older brother John dropped out of high school six years ago when a new factory opened up in town. But the job didn't last and now his brother is in prison for robbing a gas station. His older sister Kathy got pregnant when she was a sophomore and dropped out; she and her four-year-old son still live at home. Joey's younger siblings enjoy school now, but Joey can see the signs: Mary can't read very well; Annie was held back a grade; and Tommy is starting to get in trouble at school.

Joey wanders through the neighborhood wondering where to go. He likes to play basketball, but the neighborhood court was vandalized a month ago and the city removed the hoops. There was a youth center near Joey's home where kids could get help with their schoolwork and spend some quality time with counselors and mentors, but it was shut down after its funding was cut. Joey finally stops at a local convenience store where his friends hang out. Most of them have already dropped out of school, and they are always ragging on Joey to do the same. Today, it out sounds like a good idea.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

In October 2000, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that approximately

11% of young people between 16 and 24 years of age were not enrolled in high school and had not completed high school. Students who drop out of school place a heavy financial burden on this nation in the form of high unemployment rates, lost productivity, and reduced tax income. At the same time, these students generate larger social costs in the form of greater engagement in high-risk behaviors (substance abuse, sexual activity, crime, etc.), higher rates of incarceration, and greater dependence on government assistance programs.

Current economic, demographic, and educational trends could exacerbate the problem in the future. As the U.S. economy moves towards a higher-skilled labor force, workers without an education will fall further and further behind. At the same time, the number of students who are most at risk of dropping out is increasing in our public schools. The growing push for accountability is producing school policies that could increase the number of dropouts.

What can be done to help these students? In order to answer this question, we must first determine why students drop out.

WHY DO STUDENTS DROP OUT OF SCHOOL?

Students who drop out of school are influenced by a variety of factors related to the student, school, family, and community. Many of these factors can also serve as predictors of dropping out.

Student-related factors: These factors are generally personal problems that are independent of the student's social or family background. What are some of the personal problems that students experience that can negatively affect their educational career? Students who abuse drugs or alcohol, students who become pregnant, and students who run afoul of the law are all at risk of dropping out of high school prior to graduation. These factors make school attendance difficult if not impossible. Students whose behavior in school results in suspensions or other disciplinary actions are highly unlikely to return even if given the opportunity. Students who are habitually truant, absent, or tardy will probably simply stop coming.

One student-related factor that is not necessarily a personal problem but can influence a student's decision to stay in school is employment. Favorable opportunities for employment in the community increase the likelihood that a student will leave school. In fact, there is a direct correlation between the number of hours worked and the likelihood of dropping out.¹

¹E. Gregory Woods, "Reducing the Dropout Rate", School Improvement Research Series Close-Up #17 (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory: Portland, Ore.) April 2002, p. 3.

School-related factors: The single strongest school-related predictor of dropping out is poor academic performance. Students who drop out will frequently cite an inability to keep up because of low achievement and lack of basic skills as the reason for leaving school.² Grade retention is also a significant factor. Students who repeat one grade are twice as likely to drop out.³ This likelihood increases to four times for students who repeat more than one grade.⁴

Schools themselves can contribute to high dropout rates by the kind of educational environment they create. If schools offer poorly organized academic programs, suffer morale problems among students and staff, tolerate ineffective teachers, or have low expectations for their students, their dropout rate will be higher than schools that create a positive, student-supported environment.

Schools can also impact their dropout rates by the types of policies and practices they adopt. As a result of the growing emphasis on accountability in public schools, many schools are implementing new policies, such as high school exit exams, while eliminating old practices, such as social promotion. Students on the edge of dropping out because of poor academic performance may choose to withdraw rather than face the humiliation of failing an exit exam or of falling further behind. As schools tighten up their disciplinary and attendance practices and implement "zero tolerance" policies, many students will be discharged from school.

Family-related factors: There are a number of factors related to family situations that can negatively impact a student's ability to stay in school. Students most likely to leave school without a diploma live in single-parent households, live in low-income households, or have parents or siblings who also dropped out of school.⁵ Students who have a stressful or unstable home life due to parental separation or divorce, financial difficulties, substance abuse, or domestic violence are also at a higher risk of dropping out. Conversely, students whose parents monitor and regulate their activities, provide emotional support, encourage independent decisionmaking, and are more interested in their schooling are less likely to withdraw before completing high school.⁶

²Joseph D. Creech, "Reducing Dropout Rates", Educational Benchmarks 2000 Series (Southern Regional Education Board: Atlanta, GA), p. 15.

³Woods, p. 3.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Creech, p. 14.

⁶Russell W. Rumberger, "Why Students Drop Out of School and What Can Be Done", paper prepared for conference, "Dropouts in America: How Severe is the Problem? What Do We Know About Intervention and Prevention?", Harvard

Another family-related factor that impacts the dropout rate is ethnic or racial background. Students who are members of a minority or for whom English is a second language are at greater risk of dropping out than students whose families are white or native-born.

Community-related factors: The community in which a student lives also has an impact on that student's decision to remain in or drop out of school. Poverty is one of the strongest predictors of dropping out. Poor communities may have fewer resources, such as playgrounds and after-school programs, to support at-risk students. Poor communities tend to have poor schools. Other community-related factors include negative peer influences and greater employment opportunities.

WHAT IS THE SITUATION IN MONTANA?

In Montana, the overall dropout rate for high schools in 2001-2002 was 3.8%.⁷ However, for American Indian students in Montana high schools, the rate was 10%.⁸ In grades seven and eight, the dropout rate for American Indians was 2.7% compared to a 0.4% overall dropout rate.⁹ Although American Indians represented 11.3% of the public school enrollment for grades seven and eight, they accounted for 68.2% of the total dropouts.¹⁰ At the high school level, the numbers are 9.3% of the enrollment and 24.4% of the dropouts.¹¹

Montana's overall dropout rate compares favorably with national statistics. In 2000, the national dropout rate was 4.8%¹² while in Montana the rate was 4.2%.¹³ But Montana is failing its American Indian students. American Indian seventh and eighth grade students drop out of Montana

University, January 2001 (University of California - Santa Barbara) revised May 2001, p. 13.

⁷"Montana Statewide Dropout Report 2001-02" (Office of Public Instruction: Helena, Montana), April 2003, p. 2.

⁸Ibid., p. 4.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²"Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000" (National Center for Education Statistics: Washington, D.C.), November 2001, p. iii. The year 2000 is the most recent year for which NCES statistics are available.

¹³"Montana High School Dropout Rates by Racial/Ethnic Origin for the 1999-2000 School Year" (Office of Public Instruction: Helena, Montana), p. 20.

schools at a rate 12 times that of white students.¹⁴ American Indian high school students drop out at a rate more than three times that of white students.¹⁵

The alarmingly high dropout rate for American Indian students has attracted the attention of parents, educators, and legislators. Why are these students dropping out of school before they receive their high school diploma? On November 7, 2002, the Montana Indian Education Association and the Montana Advisory Council on Indian Education held a public hearing in Helena on the problem of American Indian high school dropouts. At that hearing, both oral and written testimony were taken. The testimony at the hearing mirrored the research presented earlier in this paper. Student, school, family, and community factors all contributed to the high dropout rate. However, there was another set of factors that impacted only Indian students, and those were factors related to language and culture. Witness after witness testified to the lack of Indian culture and language in the schools and to the lack of Indian teachers and administrators who could serve as role models. Non-Indian teachers were faulted for their lack of knowledge of their Indian students' culture and learning styles and for perpetuating the stereotype of the Indian student as a low achiever. Racial discrimination and harassment were also mentioned.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

With the adoption of "No Child Left Behind" and its premise that every child from every background in every part of America must be given every opportunity to succeed in school, a new light is shining on those students who continue to fail and to drop out of school. If America truly wants to see that no child is left behind, attention must be given to those students who, for any of the reasons listed above, leave our high schools every year in ever-growing numbers.

How, then, do we keep these students in school? We keep them in school by designing intervention strategies that focus on why they drop out in the first place. First of all, because dropping out is influenced by both individual and institutional factors, intervention strategies can focus on individual values, attitudes, and behaviors associated with dropping out or on the environment within families, schools, and communities.¹⁶ Dropout prevention programs that focus on the individual use

¹⁴"Montana Statewide Dropout Report 2001-02", p. 4.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Rumberger, p. 21.

programmatic strategies to provide at-risk students with additional resources and supports to help keep them in school. The two most common programmatic strategies are supplemental programs that provide services within an existing school program and alternative school programs either within an existing school (a "school within a school") or in a separate facility (an alternative school). Intervention strategies that focus on institutional factors use systemic strategies that provide resources to strengthen or restructure families, schools, and communities. These systemic strategies have the potential to impact a much larger number of students by improving the environments that contribute to dropout behavior. However, systemic changes are extremely difficult to achieve because they involve making fundamental changes in the way institutions operate.¹⁷

Secondly, effective prevention strategies must address both the academic and the social problems that students experience.¹⁸ At-risk students must be supported in all areas of their lives. Services must be flexible and tailor-made for individual student needs.

Thirdly, because dropout attitudes and behaviors begin as early as elementary school, dropout prevention strategies should begin early in a child's educational career.¹⁹ Early intervention is powerful and cost-effective and may be the very best approach to dropout prevention.

WHAT WORKS FOR AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS?

While these strategies will work for all at-risk students, are there particular strategies that will help American Indian students remain in school? Over the past decade, there have been a number of studies on "what works" for American Indian students. As part of a larger study by the RAND Corporation on the improvement in reading and mathematics scores of American Indian students, William, G. Demmert, Jr., Ph.D., conducted a review of more than 8,000 abstracts to identify those research studies that provide evidence of what works or does not work to improve the academic performance of American Indian students. He then reviewed these identified studies in depth and produced a paper entitled "Improving Academic Performance Among Native American Indian Students: A Review of the Research Literature" in December 2001. In his review, Dr. Demmert organized the studies around six general themes:

¹⁷Rumberger, p. 28.

¹⁸Rumberger, p. 21.

¹⁹Rumberger, p. 22.

- (1) early childhood environment and experiences;
- (2) native language and cultural programs in schools;
- (3) teachers, instruction, and curriculum;
- (4) community and parental influences;
- (5) student characteristics; and
- (6) factors leading to success in college.²⁰

Theme 1. Early Childhood Environment and Experiences: It is becoming more and more apparent that early experiences have a significant impact on the intelligence of a child. Both family background and a high-quality preschool program are strongly related to academic achievement as well as social and emotional development. Children need a challenging and stimulating early environment if they are to succeed in the formal school setting. Research on the influences of early childhood education on American Indian children is limited, but what research does exist supports the research findings for non-Indian children.

Theme 2. Native Language and Cultural Programs in Schools: There is a wealth of research on the influences of native language and cultural programs on academic performance. The research shows a positive association between academic performance and the presence of Indian language and cultural programs. According to Demmert, "A school curriculum that promotes the language and culture of the community or tribe served--adopted in partnership with that community--holds significant promise for improving academic performance of Native children."²¹

Theme 3. Teachers, Instruction, and Curriculum: Research on what is effective within a classroom is centered on five major areas: characteristics of teachers; classroom organization and strategies; reading, writing, and communications instruction; science and mathematics instruction; and individual student support/dropout prevention.²²

The well-established teacher characteristics--solid content knowledge, sound pedagogy, understanding of cognitive development, cultural knowledge and understanding of students served, and

²⁰William G. Demmert, "Improving Academic Performance Among Native American Students: A Review of the Research Literature" (ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools: Charleston, West Virginia), December 2001, p. 5.

²¹Ibid., p. 9.

²²Ibid., p. 17.

outstanding interpersonal skills--are just as important for teachers of Indian students as they are for teachers of non-Indian students. There is also research supporting the idea that teachers who become involved in community activities and spend time with community members can mitigate some of the social and economic factors that influence poor academic achievement.²³

Classrooms must be organized and teaching strategies used that motivate, engage, and challenge students to learn. The research shows that more informal classrooms, culturally relevant activities, student discussion/work in a group setting, and open-ended questioning enhances learning for Indian students by creating an environment in which they are comfortable and more responsive to teacher questioning.

For Indian students, the key to improving literacy, science, and mathematics skills is to provide more quality time learning the subject matter and connecting the instruction to local and traditional knowledge.

Indian students drop out of school at a much higher rate than their non-Indian peers. Schools must find ways to motivate Indian students and keep them in school until they graduate. Research shows that the support of community, family, and teachers, as well as other forms of support such as tutoring, counseling, attendance monitoring, cultural education, and hardship assistance, improves academic performance and reduces dropouts.

Theme 4. Community and Parental Influences: The Indian Education Act of 1972 required parental-committee or tribal sign-off authority for federal Indian education programs. This sign-off authority became a required provision in later legislation such as the Johnson-O'Malley Act. The framers of these legislative enactments recognized the importance of parental participation in and community ownership of schools. For American Indian parents, gaining control of their children's education has been a long, arduous struggle. For many, many years, Indian children were forcibly taken from their families and sent to government- or church-run boarding schools where they were stripped of their native language and culture. Today, the vast majority of Indian students attend public schools with non-Indian teachers and administrators. Indian communities must take greater responsibility for the education of their children. Research shows that the strongest link between educational opportunities and student achievement is parental involvement in the design and implementation of programs.

²³One of the complaints from parents heard by the State-Tribal Relations Committee at the public hearing at Fort Belknap on August 29, 2003, was that teachers do not live in the community in which they teach.

Theme 5. Student Characteristics: The research on student characteristics has focused on language and culture, poverty status, resiliency, identity, sense of self and self-esteem, goal setting and student motivation, communication styles, and language and cognitive skills. While language and culture have been shown to have a positive impact on the academic performance of Indian students, research on the other characteristics is lacking. However, there is a large body of research on the impact of these characteristics on all students and the research to date on Indian students parallels the general research findings. All of these characteristics impact academic achievement in either a positive or negative fashion. For Indian students, some of the characteristics have a greater impact than others, such as identity, self-esteem, and resiliency. However, there is much more research that needs to be done on the personal characteristics of Indian students, especially what can or cannot be changed in a school setting.

Theme 6. Factors Leading to Success in College: Research on the factors leading to college success is consistent with the findings on how to improve academic performance among elementary and secondary students. The major factors include family support, cultural identity, personal determination and goal setting, financial support, academic skills, mentors and supportive faculty, and bicultural curriculum. With the exception of cultural identity, all of the research shows that each of these factors can have a positive or negative impact on an Indian student's success in college. Interestingly, the research on cultural identity has produced mixed results on its role in enhancing or reducing college success.

What does the research tell us about improving the academic performance of American Indian students? What works and what can educators, parents, and policymakers do to help Indian students be successful in school?

- ★ Providing opportunities for the early development of language and other skills can have significant influence on how well children will do academically.
- ★ The importance of Indian language and cultural programs in schools must be acknowledged by the non-Indian education community.
- ★ There must be congruence between the culture of the school and the culture of the community.
- ★ The characteristics of successful students are also the characteristics of successful Indian students.
- ★ Social and economic circumstances of families and communities can influence student performance but may be mitigated by traditional values and practices of families and

students.

- ★ The success of Indian students in college depends upon many of the same factors that influence the achievements of Indian students in elementary and secondary schools.²⁴

FAST FORWARD TEN YEARS: CHOOSE YOUR OWN ENDING

Joey shuffles through the food line with his tin tray. A piece of dry meat loaf and a scoop of instant mashed potatoes are plopped on his plate. But his thoughts are not on food. Tomorrow he meets with the parole board. He is unsure what the outcome will be. Part of him wants to go home, but another part knows that home means no job, no money, and no future. This is his second prison term. Shortly after he dropped out of high school, he and his friends robbed a convenience store. Because he was close to 18, he was tried as an adult. The judge was tired of these young adult males coming before him and decided to sentence this group to prison as a warning to others. After he got out, Joey tried going back to school, but the high school wouldn't take him because of his age. He tried enrolling in a GED program, but there was a long waiting list. Besides, his reading skills were so poor he probably couldn't pass the tests. He'd never held a job; with no education and no skills, his chances of landing a job were slim. So he started selling drugs but got caught and sent back to prison.

Joey's dad left the family. Last they heard, he was living in a homeless shelter. John is serving a life sentence for a robbery that resulted in a death. Joey's sister Kathy has three children now and her TANF benefits ran out after five years. She still lives at home and works part-time at McDonald's. Her children are beginning to experience problems in school.

Mary also got pregnant in high school and dropped out. Annie finished high school, but her academic skills are so poor she cannot find a job. Tommy left home at age 15 and has not been heard from since.

Three generations in one family lost because at-risk students were left behind. Three generations who will contribute nothing to the well-being of society but will continue to burden already over-burdened public services.

OR

Joey sharpens his pencil and checks to see that his graphing calculator works before beginning his math test. This is the class's final exam, and he is visibly nervous. He is carrying a "B" average but would like to try for an "A" on this test. This is his final semester at the community college. Next

²⁴Demmert, pp. 42-44.

semester, he will begin at State University. Only part-time because he has to work, but he is confident he can succeed.

Joey dropped out of high school during his junior year. He hung around on the street corner for a year unable to find work. He got into trouble when some of his buddies conned him into selling some street drugs. A juvenile probation officer recognized that Joey was not a bad kid, just a kid that needed some help and guidance in his life. The officer was able to get Joey into an alternative high school and also line up some free tutoring from the local community college. It took him a little longer, but Joey got his diploma. The officer also helped him find a part-time job that became full-time once he was through school. After a couple of years, his employer recognized Joey's potential and offered to help him with his tuition at the community college if he wanted to continue his education. Joey jumped at the chance and began attending part-time.

Joey continued living at home so he could help out his mom and younger siblings. The school district where they attended school finally recognized the need to help at-risk students stay in school. The district established a special secondary school for students from low-income families and with a history of low academic achievement. The school is organized very differently from the regular public high school: small classes, longer class periods, concentrated work in specific areas, and career-oriented apprenticeships in addition to college prep courses. Mary will graduate this year. Annie is studying to be a nurse. Tommy will finish community college this year and will go on to State University with Joey. Tommy wants to help at-risk students like himself, so he tutors at the neighborhood middle school.

Joey's dad left the family. Last they heard, he was living in a homeless shelter. Joey tried to help John get into a GED program after his prison release, but his brother's reading skills were so poor he could not complete the classes. Joey's sister Kathy has three children now and her TANF benefits ran out after five years. She still lives at home and works part-time at McDonald's. Her children are beginning to experience problems in school.

Joey could very easily have followed the path of his older brother. Luckily, Joey found someone who saw something in him worth saving. But for every Joey, there are Johns and Kathys whom the educational system has failed. As a nation, we can no longer afford these failures. At-risk children deserve our attention and our concern. Who knows, maybe that Joey who sits in the corner of the classroom and struggles to keep up with his studies holds the key to curing cancer.

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