

# What Is Dropping Out and How Do You Recognize the Signs?

## Background

What is school anyway? In North America, we have school as we know it today because a few hundred years ago our forefathers, in their wisdom, decided it would be good if most of our population had a relatively well rounded minimal level of education to help support the industrialization of our society. Aristocratic elements of our society have valued such a commodity for thousands of years. With the coming of the industrial revolution and the need for people who could master and use new technologies quickly, it was obvious that a new type of citizen was needed.

This led to some undesirable traits in our education system, making our schools look and perform somewhat like factories. Regardless of that and efforts to combat such influences, the basic need that this system was created to meet has not changed. Young people today need to be able to learn new things and use them to problem solve in rapidly changing environments if they are to take advantage of the ever increasing opportunities in today's marketplace. Being able to do so is a benefit to them and society; a win-win situation.

Speaking of opportunities, there are more than ever, but their nature has changed over the years to favor those with higher quality educational experience. That technology has reduced the number of low skilled, labor intensive jobs available to all levels of our work force is the stuff of elementary school text books today. The nature of work itself is changing in our society in a way that favors people willing to make learning a life-long habit.

## Why is School Important?

The Curriculum in most North American schools today is designed to provide students with a broad range of general and specific skills that will allow students to pursue the increasingly abundant opportunities of the Information Age. Regardless of the desirability of these recent trends that is the reality faced by students today as they make choices for their future. Generally, workers are being replaced by more sophisticated machines or automated processes in jobs that require repetitive or heavy labor input, especially labor input that does not rely on problem solving or creative thinking.

Over the years such people as farmers, construction workers, manufacturing workers of all types and many others have been replaced or had their numbers reduced by advances in machine and materials technology. Although these fields of work still exist,

opportunities for employment continue to decrease, especially at the unskilled level. One man with a nail gun eliminates a lot of men with hammers. As late as the 1980's building or rebuilding carburetors was a good business to be in. Now, as an industry, it is virtually gone along with its hundreds of thousands of jobs. This trend shows no signs of ending, and in fact, seems to be accelerating.

### **What is it good for?**

What does school prove? What does it do for you? Best schools, (nobody else cares how well you do, just, did you graduate.) Best schools are a major opportunity not just in quality of education but in the prestige of their degrees and the contacts one makes for life. That's why it matters whether you go to Harvard or Podunk U. You may get the same education both places if you are a hard worker but the PU on your jacket won't convey the same message as an H (Unless the P stands for Princeton, of course.).

Wealthy families have known for millennia that it is who you know that gives you the biggest edge in life. Contacts matter. Therefore, quality schools matter and so do your marks if you want in. This is what teachers mean when they tell you that our educational choices matter as a student. Many start limiting their lives early by making poor choices, or by choosing to perform at a lower level just to get by. The worst choice of all for young people is to give up altogether and drop out.

So what does a school education give you? It provides others with proof of the following:

- Acceptable, identifiable work habits
- A certain level of mental sharpness
- Word and information processing skills
- Some ability and experience solving a wide variety of problems
- The ability to discipline oneself to complete a job to given specifications
- The ability to work as a member of a larger group
- The ability to follow an instruction

The list goes on, but you get the idea.

### **Why drop out?**

In her paper *Learning at a Distance*, Linda Reneland makes the point that all types of educational activities have dropout rates. Specifically she mentions that the electronic distance education the article considers can have dropout rates as high as 70%.

Reasons students mention for dropping out: (All subjective)

- Lack of time
- A change in working conditions
- Other causes (illness)
- Did not live up to conditions
- Lack of environmental support
- Lack of support from course management

Reasons for graduation:

- Own motivation
- Supportive environment
- Interesting course design
- Support from peers
- Support from course management
- Deal with employer

In fact, there are as many specific reasons as there are people who drop out and they are too numerous to consider here. There are signs that this is about to happen, of course, and they tend to fall into a limited number of general categories.

### **Signs That Show Increased Dropout Risk**

Since there are no indicators that one can point to and say this is the main reason students drop out, the following are in no particular order. Keep in mind that these are general behaviors and conditions each with many different particulars.

- Boredom, detachment
- Poor marks
- Low literacy levels
- Behavioral difficulties
- Absenteeism
- Lack of confidence in school ability
- Difficulties complying with rules at home, school and in the community
- Lack of long term goals
- Lack of involvement in school and community sports clubs and activities
- Low value placed on education and related skills

**Boredom, Detachment** - These are a behaviors that often start early in a dropout's school career. It is often accompanied by statements like, "School sucks." or "School is stupid." These types of statements are often accompanied by lots of emotion and are an indication of anger or frustration in a student's life.

Teachers of a student, who remains in the same school for a number of years, can often trace such behaviors to a significant loss in the student's life. If family break ups, deaths or illness have been part of your family's recent history trouble at school may be looming.

**Poor Marks** – This key indicator comes in many forms. It may start with low marks on standardized tests that show weaknesses in math or literacy levels. More often it starts as a drop in usual performance levels that often starts in elementary school but may begin in high school.

Often the common factor is an increase in expectations for independent work as students progress into the Secondary School environment. Combined with other stresses, this can show up as an increase in incomplete assignments, incomplete homework, late completions and other similar problems.

These signs require immediate attention. Rarely are these drops simply due to the increasing difficulty of higher grades.

**Low Literacy Levels** – children who drop out often (not always) have low literacy scores. This may be because of learning difficulties. More often than not, lack of commitment and its resulting lack of involvement over the years results in significant learning gaps that affect performance ability.

**Behavioral Difficulties** – Unhelpful behavior choices in school, family and social situations are signs that are difficult to separate from other factors. This category could be the subject of a whole other report. Generally, if your child is increasingly excluded from class, suspended, running with the wrong crowd, or is rude and abusive at home, things don't look good. Drugs and other high risk behaviors are a concern with rebellious students.

**Absenteeism** – Students can be absent for a host of reasons ranging from legitimate health concerns to outright truancy. Regardless, increasing absenteeism goes hand in hand with increasing risk of poor performance and dropping out. Ten days a term is a sort of alarm for educators, especially if the absences are deliberate, such as skipping classes or deliberately opting to miss school for whatever reason.

If the trend for your child is for an increase in absences over the years it is cause for concern and action. A sudden increase in voluntary absence can be an indication of a crisis and should be taken seriously.

**Lack of Confidence in School Ability** – Poor responses to mistakes and failures over the course of time can leave some students with no confidence in their ability to accomplish worthwhile goals at school. This can extend to despair over making a commitment to a worthwhile career choice much as that may be wanted. No confidence equates to no action, at least no positive action.

**Difficulties Complying With Rules at School, Home and in the Community** – This one is easy to spot. The child will often be “in trouble” most everywhere they go. This is especially evident where the people in those environments expect the student to achieve something not of their choosing, like most school assignments, for instance. At other times the child simply seems to take delight in doing whatever is unexpected or unwanted in a given situation. Taken with other signs, changes of this sort should not simply be overlooked as youthful rebelliousness.

**Lack of Long Term Goals** – There is no “plan”. Immediate needs and accomplishments are the only concern. This can range from obsession with games or social situations to working excessive hours at part time jobs. What gets consistently missed are the types of behaviors that make for good choices in the student’s best long term interest. Delayed gratification is not in their vocabulary.

**Lack of Involvement in School and Community Sports Clubs and Activities** – Homework is a school activity. Every “serious” student has regular homework, even if it is just to study for upcoming tests. The emphasis here is on regular. This should be a habit and should be a concern if it is not.

If your child belongs to no teams, takes part in no intramural or other activities, or has few long term friends, you should be concerned. If he or she is involved in community programs, there probably is no cause for concern. . But if your child is not part of the busy life going on around them, be concerned.

**Low Value Placed On Education and Related Skills** – Students place little value on the merits of a good education for a number of reasons, even fear of the difficulty of the work and the possibility of failure. Increasing evidence suggests that cultural and economic circumstances play a large role in student difficulties. Sometimes it is as simple as seeing no evidence of respect for education in the home they grow up in.

Reneland, Linda. *"Learning at a Distance - How to Prevent Dropouts."*  
surveys.canterbury. Vaxjo University. 5 Jun 2006  
[Http://surveys.canterbury.ac.nz/herdsa03/pdfsnon/  
N1152.pdf](http://surveys.canterbury.ac.nz/herdsa03/pdfsnon/N1152.pdf)>.

*What is a dropout?* In Alberta, according to an Edmonton Journal article by David Howell April 17, 2006, a dropout is defined as a person 20 to 24 years of age who did not finish high school and who is not in school.