Early School Leavers: Understanding the Lived Reality of Student Disengagement from Secondary School

Final Report


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Summary of Final Report

Investigative Team/Authors:
Dr. Bruce Ferguson – The Hospital for Sick Children
Dr. Kate Tilleczek - Laurentian University
Dr. Katherine Boydell – The Hospital for Sick Children
Dr. Joanna Anneke Rummens – The Hospital for Sick Children

Advisory Committee:
Grant Clarke, Catherine Sim, Ginette Plourde, Suzanne Séguin, Sylvie Longo, Kate Andrew,
Patricia Longlade, Nadia Mazaheri, Florence Guy, Carol Yaworski (deceased), Diane Wagner,
Gordon Floyd, Marvin Bernstein, Barry O’Connor, Cynthia Roveda, Céline Cadieux, John Smith,
Alana Murray, Catherine Siemieniuk, Ian Adamson, Sharon Wright-Evans.

Brief Overview

• The Ontario Ministry of Education is committed to further understanding and addressing the issues associated with young people who are presently leaving the secondary school system prior to earning their diploma. These early school leavers represent a unique challenge to which the Ministry has responded, in part, by contracting with the Hospital for Sick Children, which is leading a consortium of investigators (including those at Laurentian University in Sudbury) to undertake a series of research studies regarding early school leavers in Ontario.

• This report details the findings of a qualitative study designed to understand the processes of disengagement from school, and of early school leaving, from the point of view of 193 young people in Ontario who have themselves left school or are at risk of doing so. It also provides data on the process from the perspectives of groups of parents/guardians of early leavers, and of Ontario educators. This data fills a gap in the research and policy literature on the process as told from these unique perspectives.

• The research project has involved three interconnected strategies:
  a) Comprehensive literature reviews
  b) Socio-demographic data analyses (reported under a separate cover)
  c) An in-depth qualitative study.

• Early school leaving is the result of a long process of disengagement and alienation that may be preceded by less severe types of withdrawal such as truancy and course failures. Understanding this process will provide the Ministry of Education with multiple junctures in which to intervene.

• Disengagement can best be defined in the following terms:
  ▪ A process and/or pathway (often non-linear) toward adult status
  ▪ Inter-relational rather than individual
  ▪ Contingent on promises (kept or broken) between people
  ▪ Multi-dimensional across micro, meso and macro levels
  ▪ A complex, often emotional, decision to leave school
• Three separate **pathways to disengagement** were found suggesting that early leavers who could be “starting from scratch” ‘mostly protected” or “in-between” in terms of the numbers of risk or protective factors they encounter.

• The **voices** of Aboriginal, Francophone, newcomer, second generation immigrant and refugee, third plus generation, visible minority, lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgendered and rural youth were heard. Shared **risk factors** across groups included low socio-economic status, the need to take on adult roles while in school, “place” and culture, risk-taking activities, issues with attendance and school failure, negative relations with school personnel; flawed school cultures; and issues with passive or irrelevant curriculum.

• **Protective factors** also existed at the school and community levels. These included alternative schools, caring and supportive teachers, and school climates which were caring, flexible, and proactive. Families and self determination also played a major protective role for these young people.

• Risk and protective factors were found to be paradoxical for many youth, with both appearing simultaneously. Many of these young people also experienced **multiple risk factors** along their pathways to disengagement.

• Four categories of **recommended strategies** for policy and practice are offered which could most usefully be adapted for the Student Success Plan to inform the work of the Student Success “rescue teams” and the Learning Opportunities Grants in working with disengaged youth and sorted into strategic foci labelled “Curriculum and Structure,” “Pedagogy” and “School Culture.”

**Introduction**

It is well documented that one of the most critical issues facing the educational system in North America and elsewhere is the problem of early school leavers1.

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1 No universally accepted definition of dropout/early school leaver exists. Leavers are typically defined as students who leave school (not including transfers) before they graduate from high school with a regular diploma. Some students leave school before entering ninth grade, but most withdraw during their high school years.)

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- In Canada, it is currently estimated that 12 percent of students do not finish secondary school (Bushnik, Barr-Telford & Bussiere, 2004).
- In Ontario, a recent cohort study suggests that the last four years show substantially decreased secondary school graduation rates, such that up to one-quarter of students may not graduate (King, 2004).
- In 2001, 18.4% of Canadian men and women between the ages of 20-24 years did not have a high school degree, certificate or diploma.
- The rate of early school leaving in Canada varies considerably among provinces and territories, with Nunavut having the highest rate at 67.4%.
- Across the provinces, the highest percentage of early school leavers is in Manitoba (26.9%).
- In contrast, Ontario has the lowest rate with 15.9% of youth ages 20-24 years not completing high school in 2001 (Statistics Canada, March 2003).
- A large proportion of Canadian youth who leave school early do so at an early age and thus at low levels of education.
Approximately one third of early school leavers drop out with Grade 9 education or less and almost two thirds drop out with Grade 10 or less.

Four in ten early leavers have left school by the age of 16 (HRDC, 2000).

The literature in this area suggests that early school leaving is a long term, multi-dimensional process that is influenced by a wide variety of school and out-of-school experiences with broad social and cultural implications (Foster, Tilleczek, Hein & Lewko, 1993).

These implications include both costs and consequences which are becoming increasingly serious for individuals and society (Rumberger, 2001).

Students who leave school prematurely are more likely to be unemployed and to earn less over their working life.

Trends toward a higher skilled labour force will make it even harder for such youth economically.

Although many early leavers pursue a GED certification, they are not adequately prepared for attaining well-paying employment or for accessing higher education.

In addition, leavers tend to experience higher levels of early pregnancy and substance abuse, and are likely to require social services of various types (Woods, 1995).

This report addresses the following four questions:
1) Why do young people leave secondary school before graduation?
2) Which factors help to ensure that they stay in school or return to complete their diploma?
3) Do these risk and protective factors vary in nature and/or relative importance across different populations of young people?
4) What are the implications of the research for policy and practice?

Context

Historically, it was the norm to leave school at some point before high school graduation.

- In the 1940s, less than half of individuals age 25–29 completed high school. Consequently, early school leaving was not considered problematic.
- As high school completion became commonplace, graduation became an expectation for most of the nation’s youth.
- Although the use of the term drop-out first surfaced in the early 1900s, it was not typically used until much later in the 20th century (Dorn, 1996).
- In the 1960s, early leavers were often described negatively, i.e., as “deviants” in the context of juvenile delinquency and other adolescent issues (West, 1991).
- Societal treatment of adolescents has historically and culturally shifted along with the economic demands of the labour market and its educational responses (Tilleczek, 2004; Tilleczek & Lewko, 2001).
- With this shift has come an interest in understanding the systemic rather than individualized reasons for early school leaving.
- As a result, the past forty years, has seen widespread interest and concern about students who leave school prior to receiving a diploma (Dorn, 1996; Schwartz, 1995; Wayman, 2001; West, 1991).
- Many researchers began exploring the issue of “dropout” in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly focusing on the characteristics of the individuals who left school early and the conditions that might predict their leaving.
- Current work attempts to link individual and systemic factors (Dei, 1997; Tilleczek, 2003; Volpe & Tilleczek, 1999)
- Thus, the term ‘drop out’ has evolved to early school leaver.
No universally accepted definition of early school leaver or ‘dropout’ exists.

- **Early school leavers are typically defined as students who leave school (not including transfers) before they graduate with a regular diploma.**
- Some students leave school before entering ninth grade, but most withdraw during their high school years.
- An “at high risk” student is a youth unlikely to graduate on schedule with the skills and the self-esteem necessary to have meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, and relationships.
- Historically, the term ‘at high risk’ has been used interchangeably with poverty and was conceptualized as being located within the individual or family, as opposed to structures and systems.
- Within a systemic rather than individual context, the term ‘drop out’ has evolved to early school leaver.
- Risk status fluctuates over time, based on circumstances and contexts, and is not a fixed quality. For example, periods of transition can increase risk.
- Exposure to multiple risk factors increases one’s likelihood of experiencing problematic outcomes and the impact of exposure to risk factors as an infant or young child may be more detrimental than exposure later in life.

Three types of early school leavers have been identified: dropouts, tune-outs, and push-outs (Smink & Schargel, 2004).
- **Dropouts** are youth who are actively leaving or who have already left school, and are the ones for whom most.
- **Tune-outs** are students who remain in school but have disengaged from learning; unless they interrupt class or cause problems, they are tolerated or ignored.
- **Pushouts** are youth who leave school because they have been suspended or expelled; they do not fit easily into the system, and thus are encouraged or told to leave school.

Despite the wealth of literature, both published and grey, that focuses on the issue of early school leaving, there is surprisingly little extant research that highlights the voice of students who are deemed to be at risk of early school leaving, or who have actually left school prior to graduating (Farrell, 1990). This research project has been designed to fill in this gap. It began with an international literature review, with a focus on Canadian research and, where available, Ontario literature, on (a) socio-demographic factors associated with early school leaving and (b) prevention and intervention strategies and initiatives for preventing early school leaving. From this review, the investigative team has synthesized the key risk and protective factors.

**Conceptual Framework**

A **cultural approach** emphasizing the relationship between young people and their social environments guides the research (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Tilleczek, 2004).

- This framework allows for the examination of the extant forms of the relationships between young people, teachers, schools, communities and societies and guides our understanding of how these factors influence different groups of adolescents.
- This research perspective considers a diverse set of factors, patterns of interaction, and cultural diversity at three levels of description and categorization.
  - The **macrosystem** level refers to societal and cultural influences such as social class and unemployment.
The **microsystem** level includes neighbourhood, family, peer and school factors; and the individual level, comprised of cognitive and psychosocial influences.

- The inter-relationships between levels are of particular importance and occur in the **mesosystem**. For example, the relationships between school and home.

Such a model has been recently applied to the study of youth culture (Tilleczek, 2004) to assist in mapping out the social organization of the everyday lives of young people as they make their transitions toward adulthood.

The various risk and protective factors for early school leaving as encountered by young people on their pathways to disengagement have been clearly identified and synthesized for each level (macro, meso and micro). These factors have guided the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data and suggest how these factors influence different groups of adolescents.

In brief, there is a need to also consider the intersection of various types of diversity (e.g. race, social class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, culture, language and generational status) in analyses of early school leaving processes.

### Risk and Protective Factors

#### (a) RISK FACTORS: NON-SCHOOL RELATED

**Macro Level Variables**
- Low socio-economic status (SES)/social class (poverty, inadequate housing, unemployment, low levels of education, single-parent households, and minority and/or blue-collar families; etc.)
- Minority group status (for example, visible minority youth, First Nations/Aboriginal youth; Newcomer/English-as-a-second language youth; Francophone youth; Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered youth)
- Gender (males are at a higher risk than females, however the consequences for female leavers are often more severe regarding unemployment and poverty)
- Community characteristics (urban vs. rural youth; poor, socially unstable, unsafe neighbourhoods; areas with high crime rates and/or gang activity, high unemployment rates, high percentages of early leavers, Remote/rural communities where youth must travel long distances to go to school, or must leave home to attend school; Negative beliefs/attitudes/expectations about youth in culture -school, home, community)

**Meso Level Variables**
- Household stress (parental rejection; family conflict; marital discord; inadequate parental supervision; inconsistent parental discipline; parental substance abuse; parental mental illness (particularly of mother); financial, legal or health issues; unconventional structure of family; large size of family (four or more siblings); single parent households; high numbers of residential and/or school moves; child neglect abuse)
- Family Process/dynamics (low levels of parent-child bonding, attachment, communication; lack of parental involvement with school issues; marital discord between parents/guardians)
- Limited social support for remaining in school (by teachers and other school personnel (principals, guidance counsellors etc.); parents; siblings; friends; parents with low educational levels and real or perceived low educational expectations for their child)
- Conflict between home-school culture (conflict between cultural identity of youth and school culture)
Assumption of adult roles (translation for family members; providing care for family members; part-time work (more than 15 hours per week); pregnancy; childrearing responsibilities)

**Micro Level Variables**

- Low levels of student involvement with education (low levels of academic and/or social engagement at school; low hopes and/or expectations for academic success/achievement; poor academic achievement, particularly in core subjects such as English and math; low levels of literacy)
- Youth with disabilities/mental illness (learning, cognitive, behavioural, and/or physical disabilities as well as mental illness)
- Experimenting with risk/social integration versus alienation (disregard for curfews; early sexual activity; runaways; homelessness; early cigarette, alcohol, marijuana and/or other substance use; high levels of substance use; involvement with the criminal justice system; association with peers that engage in risk activities)
- Discrimination and identity conflict (low levels of self-esteem/self confidence/self efficacy; or high levels of cultural pride, identity and self-esteem, which are in conflict with school culture)

**(b) RISK FACTORS: SCHOOL RELATED**

- Ineffective discipline system (discipline system that is perceived to be unfair and/or arbitrary)
- Lack of adequate counselling/referral (lack of support and/or referral from schools to appropriate agencies for youth (and/or families of youths) experiencing personal and/or academic difficulties; lack of representation by visible minorities in positions such as guidance counsellor)
- Negative school climate (structural barriers within the school that alienate minority students; ideological conditions within the school climate such as: racism, classism, discrimination, language barriers, Eurocentrism, homophobia, heterosexism. Negative student-teacher relationships; school policies that prevent youth from expressing themselves as responsible adults; teachers who fail to recognize the critical role they play in students’ academic motivation and outcomes)
- Relevance of curriculum (monotonous school environment with no apparent connection to adolescents’ experiences in the wider community or the adult world; curriculum that fails to acknowledge and include the contributions/experiences/history etc. of minority groups; poor quality and superficial curriculum)
- Passive instructional strategies (traditional teaching methods that “teach from the book”; not allowing youth to select any of their own materials; not formulating links between the learning in the classroom, existing community issues and the “real” world)
- Disregard of student learning styles (a disparity between teaching style and students’ learning style; teachers who do not recognize the diverse learning needs, strengths, weaknesses and interests of their students; teachers who do not use varied teaching methods to teach diverse student groups)
- Retentions/suspensions (Youth who have been held back in elementary school and/or repeatedly in high school; frequent high school suspensions)
- Streaming (youth in General, Academic or Basic streams)
- Lack of assessment and support for students with disabilities (lack of academic and/or counselling supports for students with disabilities)
- Other (High numbers of transitions between schools; rigid age-grade placement practices; lack of language instruction; more data is needed on the potential risks of large versus small school size and class size)

(c) PROTECTIVE FACTORS
- Communities/schools with anti-poverty/anti-discrimination awareness and strategies
- Educational advantage/high educational aspirations and expectations
- Mixing students of SES backgrounds-type/structure of school
- Positive school ethos/climate
- School size (match between individual needs and size of school)
- School-home fit
- School-developmental needs fit
- Teaching styles – supportive and inclusive
- Relevant curriculum – popular culture; reflection of diversity
- School engagement
- Parental involvement (in school and in general life of youth)
- Moderate youth employment (10-15 hours per week)

Youth Interviews and Parent/Educator Focus Groups

Sampling and Recruitment
It is essential to note that the sample of youth interviewed was “purposive” and not random.
- The sampling strategy was one of maximum variation in which youth were recruited according to the categories noted below:
  - Only those who agreed to participation were contacted and interviewed. The total sample size for youth consisted of 193 in-depth qualitative interviews.
  - An additional 13 focus groups of parents/guardians (22) and educators (51) were conducted and analyzed.
  - Participant sub-population groups were derived from the identified categories of youth, across all 6 sites based on the number of youth to be recruited under each category.

The key population categories were:
- Aboriginal (a key visible minority population)
- Francophone (key linguistic minority population)
- Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Trans-sexual (LGBT) (key sexual minority population)
- Visible versus non-visible populations (‘racial’ identifications)
- Newcomer versus more established populations (civic status)
  - 1st generation immigrants and refugees
  - 2nd generation ethno-cultural Canadians
  - 3rd+ generation Canadians

An optimal cell size of 8-12 twelve youth for each population category has been determined. McCraken (1988) and Patton (1990) suggest a minimum sample of eight in-depth interviews for each subcategory to reach saturation of main themes. Out of these 8-12 young people, the following sampling subcategories were formed:
- 8 Early School Leavers (minimum cell size required)
  - 5 males (to parallel 14.7% prevalence rate for males)
  - 3 females (to parallel 9.0% prevalence rate for males)
- 4 recruited formally (through school boards)
- 4 recruited informally (through community agencies)
- 2 Still in School
  - 1 male and 1 female (gender balance)
- 2 Graduate Returnees
  - 1 male and 1 female (gender balance)

The sample was fully reflective of the urban–rural continuum found across the province of Ontario and included:
- Metropolitan area (Toronto)
- Major city (Ottawa)
- Smaller cities (Hamilton; Kitchener-Waterloo; Thunder Bay; Sudbury)
- Rural areas (outside Sudbury and Thunder Bay; Owen Sound)

The sample was directly responsive to local socio-demographic patterns and included purposive cross-cutting recruitment across other categories. For example:
- LGBT in the North (Sudbury/Thunder Bay/Ottawa)
- Francophone in the South (Toronto/Hamilton)

In addition, special considerations were given to ensure that the Aboriginal population was emphasized in northern rural areas, and that both newcomer and second generation youth were explored in detail in key metropolitan areas.

Francophone youth were also intentionally over-sampled across the province.

The six interview sites were Toronto, Ottawa, Kitchener, Owen Sound, Sudbury and Thunder Bay, and included their surrounding area. Research participants were recruited within school boards and community agencies at each of these sites. The Ministry of Education facilitated and organized the identification of potential participants and provided a letter to school boards explaining the project. The investigators made first contact with the various school boards to identify personnel to help with recruitment. Field Coordinators subsequently made personal contact with the selected boards to elicit specific names and contacts. This entailed gaining permission from the appropriate school boards in our various geographical study sites. We also made use of our extensive research networks.

Although we have divided gender in our sampling frame by male and female, we also have sought out and included participants who identify as transgendered, and benefited from advice from the Research Advisory Committee and collaboration with Employment Centres.

**Operational Definitions**

The team established operational definitions for inclusion in the study as follows:

**Youth**

1. An **early school leaver** is a youth between the ages of 14-21 (age range is ideal, not rigid) who has left an Ontario high school prior to receiving his/her Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) (dropped out or permanently expelled) and has not returned to any form of high school education to receive his/her high school diploma or GED (General Educational Development).

2. A **returned and graduated youth** is one between the ages of 14-21 (age range is ideal, not rigid) who left an Ontario high school prior to receiving their OSSD, and has since returned to any form of Ontario high school education (alternative school, night school, etc.).
adult education, internet education etc.) and received his/her OSSD or GED, or who will be graduating this school year.

3. A **still-in school, “at high risk”** student is one between the ages of 14-21 (age range is ideal, not rigid) who has never dropped out of high school, has not yet received his/her OSSD, and is currently attending an Ontario high school and working towards his/her OSSD. Students were defined as “at high risk” in consultation of with Ministry of Education “at-risk” guidelines.

**Parent/Guardian**
The parent or guardian of an early high school leaver who has left an Ontario high school prior to receiving his/her OSSD and has not returned to any form of high school education to receive his/her OSSD or GED.

**Educator**
A high school teacher, guidance counsellor, vice-principal or principal currently working in the Ontario school system.

**Study Results**

**Literature Reviews**
Two distinct reviews of literature have been bound under separate covers. For detailed reviews see Socio-demographic Factors Associated with Early School Leaving: A Literature Review (2004) and Early School Leaving Prevention and Intervention Programs: A Literature Review (2004). What follows is a brief overview of the literature as it relates directly to the most critical risk and protective factors.

**Risk and protective factors associated with early school leaving**
- Non-school related risk factors associated with early school leaving include **macro level** variables such as: low socio-economic status/social class; minority group status; male gender; and certain community characteristics.
- **Meso level** variables include: household stress; family process/dynamics; limited social support for remaining in school; home-school culture conflict; assumption of adult roles (for example, high levels of employment or pregnancy/childrearing).
- **Micro level** variables include: problematic student involvement with education (both the academic and social aspects of school); physical, mental and/or cognitive disabilities; youth with high degrees of autonomy; experimenting with risk (e.g. drug and/or alcohol use, disregard for parental rules and/or civil laws); and finally, discrimination and identity.

According to PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), roughly 25% of students in all participating OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries are unhappy with their school experience (Willms, 2003).
- The most commonly cited reasons offered by early school leavers for disengagement were related to school risk factors, rather than external influences.
- Leavers are more likely to perceive their school environment as unrewarding, have negative interactions with their teachers and experience social and academic problems (Kortering & Braziel, 1999 acf. Van der, Woerd & Cox, 2003).
- School related factors associated with early school leaving include:
  - ineffective discipline system;
  - lack of adequate counselling/referral;
  - negative school climate;
- lack of relevant curriculum;
- passive instructional strategies;
- disregard of student learning styles;
- retentions or suspensions; streaming; and
- lack of assessment and support for students with disabilities.

There are three main protective factors connected to early school leaving:
- high levels of school engagement (social and academic);
- high levels of parental involvement (in all areas of a youth’s life, not only academic); and
- moderate levels of employment (between 10-15 hours of work per week).

**Early school leaving prevention and intervention programs**

The empirical evidence on the effectiveness of prevention/intervention programs on early school leaving is scarce. Of those evaluations which do exist, very few are able to demonstrate program effectiveness, and virtually none link outcomes directly to a reduction in early school leaving. A specific best practice to address early school leaving does not currently exist, despite the fact that a number of programs appear to hold promise.

In order to be effective, programs, services and supports must be:
- comprehensive and directed towards all facets of a student’s life;
- flexible and customized to meet individual student needs (Rumberger, 2001);
- a broad focus that includes academic, social, and supportive activities; and
- responsive to a wide range of student needs, made possible through the integration of community services.

Effective strategies to reduce early school leaving can be divided into four categories (Schargel & Smink, 2001):

1. **Early prevention programs** include: parental skills training and family involvement; early childhood education; and reading and writing programs.
2. **Basic core strategies** include: mentoring/tutoring; service learning (linking significant community service experiences with academic learning); alternative schooling; and out-of-school enhancement (after school and summer scholastic, recreation and social programs.
3. **Making the most out of instruction** includes: professional development; openness to diverse identities, learning styles and multiple intelligences; and the use of instructional technologies.
4. **Making the most of the wider community** includes: systemic renewal; community collaboration; career education and workforce readiness; and conflict resolution and violence prevention.

General recommendations for working with and responding more effectively to youth include (Health Canada, 1999):
- recognizing the strengths, abilities, and energy of youth; providing youth with opportunities for decision-making;
- educating involved adults about the value of youth and the most effective ways of working with them;
- respecting the rights of youth to be treated fairly and with respect; recognizing that schools are an important location for interacting with youth;
- providing them with information, services and opportunities for participation; and
- recognizing the value of peer-based programs.
The research indicates that youth require:
- supports responsive to their needs;
- ones that are as multi-dimensional as their problems that are open to the diverse range of their interests, hopes and plans that are aimed at increasing decision-making capacities; and
- adults who work with youth must be able to deal with the complexities of young people’s lives, to be flexible and nonjudgmental.

Schools, agencies and programs must:
- provide youth with opportunities to make important choices;
- support them in the consequences of their decisions and in reflecting on lessons learned and successes achieved.

High performing schools have a combination of characteristics in common including:
- a clear and shared vision and purpose;
- high standards and expectations;
- effective school leadership;
- high levels of collaboration and communication;
- curriculum, instruction and assessment aligned with defined standards;
- frequent monitoring of teaching and learning;
- focused professional development; supportive learning environment;

However, there are three main reasons why current educational reforms may not succeed:
- they are often episodic;
- they address symptoms rather than causes; and
- they are not systemic (Schargel & Smink, 2001).

Pathways to Disengagement and Early Leaving

Before leaving school early, students entered into a process of disengagement from school. We were aware from the literature that this process should be seen as multi-dimensional, long term, and crossing over macro, meso and micro risk factors. The in-depth interviews with youth confirmed this tendency and further suggested that these pathways to disengagement are quite complex. For instance, different starting points, faltering points, and end points emerged from the data.

The three most common starting points were characterized as: starting from scratch; mostly protected; and the in-between:

1) Starting from scratch: The young people who were starting from scratch had multiple risk factors at all levels: family, community, and school. These were young people for whom schooling posed a further risk in an already difficult pathway. The following shortened list provides an example of the trajectory for one such young person:
- Ran away from home at age 11 due to abuse from adopted father; living on the streets but still going to school on/off;
- Removed from home by CAS, age 15, and placed in foster care;
- Ran away to live with biological sister;
- Bought own home at age 16; supported himself and older girlfriend (in university) while working full-time and going to school;
Was in the reserves/joined the military; served overseas; returned with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome; receiving excellent psychiatric care; Went into transitional housing, received financial support to complete G.E.D; and Future plans: university and then set up his own business.

2) Mostly protected: Conversely, young people who were mostly protected experienced numerous protective factors in their families, communities, schools and within themselves. For instance, they could be coming from caring homes with educational advantages and have been enjoying school before leaving. They often had plans to negotiate their way back in, or were in process of doing so. The following shortened list provides an example of the trajectory for one such young person:

- Well protected supportive family;
- In relationship with boyfriend and working full-time;
- Finishing diploma to go to college;
- Missing one credit;
- Frustrated because friends all left;
- Strong family/friends but wants independence;
- Good academic standing;
- Good school but they failed to keep track of her credit needs;
- Does not want to be in school with younger students;
- Adult roles/working/car/relationship;
- New school for last credit; and
- College plans.

3) The in-between: The young people who were in-between experienced both risk and protective factors at micro, meso and macro levels and had numerous challenges, but also distinct possibilities for success as evidenced in the protective factors surrounding them. In this case, a poor start at home could be met with a caring educational environment and outreach. The following shortened list provides an example of the trajectory for one such young person:

- Low SES, many moves;
- Kind parents;
- Low grades, risky friends;
- Likes school;
- Early adult roles at home;
- Strong identity;
- Pregnancy;
- No outreach at school-day care;
- Good teachers and guidance to look for alternatives; and
- Plans to go back to school, find a job.

Eighty-one percent (81%) (134 of 166) of our Anglophone transcripts were examined for the young person’s pathway of disengagement. We found that:

- 42% (57) were starting from scratch
- 28% (37) were mostly protected
- 30% (40) were the in-between

These differentiated starting and faltering points add depth to the definition of disengagement from school. Disengagement can best be defined in the following terms:

- A process and/or pathway (often non-linear) toward adult status;
- Inter-relational rather than individual;
Contingent on promises (kept or broken) between people;
Multi-dimensional across micro, meso and macro levels; and
A complex, often emotional, decision to leave school on the part of the student
and/or disconnection by the school system.

Young people’s accounts of becoming disengaged with school were non-linear, partial, and
fragmented. They described their experiences in a ‘back and forth’ manner - the past, present
and even the future were inextricably intertwined in the retelling of their experiences. There
were no simple constructions of the phenomenon of ‘dropping out’; common throughout
however, was the thread of contradiction, struggle, complexity, multiple tensions and subversive
forces.

The finding of numerous instances of inter-relational text in the transcripts indicated that risk
and protective factors often functioned simultaneously, or were multiple. For instance,
many youth suggested that they like some teachers very much, but that other teachers led them
to disengage from school. Engagement in school was seen as a promise made between the
school system, community, student, and family. Therefore, slippages occurred at many points.

Youth Sub-Group Findings

a) Gender
Key risk factors for young men include:
- the financial draw of employment (preferring to earn money than go to school);
- being kicked out of parental home and needing to work to support themselves and
  sometimes a partner and child(ren);
- needing to work to support or contribute to parental income;
- drugs and alcohol misuse; and
- incarceration.

Newcomer/second generation young men were sometimes required by family, or felt
responsible for taking on the role of caregiver for their parents and siblings.

Key risk factors for young women include:
- pregnancy;
- childbirth;
- caring for family members;
- being kicked out of parent’s home or leaving due to abuse and needing to support
  themselves; and
- often, their child(ren).

Their views of schooling were coloured by the time that they missed due to these
responsibilities and the extra burden of care to juggle while attending school. However, they
perceived these roles as both positive and negative. Most of these young women are
determined to give their child(ren) a better life than they had, and recognize that education is the
path to better job opportunities and thus a higher income for their families.

Protective factors for young men include:
- coop programs that allow them to work and earn money while earning school credits.
For young women they include:
- school programs that have daycare and counselling services available.

b) Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgendered Youth
For LGBT youth, there was intertwining of risk and protective factors simultaneously. For example, teachers strongly supported youth but the principal and vice-principal was against them, or a teacher was wonderfully supportive but youth would not take the support offered. In general, (with 2 exceptions) this group did not talk about their sexual orientation during the interview, and it did not figure into their accounts of early school leaving. One young person was bashed severely for being gay and left a small town because it was not gay friendly. However, lots of other events (theft, drugs, family issues, depression) were occurring in his life. The other young person was also bashed due to sexual orientation and/or his visible minority status.

Key risk factors noted (but not related to sexual orientation necessarily) included:
- alcohol;
- drugs;
- criminal activity;
- family stress;
- depression;
- multiple moves; and
- negative school culture including a great deal of violence – bullying, fights, and students who possessed dangerous weapons.

The narratives of these youth specifically linked the experience of depression to disengagement from school. In addition, despite the fact that they identified as doing fairly well in school academically, several young people conveyed that they did not value school, did not like teachers, and found school boring. This resulted in skipping school frequently which led to the downward spiral of falling behind in classes. An extremely negative school climate was experienced by many LGBT youth. This negative culture included a great deal of violence – bullying, fights, and students who possessed dangerous weapons.

Protective factors were rarely identified by LGBT youth and included:
- academic performance that was average to above average; and
- supportive teachers, family members, as well as community programs.

c) Aboriginal Youth
Aboriginal youth living in rural and remote northern areas of the province (Sudbury and Thunder Bay areas) provided insights into the ways in which their families and communities are integral contexts for their schooling experiences. In many cases, the communities were seen as “nice places” but provided “nothing to do” for young people. Extended family systems and the nature of the community played a paradoxical role in the process of identity and disengagement. For example, young people were asked to speak about how they felt to be Native.

Related risk factors for Aboriginal youth were:
- relatively low levels of socioeconomic status;
- the need to take on abundant adult roles while attempting to complete secondary school;
- drug and alcohol use; and
- distance to travel to school and/or the need to leave their rural homes and communities to attend schools in an urban area.
These early adult roles, combined with issues of attendance and school culture create the context for disengagement and leaving school. The majority of these young people were missing many classes or coming to school late due to disinterest or familial responsibilities and then had a difficult time getting caught up. The consequences for this behaviour were further detention and/or suspension, disciplinary action that were perceived as unfair or ineffective. However, young people also recognized their part in drug and alcohol use which fed into the disengagement process. A further trend for rural and remote Aboriginal students was the distance to travel to school and/or the need to leave their rural homes and communities to attend schools in an urban area. Youth, educators and parents mentioned this situation as a unique challenge which exacerbates the regular challenges of schooling and engagement.

The most prevalent protective factors were forms of:
- alternative schooling;
- caring teachers; and
- self determination and insight.

For example, a homework club was described in which teachers and education counsellors would stay after school and work with students and feed them supper. Alternative schooling was seen as a positive experience, especially for those struggling with multiple adult roles.

The Aboriginal youth living in urban areas of the province generally did not demonstrate a strong Aboriginal identity, despite the fact that several were recruited from Native Community Centres. This may, in fact, be due to the manner in which the questions were asked which frequently resulted in a monosyllabic response. Most respondents were not even sure whether or not anyone in their family had attended a residential school. In spite of this, one young person spoke of the critical role culture played in terms of the ability to walk away from the negative influences (criminal activity) in his life.

Unlike rural Aboriginal youth, urban Aboriginal interviewees often indicated that they were good students. In general, Aboriginal youth living in urban areas of the province experienced the process of school disengagement in a similar manner to those in rural communities in terms of the social class and familial struggles that figured in the narratives of this sub population.

For urban Aboriginal youth, experimenting with risk also emerged as a prominent factor leading to school disengagement.

As in rural communities, one of the most pervasive protective factors for urban Aboriginal youth was caring and supportive teachers.

d) Youth in Rural Areas

Young people living in rural areas of the province demonstrated the importance of “place” in the schooling process. Descriptions of the community were often paradoxical in that rural areas offer both safety and boredom for young people. Many young people spoke about the high incidence of drug use, alcohol abuse, and lack of activities. Place was related to schooling such that once the pathway to disengagement is entered into, it is difficult to seek alternative solutions given the lack of choice. Therefore, schools hold a more captive place in the lives of these young people. When the protective factors and opportunities are numerous, this functions very well.
Key risk factors included:
- boredom;
- drug use and alcohol abuse;
- lack of activities and choice;
- poor school culture which included severe and on-going bullying and violence; and
- sense of helplessness.

However, when the risk factors become cumulative in rural schools, youth and their parents experience a kind of helplessness. The experiences of rural youth suggest that teachers and administrators play a crucial and paradoxical role in their schooling processes. Many youth described a deep ethic of care from school personnel. However, when issues were not solved as they occurred for young people, the repercussions were felt over the long term and were seen to begin the process of disengagement. For instance, young people described troubled school cultures due to severe and ongoing bullying and violence. When these issues were not clearly and swiftly addressed, students began the process of skipping school, detentions, suspensions and early leaving. Often, these students were enjoying school prior to disengagement.

The school culture issues were least well addressed by calling in the police. Young people felt that administrators and teachers needed better and swifter solutions to improve school culture. For example, specific recommendations included more “proactive” outreach by guidance counsellors and teachers, and a wider range of interesting courses which are hooked into the “real world” of work. Most rural youth also recommended a change in the stricter adherence to practice on bullying.

Unique protective factors emerged around:
- supportive families;
- more “proactive” outreach by guidance counsellors and teachers;
- a wider range of interesting courses which are hooked into the “real world” of work; and
- self determination.

These young people seemed very able to reflect on their processes of disengagement and were well supported in their school efforts by parents and siblings. As youth culture is unique in rural areas, school cultures tend to become more critical in providing healthy spaces for young people. Many of the young people had friends who had also left school and were, with their friends, over-using drugs and alcohol as an escape from boredom. These activities were matched by skipping class and missing school. Moreover, the actions and care of school personnel are experienced deeply as no alternatives exist. In this respect, the localized curriculum in rural areas could focus on, and work to enhance, the realities of rural youth culture.

e) Francophone Youth
In-depth interviews were conducted with Ontario youth whose mother tongue is French and/or who self-identify as francophone. Like their counterparts in other cultural and linguistic groups, Francophone youth identified the following risk factors as particularly relevant for early school leaving:
- disengagement around a curriculum that is not connected to youths’ life plans;
- passive instructional strategies;
- disregard for student learning styles;
- not being able to learn at own pace;
• household stress and family conflict impacting on student performance and ability to complete schooling;
• negative student-teacher relationships;
• adult misunderstanding of youth culture;
• ineffective school discipline;
• suspensions not effective in changing behaviours or encouraging school work; and
• a negative school environment (e.g., in-school police surveillance in larger urban centres).

Earning money while in school was also an important priority for several youth. Lack of relevance of school curriculum and lack of orientation to youths’ life plans were cited often by respondents as key reasons for losing interest and for disengaging from school. These youth were adamant in saying that what is being taught in schools does not reflect the life and career skills they need now and for the future.

Francophone youth described the need for different teaching strategies because current methods were not adapted to their personal pace of learning. Some youth felt they needed different types of assignments better adapted to their abilities. Others simply were not allowed enough time to finish school projects that they knew they could complete given more time and patience. In other words, school disinterest and disengagement often occurred when students did not have opportunities to demonstrate their skills, abilities and competencies to teachers. More individualized teaching was raised by Francophone youth as a factor that would help them succeed and stay in school.

In general, Francophone youth did not raise “francophonie” issues as having an impact on their decision to leave school. While a few students transferred to Anglophone schools after not doing well in the Francophone sector, they did not blame the “French system”. Though a few Francophone respondents stated that they felt that French was being imposed on them, this was not a prominent factor.

In terms of general risk issues, many Francophone youth described what seems to be a shared experience with their non-Francophone counterparts. It is important to note, however, that there were noticeable linguistic differences between regions in the way that youth responded to interview questions. Greater Toronto Area Francophones, for example, conversed solely in French during their interviews, whereas in Sudbury several respondents had difficulty communicating in French and often switched to English. In Ottawa, on the other hand, communication was generally in French but popular expressions were stated in English. This observation may be of particular interest in the context of the Ministry of Education’s “Aménagement Linguistique” policy that aims to optimize the transmission of language and culture among young people.

Improved inter-provincial coordination in terms of consistency of grade standards and curriculum also was described as important for students who transferred between Quebec and Ontario. Some students, for example, were promoted or demoted a grade when they moved from one province to another, making it more difficult for them to adapt to their new situation because of an age difference with their classmates.

Protective factors cited by Francophone youth included:
• alternative forms of education such as co-op and ‘virtual school’ that allow for youth’s interests to come into play;
- supportive teachers and principals that understand and are patient with youth;
- particular individuals that spent individual time with them and helped them ‘hang in there;’
- presence of supportive friends;
- family involvement and encouragement; and
- communities that work in complementary fashion with the school environment.

f) First and Second Generation Immigrant Youth
Newcomer/1st generation youth in the Greater Toronto Area and Kitchener-Waterloo cited:
- The need to learn a new language, linguistic difficulties, and language barriers - including between parents and school - as important challenges;
- Acculturation difficulties and other resettlement stresses were also mentioned by several respondents;
- The migration experience itself was particularly challenging for immigrant youth who rejoined a parent years after the latter had immigrated to Canada. Raised by grandparents ‘back home,’ these youth also had to navigate an often difficult family reunification with a mother or father they could scarcely remember;
- Several youth spoke of loneliness, social isolation, a lack of friends, and a difficult ‘fit’ with new classmates;
- The negative impact of interruptions and changes in schooling due to migration; and
- Respondents spoke of the differential expectations in educational level between schools in their country of origin and in Canada, as well as other mismatches between school systems in different parts of the world;
  - These often translated into rigid age-grade placement practices regardless of prior educational achievements,
  - Inappropriate linguistic assessment and the lack of English language instruction constituted key risk factors,
  - Lack of familiarity with the Canadian school system as well as differences between previous and current school climates were also noted.

Student age at time of migration was found to be particularly critical, with youth in the latter years of high school most at risk for early school leaving:
- The non-recognition of prior educational achievement and performance at this advanced stage in school training was experienced as highly discouraging.
- Unfair practices identified by newcomer respondents include automatic placement in an English-as-a-Second-Language stream without prior checking of transcripts or evaluation of actual linguistic skills.
- The latter takes on additional poignancy in the case of migrants whose mother tongue is in fact English.

It should be noted that relatively lower socio-economic status in and of itself did not necessarily represent a risk factor for newcomer youth populations. The downward social mobility and non-recognition of professional credentials experienced by many newcomers to Canada are unfortunate aspects of the migration experience, and do not, in and of themselves, necessarily translate into educational disadvantage. However, the concomitant need to have both parents working more than one job and/or seeking additional training or re-qualification, can translate into risk factors for school attendance and academic performance that include:
- relatively less parental supervision;

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increased youth responsibility for childcare of younger family members, household responsibilities, and family financial contributions; and
the need to live in neighbourhoods where housing is less expensive can translate into long commutes and difficulties balancing school/work/home responsibilities.

For both newcomer (born overseas) and second generation immigrant (born in Canada of immigrant parentage) youth, the following represent unique risk factors for early school leaving:
- cultural dissonance with the broader society;
- value discrepancies between home and school environments;
- conflicts between the cultural identity of youth and school culture;
- tensions at home due to differential acculturation within the family (particularly across the generations) were specifically noted by respondents;
- financial stresses - especially the need to work to support immediate or extended family members;
- the assumption of childrearing responsibilities for siblings, cousins, nieces, nephews; and
- youth were often left needing to juggle school, work, and family responsibilities.

Both immigrant populations spoke about negative school climates that alienated newcomers and other ethnoculturally-distinct youth. This often took the form of:
- classism;
- discrimination;
- racism;
- negative stereotypes;
- school cliques;
- presence of gangs; and
- ethnic balkanization.

Specific cultural values may well inform the relative emphasis placed on school, employment, and family for both 1st and 2nd generation immigrant youth. For some immigrant youth, a desire to support the family of origin, assume responsibilities within the family business, make money, and/or to get married and start a family of their own, simply take priority over completion of a high school diploma. For others, high parental educational and career expectations combined with over-involvement in schooling, left some immigrant youth dealing with tremendous family pressure to perform.

Both newcomer and 2nd generation Immigrant youth spoke frequently about protective factors that included:
- the importance of familial involvement in their schooling, including parents and older siblings, and their extended family such as cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and relatives through marriage;
- the importance placed on educational opportunities and parental desire to ensure a better future for their children often strengthened youth’s determination to succeed despite experienced difficulties; and
- supportive school personnel who were familiar with the challenges commonly experienced by newcomers was cited as particularly important, as was a welcoming school environment.
g) Visible Minority Youth

Canada’s Employment Equity Act and 2001 Census define visible minorities as persons, other than Aboriginal people, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour. As an identifiable social position, ‘visible minority status’ readily intersects with social class, culture, language, religion, generational status, and other important identity markers. This means that there is considerable variation along other lines among various sub-populations that may share only a commonality of experience directly related to their ‘visibility’ with respect to the dominant ‘non-visible’ White group. This disadvantaged social position may have both direct and indirect impacts on early school leaving.

Visible minority youth interviewed in the Greater Toronto Area and Kitchener-Waterloo identified two key factors that affected their learning and/or subsequent early school leaving:
- difficulties with a particular teacher or school principal; and
- negative school climate.

Many early school leavers felt ‘forced out’ by a specific individual; often it was a single individual in position of power and authority who appeared to have made the greatest negative impact on respondents’ school experience. Reporting rates regarding particular difficulties with a school administrator or teacher were noticeably higher for this group than for other youth populations.

Many respondents also spoke of a school climate in which stereotypes, prejudice, racism and differential treatment were common and left unchallenged. Repeated exposure to negative messages was cited as particularly demoralizing. Youth also felt that disciplinary measures were often unfairly implemented and noted that the curriculum does not reflect their lived realities. When found together these two key risk factors serve to alienate these youth and seriously compromise their academic achievements and future aspirations.

Important protective factors for visible minority youth include:
- strong family involvement that extends beyond parents to siblings, cousins, uncles/aunts, and grandparents;
- support both in school and in the general life of youth;
- educational support initiatives undertaken by ethno-racial community organizations; and
- a positive school ethos that focuses on;
  - inclusiveness,
  - anti-discrimination awareness and implementation strategies,
  - a curriculum relevant to lived experiences and reflective of diversity, and
  - supportive principals, vice-principals, teachers, counsellors, and school staff.

h) Third Plus Generation Youth

Whether living in the GTA, Sudbury, Ottawa or Kitchener-Waterloo, Canadian born youth whose ancestors had been in Canada for three or more generations experienced risk factors which were multiple and complex. While not all of these young people were “starting from scratch”, for those who were, the stresses encountered from poverty or within the family frequently led to:
- the premature assumption of adult roles, including pregnancy, parenting, parental caregiving;
- homelessness;
- the need to work and earn money; and
- experimenting with risk, including:
  - alcohol abuse,
  - using and selling drugs,
Such risky behaviour often followed directly from a negative family situation, to living on the streets, or to needing to sell drugs to survive.

Many young people were also dealing with:
- mental health issues (depression was discussed most frequently as interfering with the ability to remain engaged in school);
- learning difficulties;
- social isolation;
- unresolved academic problems;
- unsupportive homes; and
- poverty.

Young people’s narratives were replete with examples of a lack of engagement with school, such as suspensions, expulsions, skipped classes, failed courses, and dislike of school. Risk factors surrounding home life, in combination with varying degrees of learning disability, resulted in the eventual disengagement from school. Poor academic performance and/or learning disabilities coupled with other related stresses, often resulted in chronic skipping or cutting of classes. Eventually, after falling so far behind, students would either be asked to leave or leave on their own. Some youth reported inflexibility on the part of schools in terms of rules. Often, minor rule breakings resulted in expulsion from classes or school itself. This was perceived by youth as aggression on the part of teachers. Once having disengaged from school, youth from unsupportive homes were asked to leave.

From this point on, another group of risk factors appear. Poverty was the main reason reported for not returning to school. Mostly, poorer youth assumed an adult role without time, resources or childcare to attend or return to school. Young people elucidated the near impossibility of living on their own and trying to go to school at the same time.

For “in-between” or “mostly protected” youth, academic problems left unresolved led to disengagement with school and eventual disengagement from their family. Most reported supportive others such as friends and teachers, but also a failure on their part to provide academic assistance that was effective in terms of their learning and academic performance. Assistance either came too late, not at all, required paper work, or did not target the youths' particular needs.

Unique risk factors found for young people in Sudbury were:
- the transition from French to English school caused significant academic problems left unresolved by the school; and
- the inability to attend school because of having to serve jail time.

Six of the youth interviewed had been in some form of detention centre for a period of time. Most often, they reported this incarceration as the main reason why they left school.

For most, there was also a poor school-to-facility connection. If youth skipped classes this was considered "breaching" and they would have to leave school again. The majority of this group reported drug use (marijuana). Only a few youth reported mild learning disability, suggesting that in many cases, this may have gone unnoticed.
All youth had at least one protective factor in their lives:

- Many young people liked school generally, did well in school, and spoke of having understanding and supportive teachers, principals, and support staff.
- Besides being seen as helpful, there was also a perception that teachers had limitations to the support they could offer.
- The youth did not blame the teachers for their failure to provide adequate support.
- Young people from more privileged social class backgrounds were also involved in extra-curricular activities and were encouraged to do well in school by parents/supportive parent(s).

**Parent/Guardian Focus Groups**

Five focus group sessions were conducted with parents of young people who had dropped out or were at risk for dropping out in the communities of Thunder Bay, Sudbury, Owen Sound, Kitchener-Waterloo, and Toronto. One focus group was conducted with Aboriginal parents, while another included visible minority parents.

The risk factor identified most frequently in focus group discussions with parents was:

- the experience of student **bullying** on the part of students and the lack of protection offered by educators.

In the focus group with visible minority parents, participants indicated:

- that black kids in particular were subject to differential and unfair treatment that amounted to **hate crimes**;
- a lack of supervision and insufficient staff to properly oversee student activities was identified; and
- in cases where bullying was reported, there was a reluctance on the part of teachers and principals to get involved or to take responsibility for school violence.

Other important risk factors included:

- **Mental health**, substance abuse problems and unrecognized learning difficulties;
  - Native communities were particularly vulnerable to a variety of mental health issues including isolation, depression, anxiety, grief, loss, discrimination, harassment, alcoholism, suicide, anger, and family dysfunction.
  - Participants in rural communities noted:
    - the lack of mental health services for students, particularly for 16-18 year olds;
    - undiagnosed learning difficulties; and
    - learning problems often emerged in elementary school but went unrecognized by teachers.

Parents identified:

- **negative teacher attitudes** as contributors to students’ absenteeism and uncaring attitudes toward school;
- teachers were seen as inflexible in their approach toward young people and unwilling to work with students who did not demonstrate a one hundred percent commitment to academics;
- once a student was identified as a trouble-maker or an underachiever, he or she was marked and subsequently targeted by teachers for humiliation or punishment;
there is an overall lack of respect for kids in the school system, with educators unwilling to hear young people’s point of view; and
that teachers/schools simply want to get rid of underachieving or problem students, resulting in students being pushed out.

Cultural ignorance and racism were also key themes in parent focus groups. Issues included:
- the relational and cultural isolation of native students traveling from remote northern communities to attend high school;
- the lack of a positive reflection of native and immigrant people in education;
- racist attitudes and assumptions on the part of students and teachers;
- the lack of Aboriginal role models in all facets of social life; and
- teachers’ lack knowledge/understanding of native communities and traditions.

Aboriginal parents indicated that students from the north:
- do not see the relevance of education due to limited career opportunities in their home communities and a lack of vision for their future;
- are more mature and take on adult responsibilities earlier than other youth, which ultimately interrupt their education.

A recurrent theme in the focus group data was the issue of punitive school policies:
- Parents identified that the practice of marking students absent for being late and suspending them for truancy was putting kids at greater risk for falling behind in their classes and dropping out of school.
- Suspending students for minor infractions such as forgetting to bring a pencil to class or wearing a shirt untucked was judged to be trivial and unnecessary. Once suspended, it is very difficult for students to catch up on their schoolwork, leading youth to lose their desire and drive.

The lack of credit accumulation becomes a more serious risk factor as students enter grade 11. At this point, older students feel out of place and are reluctant to attend class with younger students.

Parents indicated that there was a profound lack of communication between educators and parents, with parents often the last to be informed when there is a problem. Parents were not always informed of their child’s truancy or expulsion and when they were told, it was often too late in the semester to turn things around.

To a lesser extent, school structure and curriculum were identified as key risk factors. Issues identified by parents included:
- the lack of after-school extracurricular activities;
- inadequate counselling services;
- an overly challenging curriculum;
- large class sizes;
- overextended teachers;
- the lack of homework support;
- policies that promote kids to the next grade when they are not prepared; and
- transition factors as students move from the elementary system to high school.
The **main protective factors** that emerged in focus group discussions with parents were related to:
- parental support; and
- advocacy.

Parents who unconditionally supported their children and promoted the value of education were a positive influence in the lives of young people at high risk for leaving school. Parents who were able to advocate for services and support from schools on behalf of their children served as an important safety net for students who would otherwise fall through the cracks. Unfortunately, families from lower socio-economic sectors were less likely to be effective advocates for their children.

In addition to parents, the support of teachers and guidance counsellors were considered important in motivating young people to achieve academic success. Teachers with good mentoring skills and flexible attitudes were singled out as having a positive influence in the lives of young people.

**Other important protective factors** identified in the focus groups included:
- having a strong sense of one’s culture and heritage;
- individual characteristics such as the motivation to succeed;
- flexible school programming including self-directed courses and alternative co-operative programs;
- teen pregnancy programs; and
- extracurricular activities.

In contrast to educators who more readily identified leaving school as a necessary and sometimes protective factor, only one parent suggested that leaving school was a necessary step in helping young people mature and realize the importance of education.

**Recommendations from Parents**
The recommendations made by parent focus group participants centred mainly on the importance of providing flexible and alternative programs that are able to meet the unique needs of individual students and included:
- the expansion of non-academic trade-based programs;
- the provision of courses that teach practical life skills, such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, car mechanics, and banking;
- for more remote communities, cooperative programs be delivered in students' home communities so that they do not have to leave home;
- the curriculum be adapted to account for native people’s holistic learning style as opposed to analytical methods;
- practical resource programs for students who do decide to leave school or are at risk of leaving, including job resource centres, resume building skills, and counselling;
- the need to educate youth about the opportunities and career options available to them through education;
- that students receive material support such as home computers for those who cannot afford one, or alternatively providing access to school computers by keeping school libraries open until 6:00 p.m.;
- to help students transition from elementary school to high school, an information package delivered to all new high schools students could outline various school and

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community resources. Also, orientation seminars for native students coming from remote communities would help minimize culture shock;

- an important alternative to punitive suspension policies be implemented sending students to the library to work, where they can be supervised by community volunteers;
- more frequent and on-going communication between parents and educators throughout the school year as well as increased cooperation regarding remediation and program planning;
- schools to increase their outreach to community members and organizations;
- better communication of resources available to early school leavers and their parents;
- that support groups for families whose children leave school or are having difficulties would be helpful, not only to share stories and relieve stress, but also to generate new ideas;
- increased training for students and teachers;
- with respect to native issues, diversity training for non-native students in elementary schools and teachers in teacher’s college;
- additional training to help teachers recognize learning problems and mental health issues, and mandatory early childhood education to help teachers deal with special needs students; and
- hiring educators from different visible minority groups so that immigrant and native students are able to see themselves reflected in their teachers.

The importance of extracurricular activities was repeatedly mentioned by parent focus group participants. Discussion centred on the importance of daily physical education and extracurricular programs such as sports, music and art in helping kids feel part of their school community and motivating them to attend school. Parents recognized the need to explore creative ways of delivering extracurricular activities, including using parent volunteers, and reducing teacher class size and preparation time.

Ultimately, parents suggested that educators must do more to understand the needs of students. They need to listen more closely to what students have to say and take their opinions seriously. All students must be valued equally, not only those who are academically successful or high achievers. Every student has unique skills and talents that are often unrecognized and under appreciated.

To order to provide a safe environment for students, parents recommended that schools take responsibility for bullying in schools. They also suggested uniforms could help reduce bullying.

**Educator Focus Groups**

Eight focus groups were conducted with educators across the province. Participants acknowledges the ‘endless’ reasons for dropping out – they really DO NOT blame the individual at all. Rather, they recognize the complexity of the reasons and the fact that many individuals and structures are involved. This intersection of risk factors is transparent in the stories given by focus group members.

The main school-related risk factors that emerged in focus group discussions with educators were related to:

- lack of cultural competency; and
- racism.
The school curriculum is not culturally appropriate for native or immigrant students; feelings of alienation and stigma ensue as a result. In addition, teachers are not properly trained as cultural competency workshops are inadequate and do not stress the fact that learning styles may be different for different cultural groups.

Curriculum, school structure and punitive policies were also key themes in the focus groups. Large schools, big classes and the rotary system render young people at risk a greater chance of falling through the cracks, with quiet kids more likely to get lost since extremely needy, attention-seeking students will pull the teacher away from the other students.

Bullying and lack of teacher support were mentioned infrequently in the educator focus groups.

Non-school related risk factors included:
- mental health;
- addiction problems and drug abuse, marijuana in particular.

The decriminalization of marijuana means that kids are more likely to come to school high; also, there is less stigma attached to smoking up. Mental health issues often go untreated with young people facing wait lists of up to two years for mental health services. Family issues such as lack of support, low SES, family dysfunction, and assumption of adult roles lead to chronic absenteeism and have nothing to do with school life.

The main protective factors identified in the focus groups with educators were:
- flexible and alternative programming; and
- caring and supportive teachers.

These alternative settings are characterized by flexibility; small classrooms, off-site classrooms, correspondence credit work, availability of assistance, and option to work at own pace.

Teachers who function as protective factors are characterized by their ability to listen to students, to ask questions, make connections, and engage in conversation. Educators identified that at least one caring adult person to support the student makes all the difference, often bridging the gap between the student and school administration. It is important to note here that this need to have a caring “other” emerged repeatedly in youth interviews. It was also noted by educators that some young people at risk are very bright and have a good deal of confidence and self-esteem.

Recommendations from Educators

The recommendations made by educator focus group participants focused mainly on the need to:
- enhance cultural competency;
- involve communities in the schools;
- examine co-op programming; and
- scrutinize staffing.

Specific recommendations included:
- Native people should be involved in policy making at the Ministry level in order to ensure that the curriculum is inclusive of Native people. For example, courses on Native culture should be compulsory rather than optional.
There should be a priority given to hiring Native teachers and teachers from diverse cultures.

Teacher training at the college level was mentioned repeatedly as a critical way for teachers to develop classroom strategies for problem students, gain knowledge and understanding of the alternative programming available, teach teachers how to talk to students, and enhance understanding of Native and other cultures – the emphasis on Native learning style is what is currently missing.

It was suggested that there should be a course at every Faculty of Education across the province that deals with teaching at risk students.

Educators discussed the need to include communities in a more profound way in the school system:

- The Regent Park program in Toronto was posited as a model for community involvement as it combines tutorial support for youth with community youth workers, who are in communication with the schools. These community workers act as a mediator between schools and parents.
- Another example offered was the Rexdale Community Micro Skills Program that provides IT summer camps, offered in partnership with local community schools.
- It was noted that volunteers from the community can engage young people at risk, and serve as mentors. Volunteers can also provide communities with the resources to deal with mental health issues and addictions.

There is a need to expand the horizons of young people, particularly those from poorer neighbourhoods. The chain of repeated drop outs can be broken in some communities by showing inner city kids the potential that exists:

- One innovative program partners with York University to help grade 11 students earn a university credit, then asks those students to become community leaders and pull another student along with them.

The need to critically examine co-op programming was identified in the educator focus groups:

- Clearer pathways to cooperative programs are needed as clear pathways exist for university or college-bound students.
- Well-defined apprenticeship programs in European countries can serve as models for Canadians.
- An official government body that directs apprenticeship programs was suggested.
- Stronger links need to be established with potential employers, and government incentives would assist companies in participating in coop programs. This could overcome current difficulties surrounding finding placements for students interested in a coop.
- The need to make co-op placements more relevant was noted, as placing a student in a Footlocker store selling running shoes was not deemed productive – students can get such part-time jobs on their own. Placements are scarce so inappropriate placements happen because teachers are desperate.
- Parents and youth need to be educated about the coop programs that are available and the merits of enrolling in such programs.
- It was also noted that technical schools have a bad reputation. This need to be turned around as parents and youth are reluctant to go to those schools.

Educator focus group members also offered many recommendations regarding staffing issues:

- They discussed the need to hire more teachers, counselling staff, drug counsellors, social workers, and special education individuals.
Staff is required so that schools can help high risk kids re-engage whether immediately or in the future. For example, five attendance counsellors in one community for 116 schools are insufficient and ineffective when one-on-one, personalized service is needed.

The system requires a dedicated person in each school to deal strictly with high risk students. This person would identify kids, intervene, and act as mentors and advocates. In a school with 1300 students, a specialized staff person would have a case load of 130 students.

It was also suggested that retired teachers could be recruited to help with after school programs.

- A major reinvestment in schools is critical. High drop out rates were as the result of under funding and under-resourcing of schools, particularly of guidance counsellors, music, physical ed, libraries, librarians and support staff.
- Zero tolerance policies must be eliminated. Youth repeatedly suspended or expelled have issues and need to be counselled rather than kicked out of school. Suspended students cannot be sent home; rather they require support, counselling, and a place where they can complete their homework.

### Summary and Recommendations

This study has been designed to assist the Ontario Ministry of Education to further understand and address the issues surrounding school disengagement by youth who are presently leaving the secondary school system prior to earning their diploma. The process of early school leaving often begins years prior to the actual act of school withdrawal itself, and is related to countless events, experiences, and choices that occur throughout the life of an adolescent. Accurate identification of school and non-school related risk factors is essential to a more in-depth understanding of these early school leaving processes. Important to note is that there is a dynamic interplay among these variables. As a result, school disengagement by youth is determined by complex relationships among multiple causes.

This study has focussed on the “voices” of youth experiencing difficulty with the system as well as those of parents and educators. The picture they have painted for us is one of youth, parents, and educators struggling to have youth succeed in a situation which is complex and demanding for all three groups. Their delineation of the risk and protective factors currently operating in Ontario extends research knowledge about such factors and shows a remarkable level of inter-respondent agreement. The analyses show that many of our youth struggle against imposing difficulties at the individual, family, school, and societal levels.

At the same time, they reveal a wealth of strengths at every level upon which we can build effective interventions. Despite the multitude of risk factors faced by these young people, with very few exceptions, they constructed a future for themselves that included being in school.

Analytic synthesis of key risk/protective variables and recommendations delineated by youth, parents and educators provides clear guidance for the development of policies and programs to retain our youth in school through to high school graduation at age eighteen.

### (a) Recommendations for the Education System

Successful strategies for reducing early school leaving must reduce risk factors and increase protective factors operating at macro, meso and micro levels. It is important to target and address multiple risk factors and to recognize that they are interconnected in the lives of these
young people. The important role played by key protective factors also suggests that there are strengths than can be enhanced and built upon.

In using the research data to provide general advice and direction to our education and service systems, the feedback and recommendations of the various categories of youths and adults have been combined. The resulting advice can be summarized as falling under one of the following key principles: be more understanding, be more flexible, and be more proactive in reaching out to youth, families, and communities.

1. Be more understanding!
The stories told by many youth reflected such difficult and complex situations that interviewers, coders, and analysts sometimes required debriefing. Parents and educator focus groups also acknowledged that the needs of youth are varied and great. The need to be knowledgeable about the diverse life circumstances of students, and to treat such differences with respect, was emphasized from many perspectives. Some suggestions include:

- Listen to what to students have to say;
- Understand the complex “youth culture” your students live in;
- Recognize the impact of various forms of racism, discrimination, and bullying;
- Operate under principles of respect and fairness;
- Accept different lifestyles and life plans; and
- Take acquisition of cultural competence seriously (i.e. provide adequate teacher training).

To provide a foundation for a supportive learning environment, schools need to be places where all students feel welcome, respected, encouraged, as well as psychologically and physically safe.

“I think if they[teachers] just listened. If they heard what I was saying and paid attention to it.”

“I think that more supports in school. Like I know that guidance counsellors are always available, I get that; but, having, you know, other services there because everyone has unique and individual needs and I think that if kids felt like they could talk to somebody ….”

2. Be more flexible!
Most large systems and organizations develop policies and protocols that enable them to be effective in achieving their mandates and goals. The education system reflects this at the levels of the Ministry, school boards, and individual schools. It is essential to continuously examine our implementation of ‘rules’ to ascertain that we are not putting up unintended barriers to youth success. Suggestions in this area include:

- Take into account the adult roles of youth (work, parenting);
- Develop local curriculum (fitting local job pathways, providing relevance and appropriateness for different cultural groups, meeting individual needs);
- Innovative, interactive and personalized instructional strategies;
- Develop disciplinary alternatives to suspension/expulsion;
- Build links with the community (agencies, organizations, groups, businesses);
- Consider the fit between school structure and adolescent development (need for sleep, brain development);
- Include a broad offering of extra-curricular activities;
- Expand alternative approaches to school structure; and
- Create improved inter-provincial coordination and international assessment of curricula and educational standards.
Most of the above suggestions will need to be adapted across schools depending on location (rural-urban), language (English-French), and student composition (Aboriginal, immigrant/refugee, SES status, community employment opportunities etc.).

“You know, I don’t think kids have to go to school everyday. Maybe every other day. Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I find five days is too much for kids. It becomes very tiring, getting up at like, seven. Like, I get up at 5 o’clock in the morning just to get ready. Now, that’s early.”

3. Be more proactive!
All youth, parents, and educators acknowledged the many positive aspects of our schools. Youth specifically pointed out that relationships with teachers and school administrators were often crucial protective or risk factors. There were many insights and recommendations regarding ways in which schools/teachers could be even more effective. These included:

- Be proactive when youth start to disengage from school;
- Provide sufficient and appropriate resources for assessment, counselling, and needed interventions;
- Develop better communication with parents and seek ways to increase parent involvement in schools (especially immigrant parents);
- Improve teacher skills at monitoring student understanding/progress;
- Create inter-sectoral partnerships to support poor and troubled youth (i.e. those with mental health problems, substance abuse issues, involvement with the law, family difficulties, or in the care of child aid agencies) to stay in school;
- Encourage a culture in which youth feel they ‘belong’ within schools; and
- Find ways to use school facilities for homework help and mentoring.

“… if I was the principal of a school right now, I would set up a program where, if people were exhibiting warning signs of things that could possibly lead to [dropout] like, you know, I was never in a position to tell anyone at my new school that I was having problems at home and that like, there was a chance that I could leave home, right? It’s like, there needs to be a forum where people can be like, okay, you’re my teacher; I’ve got to be able to say, you know what? Things aren’t working well for me at home.”

Perhaps most important of all is the need to recognize, support, and build upon youths’ own hopes and aspirations. Despite the multitude of risk factors faced by these young people, with very few exceptions, they constructed a future for themselves that included being in school.

“I’m going to college. If they don’t let me in I’m going to pound on the doors until they let me in. I’m going to wear my high school diploma around my neck for the entire week. I’m going to make copies of my diploma and paste them all over my desk in my house.”

(b) Recommendations to Parents
The analysis of youth experiences recounted through the interview process, underscores the critical importance of positive family dynamics to school engagement and academic success. Experiences within the home environment clearly had direct impact on all aspects of youth’s lives, including their schooling. Strong support of different family members was often cited by youth as an important key protective factor; its absence a critical risk factor. Specific recommendations to parents include:

- Know what is going on in your child’s life;
- Show interest;
- Be involved and stay involved;
- Have realistic expectations;
- Provide direction and guidance; and
Communicate with the school and stay connected

Most of all, be aware of the ways in which positive or negative family dynamics can fundamentally impact your child’s school experience and overall well being.

(c) Recommendations to Other Youth
Youth also made recommendations to other youth which are significant. The single most common recommendation was to stay in school, even though, as one interviewee noted, “it’s such a cliché.” Fellow youth were encouraged by their peers to “just get your diploma – it has an impact on every aspect of your future.” Specific recommendations include:

- Think of the future, take it seriously, focus on your goals, and do it for yourself;
- Ask for help, use all available support;
- Find someone who will listen and give you advice;
- Be yourself regardless of what others say;
- Avoid alcohol/drugs;
- Tell teachers how you learn the best;
- Don’t be intimidated by teachers; watch the teachers who are problem;
- Explore other schooling options;
- Change schools if needed; and
- Persevere despite challenges.

Policy and Practice Implications

The results of this study suggest that policy and practice initiatives will be most successful if they have a broad focus. This is consistent with previous research literature regarding effective strategies to reduce early school leaving. This focus should include academic, social, and supportive activities which are responsive to a wide range of student needs and made possible through the effective integration of community services. All approaches to reducing early school leaving and improving school success must take into account that the youth who are most likely to disengage from school come from diverse circumstances, face daunting developmental challenges, and often have needed to assume adult roles which require attention to effective work/life balance strategies.

Policy and practice implications of the study recommendations can therefore be conceptualized under four broad categories as follows:

(a) Early prevention strategies targeting:
- improved inter-relations between the home and school;
- greater recognition and consideration of the diversity of youth experiences, needs, and backgrounds;
- awareness of the importance of elementary education in the process of early leaving;
- enhanced reading and writing programs; and
- enhanced teacher training regarding multiple pathways to school disengagement and adolescent development.

(b) Core secondary school structure strategies including:
- caring mentoring/tutoring;
- linking relevant and significant community service experiences with academic learning;
- continued alternative schooling;
continued out-of-school enhancement (after school and summer scholastic, recreation and social programs);
active attention to all aspects of school culture;
effective school leadership;
high levels of collaboration and communication;
curriculum, instruction, and assessment aligned with defined standards;
frequent monitoring of teaching and learning;
creation of a supportive learning environment;
equitable, effective, and consistent disciplinary rules and procedures;
greater reflection of, and sensitivity to, diversity in curricula and school environments;
fostering of a safe, inclusive, positive, school climate;
ensuring and encouraging sufficient re-entry points; and
ensuring linkages between Student Success personnel, teachers, administrators and parents.

(c) Core secondary school classroom strategies including:
ongoing and focused professional development addressing the unique challenges of the daily lives of youth and the inherent complexities of the process of early school leaving;
openness to, and inclusion of, diverse linguistic, cultural and ethno-racial identities;
enhanced career education and workforce readiness;
continued consultation and discussion with youth;
instructional strategies to accommodate different learning styles; and
curricular delivery and pedagogy in line with various adolescent developmental needs.

(d) Wider school-community strategies including:
creating a strategy for developmentally appropriate school system renewal as informed by the realities of youth (culture, identities, life experiences, need for meaningful input);
addressing the specific slippage points occurring in the process of disengagement (e.g. transition into grade 9);
greater community collaboration, particularly forged links between child welfare, children’s mental health, youth justice and education as well as more informal collaboration with community volunteers; and
increased communication, interaction, and consultation with youth’s families and/or respective communities.

General recommendations for working with and responding more effectively to youth include:
recognizing and involving the strengths, abilities, and energy of youth;
providing youth with opportunities for decision-making and meeting their future goals;
educating involved adults about the value of youth and the most effective way of working with them; and
respecting the rights of youth to be treated fairly and with respect.

These recommendations could be used to inform current Student Success plans in Ontario school boards where many innovative programs are currently being evaluated. More specifically, they may be used to inform the work of the Student Success ‘rescue teams’ and the Learning Opportunities Grants via attention to active outreach to disengaged youth. The various recommendations provided could also be sorted into strategic foci labelled ‘Curriculum and Structure’, ‘Pedagogy’, and ‘School Culture’. 
In any framework, there is unprecedented opportunity to develop and evaluate a range of intervention programs aimed at retaining students in secondary schools and ensuring that each and every youth successfully graduates, prepared for further study, additional training, or direct workforce entry. This is necessary in order to ensure that all youth are able to achieve their full personal and academic potential.

**Responding Effectively to Youth; High Performing Schools and the Reasons Educational Reforms Fail**

General recommendations for working with and responding more effectively to youth, include:

1. Recognize strengths, abilities, talent and energy.
2. Provide youth with opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them.
3. Educate involved adults about the value of youth, the need to involve youth and the most effective way of working with them.
4. Respect the rights of youth to be treated fairly and with respect.
5. Recognize that schools are an important location for interacting with youth and providing them with information and opportunities for participation.
6. The provision of services and programs that address self-esteem; personal safety; sexuality; racism; substance abuse; suicide; employment and concerns about the future; a safe environment to be with peers; recreational activities; global issues.
7. Outreach and advertisement aimed at informing youth of available services is critical.
8. Develop strategies for working with the media so a positive image of youth is projected and negative and false stereotypes are minimized.
9. Recognize the value of peer-based programs.

High performing schools are likely to have a combination of characteristics in common, including nine specific traits:

- Clear and Shared Vision and Purpose;
- High Standards and Expectations;
- Effective School Leadership;
- High Levels of Collaboration and Communication;
- Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment Aligned with the Standards;
- Frequent Monitoring of Teaching and Learning;
- Focused Professional Development;
- Supportive Learning Environment; and
- High Level of Community and Parent Involvement.

There are three main reasons why current educational reforms are unlikely to succeed:

- they are episodic;
- reforms address symptoms rather than causes; and
- reforms are not systemic.

**Conclusion**

There are no straight forward answers when it comes to early school leaving prevention/intervention programs. Existing evaluations serve as useful guides for further program development and testing, however, as the majority does not meet the current standards for scientifically reliable evaluations, a single “best practice” model does not exist. As numerous strategies may come into play when designing a program a single “best practice” model is not necessarily appropriate. This is particularly true when we consider the fact that
early school leaving is the result of a long term, multi-dimensional process influenced by a wide variety of school and out-of-school experiences and the as-yet not fully understood, complex relationship between these multiple causes.

Early school leaving is associated with both academic and social issues and therefore, in order to be effective, programs must address both these areas and provide youth with the supports they require in all areas of their lives. Furthermore, as youth withdraw from school for a variety of reasons, services offered to them must be flexible and easily tailored to meet individual needs.

The research, both experimental and descriptive, indicates that youth require supports responsive to their needs; ones that are as multi-dimensional as their problems, that are open to the diverse range of their interests, hopes and plans – both present and future, and that are aimed at increasing decision-making capacities. Adults who work with youth must be able to deal with the complexities of young people’s lives, to be flexible and nonjudgmental. Schools, agencies and programs must provide youth with opportunities to make real and important choices and to support them in the consequences of their decisions and in reflecting on lessons learned and successes achieved.

As risk factors are multilevel and systemic, preventions/interventions that approach risk from a “single-issue” perspective may be ineffective and have poor long-term outcomes. Rather than addressing risk factors as independent and isolated issues, researchers and educators now recognize the necessity of designing comprehensive programs that address multiple contexts (i.e. family, school and individual).

Many researchers believe that facilitating positive adjustment among children and youth, rather than focusing only on risk prevention and reduction, extends our attention to all children and youth, rather than only those identified as “at risk”. The appeal of concepts around resilience/protective factors can also be attributed to an increased understanding that the key to prevention and intervention is not simply the identification of risk factors, but also of those factors which reduce risk and lead to success.

Ultimately, it is essential that parents and teachers, school administrators and boards, community members and policymakers recognize that the key to economic development and a civic society is education. Education has a primary role in a youth’s ability to acquire social capital, access career opportunities and fully avail themselves of life chances.

Contact Information:

Alana J. Murray
Superintendent of Secondary Education
Bluewater District School Board
351 1st Ave. N, Box 190
Chesley, Ontario
N0G 1L0
(519) 363-2014, Ext. 276
e-mail: alana_murray@bwdsb.on.ca