Listening to Our Kids: A Dialogue about Completing High School in Granville County

A report by the LiveWell Granville Youth Issues Workgroup

May 2008
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Project Description

This report describes the results of nine focus groups that were conducted on the topic of reducing the school dropout rate in Granville County, North Carolina schools. The Youth Issues Workgroup of LiveWell Granville commissioned this project. LiveWell Granville is a Healthy Carolinians Partnership located in Granville County under the leadership of the Granville-Vance District Health Department. LiveWell Granville’s mission is “to provide the leadership, support, services, and service accessibility needed so that every citizen can choose to live healthier, happier lives.” The Annette Clark Endowment of the North Carolina Community Foundation and LiveWell Granville supported this project.

In October 2006 the Youth Issues Workgroup adopted the goal of reducing the school dropout rate in the county. In order to further that goal, the group decided to conduct focus groups with youth and parents to determine the reasons Granville County youth were dropping out of school before graduation. This project and report represent the combined perspectives of the students and parents interviewed (demographics below). The Workgroup realizes that school administrators and teachers have their own perspectives of the school environment and processes, and this report in no way is meant to diminish those views. The hope is that by understanding the students’ views, the schools, community and families can create a different dialogue to address the needs of our county’s youth, a most precious resource.

Dropout Rates a Growing Problem

The economic impact of dropouts in North Carolina is staggering. In 2007, a study of the economic impact of high school dropouts revealed that over the next 50 years the economic impact of dropouts will cost North Carolina approximately $216 billion. During the 2006-2007 school year, a record number of 23,550 students dropped out of school. Calculated from the annual public cost of approximately $4,437 per dropout per year, in 2006, dropouts cost the state more than $7.5 billion in lost income. Other recent data shows that only 68 percent of students in North Carolina graduated high school in 4 years. Whereas 74 percent of white students didn’t graduate on time, the situation was even bleaker for minority students, with only 60 percent of African-Americans and 52 percent of Hispanics graduating within four years. Granville County schools have not been exempt from these statistics. In fact, during the last 6 years, Granville County schools have faced some of the highest dropout rates in the state (e.g., 6.63% in 2006). By comparison, North Carolina’s dropout rate in 2006 was 5.04%, which makes Granville County’s 2006 rate 31.5% higher than the North Carolina rate. The county rate fell to 4.7% in 2007. The rates cited for North Carolina and for Granville County do not include expulsions. Considering this data, Granville County residents would benefit from increased efforts to prevent youth from dropping out of school.

Focus Group Methods

In this study we used Krueger and Casey’s definition of focus groups: "carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-
threatening environment." Focus groups are an effective way to ask for feedback on how to change difficult situations. Data was collected through nine semi-structured, in-depth focus groups with a total of 73 participants (see Table 1 below), and each session lasted one to two hours.

Table 1 Basic Focus Group Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Settings</th>
<th>African American Males</th>
<th>African American Females</th>
<th>White Males</th>
<th>White Females</th>
<th>Latino Males</th>
<th>Latino Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At-Risk Student Focus Group at Middle School 1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-Track Student Focus Group at High School 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-Risk Student Focus Group at High School 1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-Risk Student Focus Group at High School 2</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English as 2nd Language Group at High School 3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-Risk Student Group at Alternative Middle School</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropped Out Group #1 at Local Community Center</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropped Out Group #2 at Local Community Center</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents' Focus Group at Middle School 1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School counselors and community partners identified participants. Parents completed informed-consent documentation for each minor participant. Each focus group consisted of six to thirteen people. After introductions, the facilitators asked targeted questions of each group, while the assistant facilitators took notes. The interview questionnaire was comprised of 10 questions that discussed: what contributes to you staying in/leaving school, what are the effects of staying in/leaving school, and what do you think can be done to help you succeed in school. There was also a series of further questions that were asked in probing for additional detail (see appendix A). A tape recording of the discussion was made to ensure a complete transcript for each focus group. Following the discussion, the groups enjoyed pizza, drinks, and some social time that included extended conversation related to the focus group discussion. Each participant was given a $20 gift card for his or her time and participation.

The assistant facilitator typed the notes for each focus group. The administrative assistant listened to the tapes and edited the notes. The focus group data was analyzed using a grounded theory technique, which makes possible an in-depth understanding of the participant's underlying meanings from the data. Transcripts were coded focusing on the general themes and meanings, and these themes were then categorized into broader codes to separate, compile, and organize the descriptive data.

"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." ~William Butler Yeats

**Results**

This study revealed four major factors that influence the dropout rate:

- **Significant differences were found in the factors that lead to dropping out between those who were currently students and those who had dropped out.**
• Lack of student cognizance of the skills they will need as adults and how the schools are trying to ready them for adult life.
• Greater administrator support was suggested by each focus group; however, there was a difference of opinion as to how administrators should provide support.
• Economic factors play a key role in whether participants continue in their education.

Differences between Current Students and Dropouts

When reviewing our data we found that there was a major difference in the responses on what makes it hard to stay in school between those who are still in school and those who are not. The two figures on the next page illustrate that those who are still in school place a lot of weight on faculty behaviors/attitudes and the rules, whereas those who have already dropped out place the majority of the weight on their own risky behavior/street life and learning disadvantages. Other factors such as environment (school, neighborhood), family, social pressure (peer pressure) were also reported, but not as commonly.

These large differences in perspective raise various questions about which factors may really be relevant. It is our opinion that a combination of the two perspectives together offers a more inclusive approach. Combining these two perspectives, we see three prominent factors for these youth: personal factors, faculty behaviors, and social pressures.

Quotes from the focus groups help provide more detail regarding each of the above factors (summary statements are italicized):

• Personal factors:
  o Hard to balance family, sports and school work.
  o “Some kids progress faster so slower learners are neglected.”
  o “Stress – it makes it hard to concentrate.”
  o “Have a life after school – don’t have time for homework, remediation.”
  o “Sometimes it’s hard to ask questions.”
  o “I want to be paid to come to school.”

• Faculty behaviors
  o Discipline too strict.
  o “Needed smaller class size and patience and make each kid feel like they counted.”
  o “Some teachers care, but too many don’t care.”
  o “Don’t understand why we have to take certain classes.”

• Social pressures
  o Immature people/people judge you too much.
  o Relationships with boy/girl friends – when things go wrong; over-involvement with the opposite sex.
  o “The guys with the money, the drug dealers tempt the poor kids, it’s so overpowering.”
  o “Some people just pick on people all of the time.”
  o “Get in with the wrong crowd.”
  o “Some stay in school to do drugs or sell drugs.”
What Makes it Hard to Stay in School?

Environment 10%
Rules of Faculty 23%
Facility 50%
Personality of Faculty 26%
Social Pressure 34%
Other 7%

Figure 1. According to focus group of those currently in school

What Made it Hard to Stay in School?

Unstable Family Life 14%
Risky Behavior/Street life 40%
Personal Factors 66%
Learning styles 26%
Personality of Faculty 9%
Other 11%

Figure 2. According to focus group of those who had dropped out of school

"Education is the power to think clearly, the power to act well in the world's work, and the power to appreciate life."
~ Brigham Young
**Lack of “Real World” Skills**

Youth called for more “real world” application of the things they are learning. Many drop out and enter life unprepared to successfully take on the challenges that are before them. One youth who had dropped out mentioned that “My mind was on the street and I wanted to be out there.” The freedom many youth seek is soon replaced with worries of bills that are due, children to feed, and feeling “stuck” in bad situations. Prevention programs would benefit students by teaching about the harsh realities of dropping out of school, and the process of gaining the tools and skills they will need to succeed in the “real world.”

Focus group responses from students indicated:

- Students’ failure to recognize how the schools’ structure provides skills for life beyond high school - for the job market and daily living;
- Students’ unrealistic expectations of academic demands and their importance.

This is reflected in youth comments regarding how they perceive the school environment. The Workgroup believes it may be helpful to better understand youth perspectives: while some structure of the school environment may not change, new, more successful approaches/communication may be identified.

Dropouts indicated that they are not prepared for gainful employment after dropping out and their options are limited. We think that schools can do more to ready youth for the real world. Perhaps schools can heighten their expectations for youth by relaying the importance of structure, hard work, discipline, and doing what they don’t want to do.

“Tell kids that are at risk of dropping out what happens and try to influence them to do better”.

**Greater Administrator Support**

In this study, participants from every focus group mentioned that they felt that administrators and staff could do more to help prevent youth from dropping out. However, when asked what could be done to help, their responses varied. The table below represents the main ideas that were suggested from each group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Type</th>
<th>Suggestions for Administrators and Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Encouragement, Mentors, Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL Students</td>
<td>Mentors, Supportive Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Students</td>
<td>Active Participation, Smaller groups, Less EOG Testing, Supportive Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop Outs</td>
<td>Activities, Intervention, Community Support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Two themes that emerged from this data were: 1) the use of “hands-on activities” and 2) emotional support from administrators/teachers.

Many respondents suggested that “hands-on” or “experiential learning” activities would help keep students engaged in school. Some of the major recommendations were:

- Field trips that allow the students to see the information in action;
- Playing games (e.g., Jeopardy) to learn and review material;
- Labs where they could experiment with real world applications of the material;
- Less lecturing (boring) and more active participation in class;
- More use of computers for assignments; and
- Activities that engage students on how to use the material in real world applications.

When support was discussed, respondents focused mostly on “emotional support.” These youth feel that encouragement and support play a strong influence in one’s likelihood to drop out. Some students felt unimportant to staff, that there were often more politics involved than education, and that the discipline was often unfair. These three points were brought up repeatedly throughout the focus groups as evidenced in these youth comments:

- “They have a whole lot of ways to punish, not to help.”
- “Teachers need to understand that things happen outside of school.”
- “The whole class gets punished based on a few students.”
- “Administration needs to look at the whole story when disciplining.”
- “Discipline is taken too far for little things.”
- Teachers and administrators treat students who are not the smartest, have gotten into trouble, or have repeated a year or more differently.

They stated many times that it would be easier to do things if they felt that someone cared what they were doing instead of just feeling like it was busy work. Some stated that they didn’t understand the work, but did not receive help when they asked for it. Participants gave suggestions that they felt would help, such as:

- “Have students actively participate in class.”
- “Assign the concepts or ideas but let us pick the topics.”
- “Use smaller reading groups.”
- Use humor and media to teach.

Some issues identified as barriers to staying engaged in school work are:

- Too much pressure (including from homework and peer pressure)
- “Out of school suspension is a vacation, so stop suspending.”
- “Too much drama” with classmates, results in peer pressure.
- Bullying at school and on school buses.
- Lack of respect from teachers and classmates.
- School buses are cold.

“Last year I acted up and did not do well. Now I know it is important to do good. Now my little brother is acting up. I need to be a good role model.”
Economic Factors

Throughout each of the focus groups, economic factors were expressed as reasons for continuing one’s education. For example, when participants were asked the question “If you knew your college expenses could be paid for, would you stay in school?”, more than 75 percent said they would have stayed in school. This is a high response indicating that if money was not a factor in higher education, they would continue with their education and would go on to college. These results seem to indicate that when participants did not feel they had any chance to achieve their full potential, they felt they had little toward which to work and were more easily disenchanted with school. Most could see how further education would allow them to have more options than what dropping out/poor academic performance would allow, often stated as, “Life would be better.” Some of these students would be first generation to go to college. The parents also stated that if money was not a factor for their children to attend college that their children's desire to continue onward would keep them in school.

Dropouts reported a bit different perspective on the same issue. Many of those who dropped out of school dropped out because they believed money could be made quicker on the street. They had been misled to think that quick and easy money could be found in “hustling” or in working the kind of a job they could get as a dropout. They had been convinced that working was easier than staying in school and it got them the things they wanted. However, all of them acknowledged the reality check they experienced. The following quote better explains these feelings: “The influence of the drug dealers and rappers - the gangster life - looks glamorous but when you look up closer there is only one way out - h*** or jail.” One dropout said, “I can’t get a job anywhere, not even at McDonald’s.”

Recommendations and Next Steps

The Youth Issues Workgroup strongly believes there are many things that can be done to increase efforts to prevent youth from dropping out of school. We think that the only successful way to address the issues that lead to youth dropping out of school is to view it as a community-wide concern that requires support and intervention from every part of the county: school administrators, faculty and support staff, local government, law enforcement, community groups, parents, and the youth themselves. This report does not identify possible interventions, as we believe they are many and varied and need to arise from the community.

This report presents the perceptions of students and former students to the school system and county residents in order to further the dialogue about what is needed to encourage youth to stay in school. We discovered a complex issue with no easy, simple or uniform answers. The reasons for disillusionment and underperformance at school and subsequent dropping out are varied and reflect the difficulties that families experience in navigating the variety of barriers that confront them. Those barriers are related to community, school, and family functioning.

“I think, looking back, we would say that we could have made it. If given a second chance, we would have.”
Conclusion

This study reveals that there are many issues and concerns to be addressed in order to retain Granville County youth in school until graduation. Although this study is preliminary in nature, we think the information can be used to encourage more youth to reach their academic potential. We are indeed very grateful for those who have helped us gather this information. We are excited to know that there are many different things we can do individually and collectively to provide the leadership, support, and services that will help the county’s youth make healthier life choices. We hope you will join with us in taking the next steps to encourage the youth of our county and support the systems that assist with addressing the presenting issues. Ultimately, it is those systems, the families and the youth of the county who will benefit from the efforts undertaken.

References


Appendix A: Questions used in Our Focus Groups

What makes it hard to stay in school?
What makes it easier to stay in school?
What are the good things that happen when you stay in school?
How important is family in school success?
What could schools do to help you stay (be successful) in school?
How are school discipline issues handled?
If you could change how discipline is handled, what would you recommend?
If you knew your college expenses could be paid for, would you stay in school?
Who would approve of you dropping out of school?
Who would disapprove of you dropping out of school?

Other (already-dropped-out group):
How important is (supportive was your) family in school success?
What led to you dropping out?
What are you doing now?
Average age of exposure to drugs/alcohol before drop out.
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