The High School Dropout Problem

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I am a high school dropout. I remember well that day when I walked out of school first period and didn’t return for seven years. I can still hear the door reverberating behind me. A week before I quit, I had enrolled in this new school having just moved in with my aunt and uncle in the town I was born. I moved in with them because I was tired of getting into trouble in my former school and wanted to start with a clean slate. The year before I had failed tenth grade at a trade school, and the following year I enrolled in the local high school only to find it large and impersonal. It was at that time I made the decision to move. When I enrolled in the new school, I remember taking placement tests for several days before taking my first class. At the beginning of class, the teacher took attendance and when she got to my name, she looked at me with a frown on her face and announced in front of the entire class that she had read my cumulative folder and did not expect me to cause any trouble in her class. Branded for life as a troublemaker, I had three choices before me. I could say, yes teacher, I will be an angel in your class. The problem with this choice is that testosterone got in the way. The second choice would have been to tell her what I thought of her for saying this to me. This wasn’t an option because I was tired of being oppositional. I ended up taking the last choice, so after the period was over, I walked out of class and out of the building.

I worked for a year at a menial job, went into the Navy for four years, and worked at another menial job until I went back to school. That was also a hard decision because I had only finished the ninth grade and was not prepared well for college studies. To help prepare myself I attended Newman Preparatory School for one year to try to make up for three missing years of school. I still fell far short of enough credits to get a high school diploma but I found out I didn’t need one if I attended a federal land grant college. I applied to the University of Massachusetts and was required to take a special entrance exam made up for veterans. I passed it and was accepted because they were required by law to accept any veteran who passed the test regardless of the numbers who did. In the fall of 1966 I entered UMass at Boston and graduated with a 3.09 average in 1970. I got my master’s degree one year later at Boston University, and twelve years after that I completed my doctorate in human development and education at Boston University in two and a half years.

I credit my academic success to my supportive wife, a colleague at the job I had before going back to school who constantly encouraged me to go back to school, a terrific education at Newman Prep and UMass at Boston, and three wonderful teachers who taught first, second and fourth grade respectively and give me the foundation I needed to succeed – Miss Callahan, Miss Delmore and Miss Cahill. I still remember that they were the age of my grandmother at the time and all had silver hair with a purple tint. Each was very strict and loving.

From fifth grade on I had a terrible experience in school. The schools I attended were inner city school with kids from the toughest neighborhoods. Bullies were everywhere and anti-achievement was the norm. I suspect that this environment and my parents’ divorce took a toll on me. My parents did not place a high value on education as both were high school dropouts who worked in woolen mills since they were about 15 years old. In junior high, I was placed in a lower dead end track – section 3 - in which placement was based less on ability and more on poor performance and behavior. It was made up of goof-offs who vigorously maintained a norm of anti-achievement, sent substitute teachers packing and drove regular teachers to retire early. Section 1 was for the very bright and highly performing students; section 2 seemed to have in it students who did well but also looked good and were very popular. The students in section 4 mostly made wooden things in manual training class including the rulers with which teachers frequently hit us. In grade 8 I was truant 64 days and my report card in grades 7-9 was quite erratic and included many Es which did not mean excellent.

My educational experience has made me very interested in high school dropouts. The current national dropout rate is about 12 percent but in some inner cities it may be as high as 50 percent. For minorities in general it may be as high as 25 percent. New York Times columnist Bob Hebert wrote on this subject and found that “Overall, the United States has one of the highest high school dropout rates in the industrialized world… that half of the kids of color in the United States drop out of high school”. He also noted that dropouts earn less that high school graduates, are more likely to be unemployed, less likely to vote and more likely to end up in prison.

Some factors associated with dropping out of school include an ineffective discipline system, overburdened school counselors, a negative school climate, retention and/or suspensions used to control discipline rather than addressing causes, disregarding student learning styles, passive instructional strategies, lack of a relevant curriculum, low expectations of student achievement and fear of school violence.

I have never been on a recall list but I would have liked to be. It seems as if many schools try to get students to drop out so they do not have to deal with them because dealing with them may mean that the schools themselves would have to change whereas getting rid of troublesome students preserves the status quo. Thus, one initial step to the solution of the dropout problem is to provide a forum for high school dropouts so that they can discuss the reasons they dropped out. This information would be invaluable to school administrators so that they could put into place those preventive measures that would keep more young people in school. The problem is that school authorities must be willing to hear things that they may prefer to be left unsaid. However, if we expect our prison population to decrease along with youth suicide, depression, drug and alcohol abuse and promiscuous sex that has led to one out of four girls having a sexually transmitted disease, then we must change our paradigm to prevention.

The one example that comes to mind was of an underachieving student who was provided a modified program to increase his motivation to stay in school. In the morning he attended regular classes at high school and in the afternoon, he worked for a Harley-Davidson factory. He was so mechanically inclined that even some of the experienced mechanics came to him for advice. The managers told this student that if he finished high school, they would hire him. He did and they did.

The high school dropout problem will not be solved until former dropouts are brought into a dialogue about dropout prevention. Such a dialogue would yield constructive ideas for high schools to build on to develop more vital institutions. I am encouraged that in New Hampshire’s School Dropout policy there are provisions for the development of alternative programs. However, it is important to make high schools themselves more enticing to all students. To do this school officials need to think outside of the box. An important first step is to listen to student voices current and past.