

# Drop-Out Challenges:



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# Pathways to Success

## PREVIEW

**Action research at an alternative high school explores drop-out prevention strategies with first-year students.**

**Mentoring and individualized graduation plans help students set goals and plan for graduation.**

**Case studies best highlight successes; but results also indicate that even with support, socioeconomic factors present fierce obstacles.**

**S**tudent retention is extremely challenging for alternative schools. Because their mission is to provide a second chance to students who could not succeed in a regular setting, those schools regularly must deal with academically low-performing students, pregnant or parenting youths, or students with disciplinary problems. As numerous studies point out, these particular categories are at higher risks of dropping out of school.

Bryant Adult Alternative High School in Alexandria, VA, has an average drop-out rate of about 60%. For a number of years, the school community has been striving to understand this problem and to find ways to fight it. In September 2007, the school faculty formed a drop-out prevention research group to gain a better insight into its drop-out rate, as well as to explore ways to reduce it. The research group decided to focus on new students because they constitute more than half of the student body at any given time. The school has an open enrollment that allows students to start the program at any time throughout the school year. Those students contribute significantly to the overall drop-out rate because one-third of them typically leave the school before the end of the school year.

The research focused on three areas:

- Collecting and analyzing statistical data of newly enrolled students, including their demographic information and academic history
- Analyzing new students' education values and commitment to earning a high school diploma
- Mentoring as a means to promote students' success and reduce the number of students who drop out.

## New Arrivals

The demographics of newly enrolled students in 2007–08 closely match the overall school demographics. Half are not native English speakers, 23% are pregnant or parenting students, and 14% receive special education. Ethnically, the largest group of the newly enrolled students are Hispanic (45% of students), followed by Black (41%), White (7%), and Asian (5%).

At Bryant, the drop-out rates of Hispanic and Black students are particularly high—some years as high as 75% and 62% respectively. White and Asian students have relatively lower drop-out rates (38% and 48%), but because they are in the minority at Bryant, they do not significantly affect the school's total drop-out rate. The high numbers of Hispanic and Black students who enroll in Bryant are a reflection of the events taking place across the nation, where drop-out rates among Hispanic students are almost four times higher than those of Whites (22.4% versus 6%) and twice as high as Blacks (10.4%).

The academic skills of new students at Bryant are evaluated with reading, writing, and mathematics tests during an orientation session. Although average scores in reading and math are 63% and 62% respectively, many students (18% in reading and 30% in mathematics) score below

50%. Another indicator of low academic achievements is GPA. The average GPA for new students is 1.60 with a standard deviation of 0.67. About 18% of students have a GPA below 1.0. On average, new students come to Bryant having completed only 75% of courses they enrolled in at their previous schools. They either dropped out of their regular schools or were at risk of doing so.

## Motivation to Succeed

To further assess new students' writing skills and to study their attitudes toward education in general and their aspirations to receive a high school diploma in particular, the research group suggested the following prompt for an essay:

People from different walks and cultures come to Bryant Alternative High School. They are here for different reasons and with different expectations. Discuss what brought you here, and what you expect to achieve at Bryant.

An analysis of the resulting essays showed that students come to Bryant with a strong desire to graduate. Often they are self-critical when describing their attitudes and behaviors in previous schools, admitting that they had not taken school seriously. They came to realize that without an education, their dreams of having a career and succeeding in life would not be possible. Following are just a few quotes from the essays: "I was a class clown.... I chose to do nothing," "I did make poor choices...including attendance," "I played around a lot," "I failed algebra every quarter," and "I was not the brightest."

A group of pregnant and parenting young students (46% of new enrollment) enroll in Bryant because they expect that it will offer more flexibility and accommodations for their unique life situations than traditional schools do. Even though they frequently describe their prior school behaviors in the same terms as other students (e.g., poor attendance and academics and lack of interest in education), they express their willingness to work hard to receive a high school diploma so that they can provide a good future for their children. "I



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want to graduate so that I can have a better job, and so that I can give my child a better place to live and a better education,” wrote one student whose sentiments and hopes are common among students who are also young mothers.

Although almost all students stressed the importance of graduating from high school, only about 40% of students mentioned their plans to go to college in their essays. Because the prompt was focused on students’ expectations, however, we assume that the number of students who are considering college is even higher. This assumption is confirmed by a student survey that was conducted in the 2006–07 school year: about 72% of students said that they plan to enroll in college right after they graduate from high school.

Thus, we can summarize that students come to Bryant realizing that their previous mistakes affected their success and understanding of the importance of education. But even before the school year ended, one out of four new students became a school dropout again.

### An Experiment in Mentoring

To better understand this problem and as a way to reduce the number of students who drop out, a group of Bryant teachers decided to conduct a mentoring experiment with a focus on a research question: can mentoring at an alternative school significantly increase retention?

A group of 20 educators agreed to become student mentors and accept the following responsibilities:

- To establish a trustful relationship with a student and become familiar with the student’s academic plan, employment (if applicable), and family situation
- To encourage and support that student’s educational efforts and monitor his or her progress
- To serve as a liaison between the student and the resources that are available through the school and the community, making them more readily accessible for the student.

Twenty new students were paired with mentors. A group of another 20 students who had demographic and academic characteristics (e.g., sex, age, grade, English language proficiency, GPA, and



credits earned) that matched the mentored group were selected as a control group.

After a student and his or her parents gave consent that the student could participate in the program, the student, the mentor, the counselor, and the program coordinator met to discuss the purpose of mentoring, the expectations of both parties, and the student’s individualized graduation plan. The draft of the individualized graduation plan was prepared before the meeting after a thorough review of the student’s transcript and orientation test results. Each student’s teachers provided input regarding the expected completion date for their courses. During the meeting, all participants discussed what options, such as night or online classes and summer school, were available to accelerate the student’s graduation. The purpose of the discussion was to help the student see the available options and set realistic expectations and goals.

Traditionally, guidance counselors do similar work with newly enrolled students but don’t set a time line. They are well aware that it is hard to predict the amount of time that some students will need to complete a course, given their low basic skills levels and attendance issues. As a result, most students do not have a clear idea about when they can expect to graduate. Bryant’s flexibility allows practically unlimited time for students to complete any course if they come to class and make progress in mastering the subject. An individualized graduation plan sets a student’s goals for each semester, and lets the student see how failing to complete a certain course on time will delay his or her graduation.

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### Mixed Results

In May 2008, an analysis showed that only 60% of the students enrolled during the current school year were still on the roll. Of those students, 14% graduated in February, 10.6% transferred to another school, and 75.6% were dropped after 15 consecutive absences from class. Students in the last category can be considered dropouts. Thirty percent of new students fell in this category. This rate is significantly higher than the drop-out rate (19.2%) among the returning students. This finding confirmed the importance of focusing on newly enrolled students. The first year at any new school requires adjustment, self-discipline, and hard work, and supporting students as they go through this transition is essential.

Mentoring as a retention program showed mixed results: it was successful in some cases, but it failed in others. Overall, the drop-out rate of 15% among mentored students was lower than the one in the control group (61.5%). But because of the relatively small numbers in both control and experimental groups, these numbers cannot be considered statistically reliable. Besides, matching two groups by a few demographic and academic characteristics provided only a relative closeness between the experimental and control groups. Each individual student has unique characteristics and life circumstances that were not accounted for in the study.

Individual case studies better reveal in what situations mentoring works or fails. It was a success

for one student who had a serious health issue and had to miss two days of school every week because of the treatment he was receiving at a hospital. As a result, he began falling behind in mathematics, and his predicted graduation in February was threatened. His mentor not only arranged tutoring for him, but she also helped him by finding him free transportation to school, which saved him time and energy that he could put to completing his schoolwork. His performance in mathematics rapidly improved, and he was able to complete the course, successfully pass the Virginia high-stakes test, and graduate on time.

Another student had disciplinary problems and was struggling with chemistry. His mentor was able to establish a relationship that was instrumental in helping the student resolve a few conflicts. The mentor followed the student's performance in chemistry very closely and provided support and assistance as needed. She stayed in touch with the student's parent, who was very appreciative of the support. The student successfully graduated in February.

Three of the mentored students dropped out. One of them was a young mother who was trying to juggle multiple roles. At some point during the school year, she took a job at a hotel that required her to work 12 hours a day from 4 p.m. to 4 a.m. She was unable to attend her morning class. She began skipping school but was encouraged by her mentor to come back and to have her class load reduced. Her individualized graduation plan was redesigned, and she returned to school. But shortly thereafter, she stopped coming to school again, this time explaining she had a problem with child care. She began considering taking the Tests of General Educational Development (GED) as an alternative to earning a high school diploma. A combination of such factors as motherhood, previous truancy problems, little self-confidence, and employment led to a failure in her case.

In her previous school, she had completed only 3 of 16 attempted courses. She had multiple referrals that related to her poor attendance and disciplinary issues. In her orientation essay at Bryant, she wrote: "I have never been good at school and I have always put it as an excuse....

Ever since my dad left home, I have always wanted things my way.... I have always been stubborn.... I needed some help and advice but I have locked everyone out of my life." Those statements would indicate that she could have benefited from having a mentor and become a success story at Bryant, but she could not break her long-existing pattern of truancy. The necessity to provide for the family and to take care of a young child made this task even harder. Her teachers at Bryant agreed that GED might be a good solution in her situation.

By the end of the school year, students in the mentoring program took a survey to gauge the effectiveness of mentoring. The students were unanimously positive about their participation in the program. What students appreciated most was the support and encouragement they received from their mentors. Some students also appreciated advice in personal matters and help with their adjustment to Bryant.

In the survey, students were asked to reflect on the reasons why some of their classmates dropped out of Bryant. Their opinions were varied. Some believed that students drop out because they have little confidence in their own success, lack willpower, and have no one to encourage them to keep going. Other students believed that Bryant's lenient attendance policy gives too much freedom to students who aren't committed and who start skipping classes and eventually drop out. Jobs and family responsibilities are the main contributing factors, according to others.

Students' opinions mesh with the perceptions of their mentors, which were expressed in a similar survey. Many mentors wrote such comments as, "Keep the program in place. Find more mentors to join the program. Start early in the school year. It's working!" to express their support for and appreciation of the initiative. They found that individualized graduation plans were useful in helping students focus on meeting the requirements for graduation. On the other hand, they see student attendance as a major problem that affects the efficacy of the program and the development of a positive relationship with their protégés.

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### **No Simple Answer**

Putting the findings of the three study areas together, the research group came to the conclusion that given the demographic and academic characteristics of students entering this alternative school, the risk that new students will become dropouts is very high. New students enter Bryant with high expectations for success and a speedy graduation. When they realize that they will be expected to complete a rigorous curriculum but will have a flexible schedule that will allow them to take additional time to complete a course—plus a relatively lenient attendance policy that allows them to take up to 15 consecutive absences—many students lose focus, get discouraged, start falling behind, and eventually drop out. An individualized graduation plan prevents this by helping students visualize a path to graduation.

Although mentoring is a valuable tool for helping students adjust, it is not a panacea for those who have not made a commitment to doing the hard work that is needed to complete a high school program. Individual mentors cannot overcome poverty, teenage pregnancy, or the achievement gap. Reducing drop-out rates strongly depends on the efficacy of wide social establishments and institutions that work to overcome these challenges. **PL**

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