

THE ADVOCATE



What can you do?

Become a catalyst for change
in your community.

5



Step it up!

A street dance club provides
unconventional opportunities
for students to shine.

5



An education transformation.

Bold action by one principal
resurrects the arts and everyone wins.

6

Defeating the Dropout Crisis

Intervention + Involvement = Reduced Risks

BY KATHLEEN WILSON SHRYOCK

The statistics are staggering. Every year in the United States, millions of teens are dropping out of high school. On any given day, as many as three out of every ten teens are closing the door on an education, and nearly half of them are not even failing; they are simply walking away. For these teens, the consequences can be severe. Without a diploma to pave the way to college or career success, they are at risk for perpetuating a cycle of poverty that lasts a lifetime. For our country, the effects are equally devastating. A high dropout rate increases government spending and reliance on government health care programs. It also reduces tax revenue and increases the population in America's prisons. The National Dropout Prevention Center reports that 82% of this country's prisoners are high school dropouts. Statisticians estimate that the United States would save \$300 billion if the number of students who drop out in just one year were converted into graduates.

As overwhelming as those statistics may sound, there is a way to effectively combat the dropout crisis. Kate Pojeta, executive director of the Alliance for Student Activities, explains that substantiated, common sense strategies aimed at increasing student engagement must be included in educational reform. "The national dropout statistics are obviously a huge concern, but the research shows that there is a clear path to reversing this trend," said Pojeta. She cites a study prepared by Joseph Mahoney and Robert Cairns and published in *Developmental Psychology* which indicates that student activities are a critical part of the educational reform equation. In the study, the high school dropout rate among at-risk students was significantly lower for students who participated in student activities when compared with those who did not participate. ➔

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were converted into graduates.

- In middle school, with no participation in student activities, **52% of at-risk students dropped out.**
- When middle school students participated in one activity, the **dropout rate fell to 25.7%.**
- When middle school students participated in more than one activity the **dropout rate decreased to 12.5%.**
- In high school, **only 4.5% of at-risk students dropped out** when they were involved in one activity.
- When high school students were involved in more than one activity, the risk was **eliminated entirely.**

Research indicates that the dropout crisis has a negative impact on our communities and that student activities have been identified as an effective preventative, but how can educators and other advocates identify students who are in trouble? Are there warning signs that can predict which students are most at risk? Evidence presented in *The Middle School Moment*, a documentary produced by Frontline and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), details the impact of the dropout crisis and provides an important blueprint for identifying at-risk students. According to Dr. Robert Balfanz, co-director of the Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education (Baltimore, MD), the middle school years are a critical time for identifying a student’s dropout potential and for applying appropriate intervention strategies. Through his

research, Balfanz has identified factors—described as the ABCs—that can predict how likely a student is to drop out of high school; these indicators are attendance, behavior, and course performance.

Balfanz explains that, for most students, the process of dropping out begins in middle school when students develop habits that predict whether or not they will graduate. In high-poverty, high-risk areas, students entering early adolescence are especially vulnerable. The ABC indicators can be used to develop an early warning system. “In the middle grades, students typically start with one indicator. The earlier it is noticed and responded to, the easier it is to alter,” Balfanz said. “If left unaddressed, by the time they are in the ninth grade, students who started with one indicator, now have three or four. They are much more disengaged in school and have often developed dysfunctional coping responses.”

“Student activities are excellent examples of two powerful approaches. They make school an engaging place where students want to be and where they can feel valued and successful, and they increase the number of adults who can form supportive relationships with students.”

To combat this problem, Balfanz suggests that educators regularly review data about their students’ attendance, behavior, and course performance and use this knowledge to design appropriate interventions including a champion, or adult mentor, who can help students stay on track. “Even kids in the most dire circumstances want a future. They just need a path to it,” noted Balfanz. “They need an adult counter force who every day is reminding them in simple ways that school leads to a good future.”

Balfanz also cautions that while teachers are valuable champions, the expectation that they reach every at-risk student is unrealistic, and it is important for administrators to explore creative alternatives. This is where school-sponsored, adult-supervised, student-driven activities come to the rescue. “Student activities are excellent examples of two powerful approaches,” Balfanz explains. “They make school an engaging place where students want to be and where they can feel valued and successful, and they increase the number of adults who can form supportive relationships with students.”

The case for student activities is further supported in Sir Ken Robinson’s April 2013 TED Talk, “How to Escape Education’s Death Valley” (a4sa.org/robinson2013april). In his presentation, Robinson—an author, educator, and creativity expert—warns that the dropout crisis is only the tip of the iceberg unless our education system is jumpstarted with the secret to human thriving. He encourages decision makers to cultivate strong students by offering diverse, creative opportunities. While courses like science and math are important, an education based solely on traditional core classes is insufficient. “A real education has to give equal weight to the arts, humanities, and physical education,” he said. “Kids prosper best with a broad curriculum that celebrates their various talents, not just a small range of them. The arts aren’t just important because they improve math scores; they are important because they speak to parts of a child’s being that are otherwise untouched.”

dropout risk factors

A
Attendance
Attends less than 80 percent of the time

B
Behavior
Unsatisfactory behavior grade in a core course

C
Course Performance
Fails math or English

In high-poverty schools, if a student meets **just one** of these criteria during their middle school years and effective interventions are not in place, then there is a **75 percent chance that the student will drop out during high school.**

In contrast to traditional education programs that focus on conformity, Robinson also points out that many alternative education programs work because they are personalized, offer a broad and diverse curriculum, and feature programs that engage students outside of the classroom. Not by coincidence, these are some of the same features that make student activities an effective tool for dropout prevention. “We now know that intervention by concerned educators and significant adults can reduce risk factors, but linking that intervention to school-sponsored student activities can provide some of the most effective, scalable, and cost-efficient prevention strategies available to teens in trouble. That’s a powerful story, but it’s also an under-reported story,” said Bob Tryanski, director of the Alliance’s *Let X = Student Activities* campaign.

Unfortunately, in too many of our schools, arts, athletics, and activities programs have become the missing variable in budgeting, scheduling, and educational reform equations. The Alliance is committed to turning that around by helping educators, parents, and community members develop a realistic plan of action designed to expand and fund their own student activities programs. The Alliance also provides advocates with all of the resources needed to shine a spotlight on the dropout crisis and to promote varied activities as a powerful, affordable dropout preventative.

“Even kids in the most dire circumstances want a future. They just need a path to it. They need an adult counter force who every day is reminding them in simple ways that school leads to a good future.”

To further promote the value of diversified arts, athletics, and activities programs in reducing the dropout rate, the Alliance has combined forces with CPB and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) to launch *Let’s Get It Started*, a nationwide community screening campaign that allows educators and other stakeholders to become catalysts for positive change. “What’s exciting

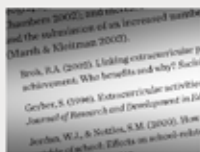
“We now know that intervention by concerned educators and significant adults can reduce risk factors, but linking that intervention to school-sponsored student activities can provide some of the most effective, scalable, and cost-efficient prevention strategies available to teens in trouble.”

about a nationwide collaboration between the Alliance, NASSP, CPB, and community leaders is that we have the potential to change the conversation about our educational priorities,” Tryanski said, “but we need community leaders and advocates to get that conversation started by sharing the story that the dropout crisis is preventable and that student activities are the vehicle that can turn things around for a student who is really struggling”

Research indicates that the dropout crisis is reaching epidemic proportions. Without effective, immediate intervention on the part of stakeholders, the negative impact on individual drop outs and their communities will only get worse. Balfanz notes that community screenings like *Let’s Get It Started* are a perfect forum for starting critical conversations in neighborhoods all across the country. “Students drop out of schools, but they stay in communities,” he said. “Hence, communities bear the cost of the crisis. There is little work for high school drop outs in the 21st century, especially work that will support a family. It is essential that all students graduate from high school prepared for adult success.” For that reason, community members must get involved in altering the course of the dropout crisis by supporting schools and advocating for policies that provide students with adult champions and opportunities to engage in their education through student activities. ●

TO LEARN MORE about the benefits and ease of hosting a *Let’s Get It Started* screening in your neighborhood, see “Make the Time” on page 5 in this issue of *The Advocate*.

DROPOUT RESOURCES



STUDENT ACTIVITIES RESEARCH SUMMARY
Where do we get our research? Download an annotated bibliography and delve deeper into the facts. a4sa.org/bibliography



ENCOURAGING NEWS FROM GRAD NATION
The 2013 *Building a Grad Nation* report outlines progress and challenges in ending the high school dropout epidemic.



THE ECONOMIC IMPACT
The Alliance for Excellent Education analyzed the economies of 220+ metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs), all fifty states, and the District of Columbia to determine the economic benefits that could be obtained by improving graduation rates in each locale.

a4sa.org/resources



RESEARCH-BASED STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITIES
The updated *Grad Nation Community Guidebook* shows concerned citizens how to spur community action, understand conditions in the local community, create lasting solutions, and produce sustainable change.



AMERICAN GRADUATE: LET'S MAKE IT HAPPEN
This long-term public media commitment, supported by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), helps communities implement solutions to the high school dropout crisis.



IDENTIFYING BARRIERS, FINDING SOLUTIONS
The Everyone Graduates Center seeks to identify the barriers impeding graduation for any and all students, to develop strategic solutions to overcome the barriers, and to build local capacity to implement and sustain these solutions.

LET'S GET IT STARTED!

Promote the value of student activities by sponsoring a community screening.



Demonstrate the Benefits



Model Intervention Strategies



Share the Research



Promote the Value!

 BE A CHAMPION

Meet Sandy St. Louis

National Campaign Manager, FRONTLINE's Dropout Nation

AMERICAN GRADUATE: *Let's Make It Happen*, sponsored by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), is a nationwide campaign aimed at helping communities identify solutions to the dropout crisis. As part of this campaign, CPB previously sponsored a community screenings program featuring FRONTLINE's *Middle School Moment*, an important documentary that discusses the importance of identifying students at risk for dropping out. This fall, the Alliance for Student Activities will join forces with the CPB and the National Association of Secondary School Principals in a new wave of community screenings that will not only raise awareness about the dropout crisis but will prescribe student activities as an affordable dropout preventative. In addition to viewings of *Middle School Moment*, the campaign will feature the Alliance's *Do the Math* and *Solve for X* videos. Sandy St. Louis, the national campaign manager for FRONTLINE's Dropout Nation, speaks out about the importance of these programs.

Why is it important for educators, community members, and other stakeholders to be aware of dropout statistics?

When I first started working on FRONTLINE's national campaign, I was struck by how many students are dropping out of high school. I had no idea the extent of the problem. Once you know the numbers, it's hard to ignore the urgency of this national issue.

Why are student activities an effective strategy in combating the dropout crisis?

Adding a broad range of activities to a student's academic experience helps them stay engaged in school and keeps the curriculum relevant to their lives and special interests. Every student is unique, and student activities allow them to express their individuality, explore their passions, and demonstrate their curiosity about a range of subjects.



What are some positive results that occurred as a result of FRONTLINE's previous community screenings?

Through screenings of *Middle School Moment* and resulting discussions, FRONTLINE was able to raise awareness about the importance of the middle grades in preventing dropouts and the unique vulnerabilities of kids in those grades. We also recognized that educators are not the only key to solving the dropout crisis. Communities, parents, mentors, and others must work together.

How does the Alliance for Student Activities' *Let's Get It Started* campaign complement earlier dropout awareness programs?

Many producers, like FRONTLINE, are working with partners in public media and beyond to support community outreach efforts. Public media plays a significant role in building community capacity and national awareness around the dropout issue, but we cannot do it without the support of partners like the Alliance and NASSP to help us reach students, educators, and other stakeholders.

What is your advice to individuals who want to raise awareness about the significance of the dropout crisis and the importance of supporting effective interventions like student activities?

My advice is to get involved and stay involved. You don't need to be an educational policy expert, government official, or even a parent to care about this and get involved. College students can be role models and mentors, business people can show a kid a path to a good career, and others can volunteer their time and talents to keep students engaged in their educational achievement. It's an issue that touches everyone, and it's a problem we can solve when our communities come together to help kids stay in school. ●

Be a Game Changer in Your Community

IT IS HARD TO ARGUE against expanding arts, athletics and activities when you consider the benefits of increasing student involvement. Unfortunately, the average tenth grader spends less than one hour a week involved in school-sponsored, adult-supervised, student-driven activities. Too often arts, athletics, and activities have become the missing variable in educational reform equations. We can't afford to allow those trends to continue. The stakes are too high.

The Alliance's *Let's Get It Started* community screening program makes it easy to promote the value of student activities. By committing to host a screening, you can take the first step towards mobilizing an action-oriented team of educators, parents, and community leaders who are serious about engaging more students in their schools.

"Whether you are sharing the videos with ten people in your living room, hosting twenty-five parents and teachers at a school, or organizing a community-wide meeting with 100 participants, anyone can be a catalyst for change," said Bob Tryanski, director of *Let's Get It Started*.

Potential hosts simply need to locate a suitable venue, spread the word, and get the conversation started using the free *Let's Get It Started* toolkit. With each online registration, the Alliance will provide the host with all of the information needed to effectively promote the value of student activities



and reclaim the dollars needed to sustain a vibrant co-curricular activities program.

The comprehensive kit includes the Alliance's *Solve for X* video highlighting the unintended consequences of funding cuts to arts, athletics, and activities programs. Frontline's *Middle School Moment* personalizes that story by focusing on one student's success at overcoming the obstacles that put her at risk for dropping out of high school. Finally, the Alliance's *Do the Math* video connects *Middle School Moment's* intervention strategies with compelling research demonstrating how student activities can reduce dropout rates, increase test scores, lead students to make better choices, and provide a launching pad to college and career success. An event planner's guide, a facilitator's manual, and links to other valuable resources are also included. ●

SIGN UP TODAY AT a4sa.org/screening

CLUB CONNECTIONS

Street Dance Club Motivates Students to Step It Up

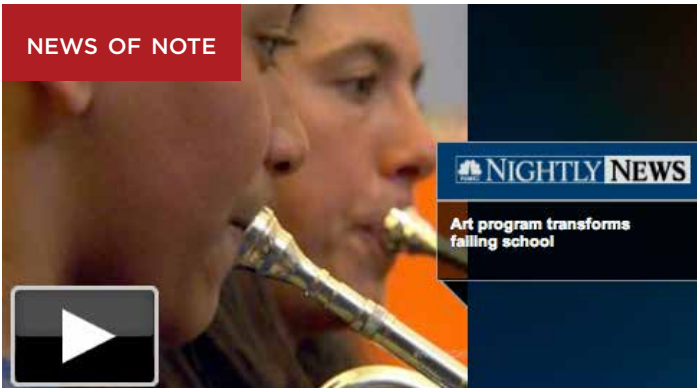
FOR ANN POSTLEWAITE, director of student programs for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, her varied experiences in student activities have provided proof that a diverse offering of clubs can help at-risk students stay in school. Research reaffirms her observations. Among the body of evidence is a 2002 *Harvard Educational Review* article stating that participation in school-based activities benefits low-status, disadvantaged students as much as or more than their more advantaged peers.

She recalls an experience as the student activities coordinator at Roseville Area High School (Roseville, MN) in which a less traditional club transformed a tricky situation into an opportunity for student engagement. Postlewaite explains that a group was hanging out after school, street dancing in the halls. The students were unsupervised and were frequently reported for loitering. While Postlewaite actively promoted student-initiated clubs through her activities program, none of these students had thought about channeling their energy into a school-sponsored activity. "Instead of turning them away, we encouraged them to form a club. A teacher, who was staying after school anyway, volunteered to monitor the group. More students joined and were

spending time after school sharing their talents and building connections with others," she said. "The group performed at school events, and the student body went crazy. It was great to see students that were not normally recognized being acknowledged in positive ways."

Postlewaite adds that—at an average cost of one to three percent of the total budget—activities can be a bargain. In addition, she encourages educators to think creatively. "Are there already teachers available after school? What if the students bring their own supplies? What about fundraising? Students benefit when they share in the responsibility of planning and maintaining their own activities. When you look at how many students are involved in an activity and consider what they might be doing if they weren't engaged in these programs at school, it's easy to imagine the activity's value." ●





Arts and Activities Ignite Positive Change

WHEN ORCHARD GARDENS was founded in 2003, expectations in the community of Roxbury, MA were high. Supporters of the new public school hoped that a focus on the arts would allow students to thrive. Instead, a school that was supposed to be a source of enrichment was quickly defined by violence. Arts programs never emerged, and poor student performance became the rule. Six administrators later, Principal Andrew Bott was determined to redefine the school. He made the bold decision to eliminate the significant dollars spent on security and reinvest those funds into the arts. The improvements in academics, behavior, and school climate were astounding. Orchard Gardens now boasts one of the fastest student improvement rates in the state.

The results at Orchard Gardens confirm what many experienced educators have long suspected; when schools invest in viable arts programs, young people become energized and educational outcomes improve. Investigators at the Minneapolis-based Search Institute have proven that the secret to student success is rooted in the language of human thriving—a concept indicating that people do best when they are engaged in something that brings them joy. Author and educator, Ken Robinson, agrees that strong students are best cultivated through schools that provide opportunities for young people to practice their spark through arts, activities, and athletics. ●

TO READ MORE about the transformation of Orchard Gardens, view this article from NBC news: a4sa.org/artshired

☞ PROMOTE THE VALUE

return on investment

Research has shown that participation in student activities can **reduce or even statistically eliminate the risk** that a student will choose to drop out of high school.

yet...

The average school district spends **less than 3%** of its total budget to support student activities.

so?

A reduction in the dropout rate benefits everyone. In the course of a lifetime, a high school graduate generates more tax revenue and requires **\$200,000 less in government spending** than a high school dropout.

when you do the math...

student activities are a bargain!

Promote the value.
Alliance for Student Activities
a4sa.org

THE ADVOCATE

The Advocate is published ten times a year by the Alliance for Student Activities, a nonprofit corporation whose mission is to promote the value of student activities through advocacy, training, resources, and networking.

a4sa.org

Submissions of student activities research and other inquiries are welcome. Contact advocate@a4sa.org

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