# School dropout prevention: What arts-based community and out-of-school-time programs can contribute

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## Abstract

*Out-of-school-time programs, especially arts-based programs, can be critical players in a community's efforts to prevent school dropout. This research review suggests the following approaches for arts-based programs: (1) recruitment and retention of target populations with multiple risk factors; (2) long-term skill development that engages youth behaviorally, emotionally, and academically rather than a drop-in culture; (3) an emphasis on the critical ingredient of real-world applications through performance; (4) staff development and mentoring; (5) a strategic community-level plan for dropout prevention; (6) and program content reframed toward competencies that underlie better school performance and prosocial behavior, such as communication, initiative, problem solving, motivation, and self-efficacy.*

CONCERNS OVER WEAK national academic progress and the growing achievement gap have affirmed that "schools alone are not enough" and have fueled interest in understanding the potential role that community-based and out-of-school-time (OST) programs can play in retaining middle and high school youth in

school.[1] Although there are substantial research findings on traditional education classrooms and systems related to student dropout, much less work has been done to explore dropout prevention as an outcome of community-based and OST programs. The majority of these types of programs incorporate direct academic support in their model to reengage students in their own learning and motivation to graduate. In addition, a number of programs support student learning and engagement using instructional tools that are not traditionally considered academically focused, such as the visual and performing arts. The unique role of community and OST arts-based programs in dropout prevention efforts is explored in this article. Our goal is to inform those working in existing and emerging arts-based community and OST programs and youth workers about how to incorporate effective dropout prevention strategies and practices in their programs.

Three key questions guide this article:

- What are the predictors of high school dropout?
- What are best practices components from community dropout prevention programs?
- What is known about the role of arts in community-based or OST programming as a dropout prevention program element?

*Methods*

We conducted a review exploring the current discussion and research findings on high school dropout prevention as related to community-based and OST programs, with a specific emphasis on arts-based programs. We used a Web document search and several electronic databases, including Academic Search Complete and PsycInfo, to search for recent journal articles, reports, research briefs, and conference proceedings. The Web site and document search process included reviewing materials from organizations such as the Forum for Youth Investment, National Dropout Prevention Center, U.S. Department of Education, Center for Mental

Health in Schools at UCLA, and Communities in Schools. In total, we selected 105 documents for initial review. This article incorporates information from over 40 of the most relevant selected documents. We primarily focused on literature and research published within the past fifteen years, reviews of the literature, and those who reported on evaluation or research findings that could inform programming and approaches for arts-based programs. For purposes of this article, "arts-based programming" refers to the visual arts (for example, painting, textile arts), performing arts (for example, dance, drama, music), and media arts (for example, digital photography, video-making).

## *Predicting high school dropout*

According to the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk, approximately one thousand U.S. high schools have a 50 percent rate of graduation.[2] The long-term cost of school failure includes increased likelihood of being unemployed, committing crimes, receiving public assistance, and being incarcerated.[3] Dropouts are less likely to receive health insurance and have pension plans, be in good health, and live as long as those who graduated.[4] In 2007, the National Dropout Prevention Center and Communities in Schools  conducted a comprehensive literature review with the goal of identifying risk factors or conditions that significantly increase high school dropout rates.[5] In general, their findings pointed to a multitude of dropout risk factors in several domains: individual, family, school, and community.

No single risk factor can accurately predict who is at risk for school failure, but risks increase when several factors are considered together. Dropouts are not a homogeneous population, and many times a lengthy process of disengagement, which begins before kindergarten, leads to the process of dropping out. In other words, it is not a single event that leads to dropping out but a process of risk factors that build and compound over time. Although

most dropouts leave school by eleventh or twelfth grade, two studies have identified earlier patterns of dropout: tenth grade in Chicago and Baltimore and ninth grade in Philadelphia.[6]

One of the most critical time periods for students when they begin to show warning signals is in the transition to middle and then to high school—respectively, sixth and ninth grades—even in the first month of the school year.[7] In addition to having to negotiate a new and often larger institutional setting, students find that the course work has become more intellectually demanding, teachers are less supportive, peer groups are larger, relationships are more complicated, and temptations become greater at the same time that they begin to experience more personal freedom.[8] The following sections provide a brief overview of the most significant contributors to dropout during the middle or high school years.

### Early adult responsibilities

When children are forced to take on adult responsibilities, there is an increased likelihood of falling behind in school and eventually dropping out. Such responsibilities include taking on a job to help pay for family expenses, taking care of siblings, or becoming a teen parent.[9]

### Social attitudes, values, and behavior

Antisocial behavior in the early adolescent years, such as substance abuse, early sexual risk taking, and violence, has been linked to dropping out of school.[10] How adolescents spend their free time also plays a role; for example, teens who do not read for pleasure each week are more likely to drop out.[11]

### School performance

Whether it is measured by course failure, grades, or test scores, academic performance is one of the strongest predictors of dropout starting even in the first grade through the elementary school years into middle school and eventually into high school.[12]

### School engagement and disengagement

Students who become detached from their academic studies typically start to demonstrate patterns of absenteeism and cutting class, not completing homework on a regular basis, and coming to class unprepared.[13] When students indicate low educational expectations, such as being uncertain about graduating from high school or not having any plans beyond high school, they are at risk for dropping out before getting a diploma.[14] The psychological reasons given for dropping out of school include a lack of a sense of belonging at school, not feeling connected to any teachers, or a generalized dislike of school.[15] Dropouts tend to associate themselves with friends who are also at risk of school failure.[16] One major sign of social disengagement is lack of involvement in school-based extracurricular activities, such as sports, school newspaper, and clubs.[17]

### Family background characteristics

Above all other family characteristics, socioeconomic status appears to be the most consistent factor that affects dropout, whether measured through parent education level, occupation, or income.[18] Those youth at most risk of school failure are students from nontraditional homes, such as non-English-speaking households and single-parent or stepparent families.[19] Family conflict, health problems, residential moves, and other family crises such as divorce, remarriage, or death all have a negative impact on the likelihood that a young person will stay in school.[20] Male students from minority backgrounds are particularly at risk for dropping out.[21] Latino and African American boys are much more likely to repeat a grade level than white boys or girls of any racial/ethnic group. Boys, in particular minority boys, are suspended or expelled from school in higher numbers than girls are.[22]

### Family engagement and commitment to education

Low parental expectations about school, parents who dropped out when they were young, or siblings who have dropped out place students at high risk to drop out themselves.[23] Parents' actions

regarding the importance of education send implicit messages to their children, for instance, avoiding talk about academic performance or behavior, rarely getting involved in PTA types of activities, and a lack of study aids and homework monitoring in the home.[24]

## OST dropout prevention efforts

Given the risk factors reviewed, many of which highlight the critical gap in caring adults who can offer guidance and help young people thrive, as well as the perils of unstructured time alone, OST programs can be critical players in a community's efforts to prevent school dropout. However, many dropout prevention programs are being used throughout the country with almost no documentation of their development or little or no long-term follow-up data to determine impacts on youth over time.[25] Positive youth outcomes are more likely to occur when a program's theoretical rationale, objectives, goals, and outcome evaluation data have been carefully reviewed.

Starting from a list of evidence-based programs compiled by Sharon Mihalic at the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence and cross-referencing the listed programs with other sources, the National Dropout Prevention Center identified fifty exemplary programs.[26] These programs met the criteria of being ranked in the top tier by at least two sources; were currently in operation; had consistent, positive outcomes; targeted students from kindergarten through twelfth grade; and had no major recent revisions to their program. One of the programs showing at least moderate to large effects on positive school behaviors is Talent Search, which operates in Texas and Florida and serves over nine thousand eight hundred mainly low-income students who are future first-generation college students. The Talent Search curriculum has three parts:

- Individualized academic assistance for their current school work, such as tutoring and counseling

- Exploration of future careers and colleges, including aptitude assessment, visits to college campuses, and preparation for college entrance exams
- Workshops for participants' families

Another program that has demonstrated positive effects on school behaviors, Quantum Opportunity, emphasizes long-term commitment and case management follow-up over several years to lower dropout rates and track success. Operating across several states, including Ohio, Texas, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and Washington, along with Washington, D.C., this program combines mentoring, tutoring, recreational programs, and financial incentives to attract at-risk youth to their programs and retain them.

Of the top fifty evidence-based dropout programs identified by Mihalic,[27] the most frequently used strategy of life skills development (which was incorporated into two-thirds of these programs) entailed developing the following:

- Communication skills
- Healthy relationships
- Problem-solving and decision-making skills
- Critical thinking
- Assertiveness
- Peer resistance and selection
- Stress reduction
- Leadership
- Appreciation for diversity

The second most frequently used strategy was family strengthening activities, such as providing specific training to parents on how to assist their child academically. About half of the top fifty programs included parents as a critical part of their dropout prevention framework. The third most frequent strategy was academic support, such as homework assistance and tutoring, which about one-quarter of the evidence-based programs used.

Although the primary goals of each of these dropout programs are focused on positive school engagement and academic skill building, the application of these goals is centered not only around direct academic support but also on developing the intermediary skills that are critical to academic success, such as developing positive relationships with others, learning how to communicate effectively, and appreciating diversity. These types of skills are critical for nurturing young people who need a positive and supportive environment to bring their assets to the foreground and become productive citizens.

## Arts-based youth development

In resource-poor communities, young people may have a particularly difficult time finding opportunities to feel valued and accepted as engaged citizens, which makes youth development programs so vital in order for young people to remain connected to their communities.[28] With ongoing national education budget cuts necessitating tangible evidence of learning gains that will improve high-stakes testing results, arts classes fall victim to cuts, leaving a cultural void in the school curriculum.[29] In some communities, arts-based alliances between nonprofit organizations and businesses have formed to fill some of these institutional gaps in order to involve young people in collaborative experiences that increase their knowledge and skills during the OST hours.

The Arts Education Partnership and the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities developed Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning, an initiative that explored the impact of arts education experiences on young people's lives.[30] They compiled seven research teams that examined a variety of art education programs, both in and out of school, using quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Although the teams conducted their investigations independently, a notable consensus existed among their findings that pertained to theories regarding how and why the arts change the learning experience.

Seven common themes emerged regarding why the arts change the learning experience. They:

1. Reach students who are not being reached through other means
2. Reach students in ways that had not been tapped into before
3. Connect students to themselves and with each other
4. Transform the learning context
5. Provide learning opportunities for the adults in young people's lives
6. Provide different challenges for students who are already considered successful
7. Provide a real-world learning experience

There were also seven common themes regarding how the arts change the learning experience. They:

1. Provide direct access to the arts and artists`
2. Require significant staff training and administrative support
3. Support extended engagement in the ongoing artistic process
4. Encourage self-directed learning
5. Promote complexity and challenges
6. Allow management of risk and vulnerability
7. Engage community leaders and resources

In their list of promising practices from twenty-three organizations using a variety of media arts and technologies, Baker, Jeffers, and Light encourage programs to:

- Focus on the role of participants and adults as facilitators, role models, and co-explorers
- Prepare young people for the workforce by building strong program relationships with business and industry and by exhibiting the work that young people do to potential and current community partners

- Teach technological literacy but also teach skills that are not technology specific, such as self-expression, teamwork skills, and linking technology content with other types of projects
- Maintain a family-like sense of community by developing a sense of work ethics and interpersonal skills
- Give priority to underserved youth, particularly girls, and recruit staff who reflect participants' identities and communities[31]

## *Out-of-school arts learning outcomes*

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, after-school arts programming not only increases the academic achievement of at-risk youth but also decreases drug use and juvenile delinquency, increases self-esteem, and increases positive interactions and connections with peers and adults.[32] Students have attributed these positive outcomes through arts education to increased caring and attention from supportive arts instructors, an increase in self-esteem, and a sense of accomplishment through the learning opportunities.[33] For economically disadvantaged youth, studies have shown that access to arts education benefits low-income populations in unique ways. In an eleven-year national study of youth in low-income neighborhoods, McLaughlin found that those who participated in community-based arts programs were more likely to have high academic achievement, be elected to class office, participate in a math or science fair, or win an award for creative writing.[34] The programs studied included those based on athletics, community service, and arts. Surprisingly, although youth in the arts programs were identified as most at risk, these young people were doing the best compared to youth in the programs based on community service or athletics. McLaughlin hypothesized that the characteristics particular to arts-based program settings and culture make them more effective than the other alternatives.

## *Recommendations*

The research conducted for this article suggests the following dropout prevention program strategies and approaches for arts-based community and OST programs.

### *Focus on identifying, recruiting, and retaining the target population*

A review of program goals and priorities in order to identify a specific target population for recruitment would be worthwhile. Mathematica researchers have concluded that dropout prevention programs typically end up serving students who were not at risk of dropping out and do not serve students who are at risk.[35] In order to avoid this mismatch of service delivery to the appropriate population, program developers might pay attention to the high-risk individual and family characteristics noted previously in this article to identify, target, and recruit purposively for programs. Wright, John, and Sheel recommend a three-stage process for recruiting and sustaining involvement of parents and youth:

1. Community mapping and active recruitment strategies—for example, identifying community characteristics and resources; setting up booths in malls; and posting advertisements at malls, housing projects, schools, community-based organizations, ethnic organizations, and parks and recreation centers
2. Inviting parents to an open house to explain any participant incentives and remove obstacles for participation, such as transportation issues
3. Matching artists and staff members to participant characteristics, such as race/ethnicity[36]

Since transition into high school has been identified as one of the critical periods for dropout prevention, focusing on recruiting at-risk eighth and ninth graders would be an important step. Partnerships with local schools, including key relationships with principals, guidance counselors, and in-school arts and technology

teachers, could lead to numerous referrals and opportunities to make classroom presentations, hold school assemblies, and offer information through informal presentations and disseminating program information during school orientations. Current participants in the program can serve as recruiters by spreading the word to their friends and classmates to come check out the program.

To increase retention of students over a longer period of time, programs could provide leadership opportunities for current students to become mentors to younger cohorts and apprentices to adults in real-world jobs and to be given greater levels of decision-making capacities within the program itself. For instance, participants can periodically engage with staff in focus groups to reflect on the program and how to improve it. More committed participants can also be offered a position as assistant to the director, a peer leader, or a youth representative on an advising committee or board.

### *Offer dynamic arts-based programming that engages youth*

It would make sense for programs to review attendance levels of current course offerings, student feedback, and observations of meaningful staff-youth relationships during the program. A broad assessment of current teaching practices and instructional approaches would inform a process of redirecting practice toward a dynamic teaching model that engages youth behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. In addition, programs should create opportunities for sustained youth engagement and reflection through ongoing projects, youth journals, and portfolios.

Long-term engagement can be encouraged by sequencing courses in a way that provides continuation incentive. For example, a first course sequence could begin with script-writing, then move on to video production, and then a course on postproduction and editing, all of which require successful completion before taking the next course. Programs might consider emphasizing a performing arts genre, such as spoken word or poetry, drama, dance,

or music, in order to foster community dialogue tied to showcase opportunities. In terms of specific curricula, research suggests that programming should not just focus on the delivery of services and activities, but also seek to develop and maintain trusting social relationships with peers and adults. One way to encourage discussion and connection between participants is to start the day with "check-ins" so that the staff members are in touch with how their students are doing at school, home, and life in general. Caring relationships with mentors have been shown to be key to program retention and positive outcomes.

A purposeful plan with multiple strategies to ensure program impact should be in place to address multiple risk factors across the domains of the individual, family, school, and environment.[37] For example, incorporating an element of tutoring or counseling on top of arts program activities might increase graduation rates.

### *Emphasize performance and recognition*

Prior research on arts-based programs emphasizes the critical ingredient of audience and real-world applications through performance. If programs were to adopt a performance aspect to their model, youth workers should pay particular attention to each course being suitable for showcasing or performances such that no student is left out of the performance aspect. Once successful exhibitions have showcased student work with positive feedback from a familiar audience of family, peers, and community members, programs may take the next step to professionalize student work and increase students' confidence and networking opportunities by entering them into arts contests and local, regional, or national youth arts and media arts festivals. In terms of appreciation events and ways to encourage long-term enrollment, programs have incorporated an end-of-year awards ceremony in which every student receives an award for his or her commitment or an individualized award for improving in particular ways, as identified by the staff instructor.

### Offer training on youth development to enhance staff mentoring skills

It is critical to recruit staff who reflect participant characteristics in race/ethnicity and gender. Staff instructors should not only be professionals in their fields with connections to industry, but they need to have certain personal characteristics such as interacting and communicating well with at-risk youth; a willingness to mentor youth over time both within the subject taught and outside; an ability to understand the different pathways that young people might need (for example, different learning styles) to grow at their own pace; and a sense of passion for their art, which may be contagious to their students, motivating them to achieve and hone their new craft. Programs can enhance the contribution of master teachers and mentors by including extensive professional development on positive youth development theory and approaches. In addition, programs can support dedicated time for teachers to collaborate on student projects, check in on student progress, and help one another troubleshoot solutions for keeping students engaged in the program itself and at school.

### Involve parents and community

Lack of student school engagement is associated with parental lack of school engagement, parental commitment to education, and parental expectations for children. For programs to encourage parent involvement, thereby offering more opportunities for parents to become familiar with their children's talents and interests, the program might invite parents to open houses, exhibitions, fundraisers, and a special parent day at program classes so that students and parents can have the experience of learning and cocreating together. Parents might be invited to speak at these performances and exhibits, reflecting on their reaction to watching the young people perform. Open house events might tie in school engagement topics, such as credits needed to graduate or tutoring and counseling, so that parents and students have opportunities to discuss progress in school in a structured yet informal way.

In addition, a strategic plan for dropout prevention needs to be formulated at the community level. It is critical to work with community partners such as other youth-serving organizations, mental health, social services, and educational institutions to reach consensus, establish priorities, and do action planning around dropout prevention. In order to establish and maintain community ties and contribute to the community's cultural awareness of youth ideas, youth arts projects can be displayed and showcased at community partners' office buildings, health centers, community theaters, museums, or galleries.

### Evaluate intermediary skills

Consideration should be given to reframing program planning and content toward skills and competencies that underlie better school performance and prosocial behaviors. Program content, instructional practices, and outcome evaluation should focus on intermediary skills besides the long-term goal of dropout prevention, such as engagement, expectations, relationships with adults, relationships with peers, communication, initiative, problem solving, motivation, self-efficacy, and self-competence. A menu of both quantitative and qualitative measures will offer a full picture of progress on youth outcomes and participation experiences.

### Conclusion

The research literature on dropout prevention points to a number of school-based, classroom-based, and district-based strategies that have been demonstrated to support keeping students in school. It appears that the most important activity that community-based and OST programs can do is to work on the components of dropout prevention that can also apply to settings outside the school experience—for example:

- Reengage youth who have become or are in danger of disengaging from school.

- Provide opportunities for attachment and the development of close and caring relationships with an adult.
- Provide opportunities for involvement in an extracurricular endeavor, such as appreciating the arts and learning principles of art design.
- Offer a social and learning environment that is supportive and embraces positive youth development principles.

This article has looked at the connection between two often separate efforts within youth development: dropout prevention and arts-based programming. Such knowledge can inform and guide youth workers and program coordinators in arts-based community and OST programs in developing, implementing, and integrating effective strategies and practices for dropout prevention within their local programs and communities.

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