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## High school dropout : educators' knowledge of and perceived role in dropout prevention

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HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT: EDUCATORS' KNOWLEDGE OF AND PERCEIVED  
ROLE IN DROPOUT PREVENTION

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Educational Specialist

Dustin Reese  
University of Northern Iowa  
May 2007

## ABSTRACT

The reasons behind high school dropout have been examined for years. Previous research has focused primarily on understanding student characteristics in relation to high school dropout. However, teachers play an important role in preventing school dropout. Their beliefs about dropout may influence the way in which they interact with students, especially those they believe are at risk for dropout. Because of the critical influence teachers can have on students' educational decisions, this research sought to answer the following questions: (1) What factors do educators believe contribute to students' decision to drop out of school? and (2) What type of influence do educators believe they have on students' educational decisions? Teachers in this study stated that frequent absences, frequent trouble at school, limited parental support, low academic achievement, and trouble with the law contribute significantly to students' decisions to drop out of school. In addition, teachers stated that their role in encouraging student persistence included building relationships, communicating caring, motivating and encouraging, and pointing to the future. However, almost a quarter of teachers stated that they have little or no influence on keeping students in school. If high school dropout is to be prevented, teachers need to develop an accurate understanding of dropout and the positive influence they can have on students at-risk of dropout.

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This Study by: Dustin Reese

Entitled: High School Dropout: Educator's Knowledge of and Perceived Role in Dropout Prevention

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

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## CHAPTER 1

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, researchers, educators, and policy-makers have recognized high school dropout as a concern. However, research has focused on dropout as the result of student deficits (Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003). These research findings suggest that characteristics or features inherent to the individual student are primarily responsible for students' school withdrawal. However, teachers play an important role in both contributing to dropout, as well as dropout prevention. Although student characteristics may influence the student's school experience, teachers play a role in making school more rewarding. Teachers, by communicating caring and interacting positively with students, can help prevent high school dropout (Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995; Fine, 1991; Knesting, in press). The purpose of this research was to examine what teachers know about high school dropout as well as their perception of their role in dropout prevention.

#### Importance of Dropout Research

Current legislation puts pressure on schools to improve learning outcomes for their students. The implementation of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) has resulted in schools being held accountable for student outcomes (Lehr et al., 2003). One example of this accountability is graduating students on time (U.S. Department of Education, 2003a). The pressure placed on school districts to improve their graduation rate has led to an increased focus on how to help students finish high school (U.S.



Department of Education, 2003b). Since teachers are directly involved with students, they are in an excellent position to provide guidance to students in finishing school.

The percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds not currently enrolled in high school and without a high school credential is estimated to be 10% (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). In 2004, schools reported that 6.8% of Caucasians, 11.8% of African-Americans, and 23.8% of Hispanics failed to graduate from high school. This difference between racial/ethnic groups has remained consistent over the last 40 years. Although overall dropout rates appear to decrease considerably from 1960 (27.2%) to 1990 (12.1%), they have remained stable over the last fifteen years (Hayes, Nelson, Tabin, Pearson, & Worthy, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). This relatively stable dropout rate could be due to researchers' and policy-makers' overemphasis on understanding student deficits. When focusing on internal characteristics of at-risk students, only modest positive change can be accomplished. Shifting the focus to factors within teachers' control could possibly reduce this dropout rate.

Dropouts may face a variety of problems when they leave school. The median annual income for high school dropouts is significantly lower than adults with a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2004a). In addition, the unemployment rate for high school dropouts is significantly higher than adults with a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2004b). Finally, high school dropouts may experience alienation in adolescence, possibly increasing their likelihood of gang activity, violence, vandalism, absenteeism, or truancy (Brown, Higgins, & Paulsen, 2003).

### Describing the Students Who Drop Out

Past dropout research has focused on individual student deficits (Lehr et al., 2003). As a result, an extensive literature base has been developed describing the students at-risk for dropping out (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). Poor academic performance (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbot, Hill, Cattalono, & Hawkins, 2000), employment during school (Barro & Kolstad, 1987; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005; Karpinski, Neubert, & Graham, 1992), lack of motivation (Gewertz, 2006; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997), grade retention (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, 1989; Entwisle et al., 2005; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Schargel & Smink, 2001), and high-risk behavior (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Rosenthal, 1998) have been correlated with early school dropout. Over the past 50 years, many different variables that correlate with high school dropout have also been identified (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000). However, these variables have not been useful in creating interventions. Demographic factors such as race, low socioeconomic status, and early parenthood have consistently been associated with school dropout (Cairns et al., 1989). Yet these wide-ranging variables leave significant variance unaccounted for and they are not very informative when trying to determine the process of school withdrawal (Jimerson et al., 2000).

Teachers have very little control over student characteristic variables. This may be a contributing explanation for the limited success in reducing high school dropout over the past fifteen years. With current legislation holding schools accountable for improving student learning outcomes (Lehr et al., 2003) and dropout rates that are not decreasing

(U.S. Department of Education, 2005), it is necessary for teachers to take a more active role in preventing school dropout. It is important for educators and researchers to look beyond the individual characteristics of students and to focus on potential factors within the schools and the possible interactions between schools and the students (Knesting, in press; Lehr et al., 2003). Fine (1991) states, "The bulk of dropout literature obsesses on characteristics of individual students who flee rather than on attributes of the schools from which they flee" (p. 22). By identifying and understanding the factors within the schools, educators can take preventative measures to prevent school dropout and encourage student persistence.

### Encouraging Student Persistence

Educators' beliefs about dropout can influence the way in which they interact with students, especially those they believe are at-risk for dropout. Educators must develop an accurate understanding of the dropout process, particularly the reasons behind it, if they want to decrease the prevalence of students leaving school without a diploma. Student characteristics have been the primary focus of dropout research, however, reducing the number of students who leave prior to graduation goes beyond these characteristics. To reduce high school dropout, educators must acknowledge and understand their role in the process of students withdrawing from school.

Although student characteristics contribute to high school dropout, teachers may play an important role in addressing this problem. Researchers have found that listening to students (Gallagher, 2002; Knesting, in press), communicating caring (Knesting, in press), reducing alienation (Altenbaugh et al., 1995; Brown et al., 2003; Fine, 1991;

Gallagher, 2002; Kaplan & Peck, 1997; Knesting, in press; Shoho, 1996; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989), holding positive expectations (Knesting, in press), and providing students with a sense of control (Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001) are critical to supporting student persistence. These factors are discussed further below.

### Listening to Students

The problem of students' dropping out is acknowledged within most school systems. Teachers, administrators, school board members, district superintendents, parents, politicians, school counselors, and researchers are all involved in discussions about dropout prevention. However, one group of important individuals is often left out of this discussion: the students (Knesting, in press). Students at-risk for dropping out have opinions that "need to be solicited, valued, and utilized in determining school mission statements, planning learning programs, assessing school climate, and assigning and evaluating school personnel" (Gallagher, 2002, p. 37). Listening to students about why they drop out provides information that may strengthen dropout prevention programs (Williams & Riccomini, 2006). If teachers take the time to listen to students at-risk of dropping out, they may gain a better understanding of what influences their decision to leave early and what may help them graduate.

### Communicating Caring

Knesting (in press) discusses the importance of communicating caring to all students, especially those at-risk of dropping out. The students in her study stated that feeling respected and cared for was a significant factor in their school persistence. The

lack of care that school provided was their biggest complaint. In addition, the support they received from teachers who they believed to care about them was one of the most vital components of their persistence.

Caring for students seems quite obvious and most teachers claim that they do care. Rather than telling educators to care about their students, the focus should be on *how* to care for students (Knesting, in press). Many schools may think they are communicating caring through pep rallies, scholarships, athletic posters, and recognition of those who have demonstrated excellence. Although this is beneficial for communicating caring, it only recognizes a small portion of the school population. The students that are being respected are not the students that are at-risk. It is not sufficient to embrace only the “popular” students, all students must be nurtured and respected. Littky (2004) stated:

They need to feel that school is a place where their strengths and energies are nurtured and applauded, where they and their loved ones matter as human beings, and where they have control of themselves and their successes. Finally, they need their school – and their society – to see them as a resource and not as a resource drain. (p. 22)

School is too often a place where students feel ignored and neglected. By demonstrating to *all* students that they care, teachers are making school a place where students feel safe and comfortable. This can have far-reaching effects on their school experience.

#### Reducing Alienation through Meaningful Connections

Teachers need to make students feel welcome in school and promote an accepting environment. Many students who drop out of school feel a sense of alienation within the confines of the school (Altenbaugh et al., 1995; Brown et al., 2003; Fine, 1991;

Gallagher, 2002; Kaplan & Peck, 1997; Knesting, in press; Wehlage et al., 1989).

Gallagher (2002) investigated the reasons given by students for dropping out of high school. She conducted in-depth single-session interviews with four former students whose names appeared on the 1999-2000 Student Dropout Report for the Indiana Department of Education. None of the students felt welcome at school or believed they would be missed. All of the students felt that teachers wanted them removed from school. One student stated, "The teachers had little schemes planned to get me in trouble so I'd get kicked out" (Gallagher, 2002, p. 45). Another informant stated, "No one tried to get me to stay, no one cared if I left or not. They were too busy with other stuff" (p. 45). Feeling alienated within the school environment may eventually lead to students' dropping out. Teachers who develop meaningful connections with students can make school a more positive and worthwhile environment for those at-risk of dropping out. (Knesting & Waldron, 2006).

### Holding Positive Expectations

Teachers and administrators need to believe that they can make a difference in students' ability to persist. In the study conducted by Knesting (in press), the adults to whom the students turned to for help were those that believed they could and should help all students stay in school. These adults believed in the students when others waited for them to fail. This level of confidence in the students resulted in a positive climate.

In addition, this support does not require substantive amounts of effort (Knesting, in press). Teachers who are simply polite and demonstrate respect for *all* students in their classroom, provide this necessary support. Teachers may not realize that they are not

showing this support. In some classrooms, teachers may think that at-risk students do not want their attention and want to be left alone. In reality, these students respond to teachers who ask for their opinions and actually listen to their answers. They also develop encouraging relationships when high expectations are displayed, as well as when pushed to achieve their goals (Knesting, in press). This context provides an atmosphere in which these students feel they will get something out of staying in school.

### Providing Students with a Sense of Control

Research has shown that students who perceive a sense of control over their environment are more engaged in school (Rudolph et al., 2001). When students do not feel they have any control over their school environment, they may take control by leaving. This is a way of exerting control through leaving rather than staying (Knesting, in press). As Fine (1991) stated, "The act of dropping out could be recast as a strategy for taking control of lives fundamentally out of control" (p. 4). When teachers ask for at-risk students' opinions and actually listen and consider their answers, a sense of control is provided.

### Conclusion

While a number of risk factors are associated with students dropping out of high school, many students overcome them and succeed in school and graduate. Educators have the potential to positively influence at-risk students to not only graduate, but feel comfortable in the school environment. By listening to students, communicating caring, and having positive expectations, educators provide the necessary support to help their students succeed. Because of this critical influence teachers can have on students'

educational decisions, this research sought to answer the following questions: (1) What factors do educators believe contribute to students' decision to drop out of school? and (2) What type of influence do educators believe they have on students' educational decisions?



## CHAPTER 2

### METHODS

This research examined educators' beliefs about dropout as well as their role in the dropout prevention process. School atmosphere and student-teacher interactions play an influential role in high school dropout and must be recognized as key factors if effective prevention and intervention programs are to be created. Educators must develop an accurate understanding of dropout, particularly the reasons behind it, if they want to reduce the prevalence of dropout. The focus of this research was to investigate the following questions: (1) What factors do educators believe contribute to students' decision to drop out of school? and (2) What type of influence do educators believe they have on students' educational decisions?

#### Participants

Participants were teachers from two Midwestern high schools in the same school district, including special and general education teachers from all content areas. The graduation rate of the school district in 2005-06 was 77.7% compared to a state graduation rate of 90.7%. Information on each of the school's graduation rates could not be obtained, including data from the last five years. All teachers were informed that the researcher was conducting research on high school dropout. The researcher received prior permission from school administrators to distribute materials to participants. By returning completed materials, teachers consented to participate. Any surveys completed by individuals other than teachers (e.g., guidance counselor, school psychologist) were discarded.

### School A

Surveys and cover letters were distributed to 108 high school teachers in School A. The complete list of teachers was provided to the researcher by the school principal. Of the 108 teachers, 56 (51.9%) returned completed surveys. According to School A's 2005-2006 Annual Report, 1851 students were enrolled in grades nine through twelve. Seventy-six percent of the student body was Caucasian, 17% was African-American, 4% was Hispanic, 2% was Asian, and 1% was Native-American. Of the 1851 students enrolled, 50.4% were eligible for free and reduced lunch.

### School B

Surveys and cover letters were distributed to 78 high school teachers in School B. The complete list of teachers was provided to the researcher by the school principal. Of the 78 teachers, 39 (50%) returned completed surveys. According to School B's 2005-2006 Annual Report, 1225 students were enrolled in grades nine through twelve. Sixty-one percent of the student body was Caucasian, 35% was African-American, 3% was Hispanic, and 1% was Asian. Of the 1225 students enrolled, 50.5% were eligible for free and reduced lunch.

### Survey

Participants answered five demographic questions (school, content area taught, current grade level taught, years teaching, gender) at the beginning of the survey. Next, participants completed four Likert type items addressing the study variables. The first item required the participants to identify how significant of a problem they believe high school dropout is at their school on a 5-point scale (*not a problem/mild*

*problem/moderate problem/significant problem/do not know*). The second item required the participants to respond to describe their school's dropout rate during the last five years on a 4-point scale (*decreasing/staying the same/increasing/do not know*). The third item required the participants to describe how much of an influence teachers have on students' decisions to stay in or drop out of school on a 5-point scale (*not at all/a little/some/significant/do not know*). The fourth item required the participants to describe the importance of teachers to schools' efforts to reduce the number of students who drop out on a 5-point scale (*not important/mildly important/moderately important/very important/do not know*). Then, the participants described the extent to which they believe 18 factors contribute to high school dropout on a 5-point scale (*not at all/a little/some/significantly/do not know*). Following the Likert type scales, participants responded to an open-ended question asking them what type of influence educators may have on students' decisions to stay in or drop out of school. Lastly, participants were given an opportunity to list any additional factors they felt may contribute to high school dropout. A copy of the survey is in Appendix A.

Surveys were placed in the school mailboxes of teachers from the two high schools. Teachers received materials in a research packet. Inside the packet, there was a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, assurance of anonymity, the survey, a self-addressed return envelope, and directions for completing and returning the survey. The teachers were allotted two weeks to return the survey. Follow-up letters and another copy of the survey were sent to those who did not return a completed survey before the

deadline. Upon completion of the survey, the teachers placed the survey in the self-addressed return envelope and mailed it to the school address of the researcher.

### Data Analysis

Data was analyzed to determine what educators know about dropout and the role they play in students' educational decisions. A descriptive analysis was conducted to provide an overall picture of teachers' knowledge and beliefs about high school dropout. Independent t-test analyses illustrated the relationship between teachers' gender and their knowledge and beliefs about dropout as well as the relationship between teachers' school and their knowledge and beliefs about dropout. Finally, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) described the relationships between teachers' content area taught and their knowledge and beliefs about dropout, teachers' years of experience and their knowledge and beliefs about dropout, and teachers' grade level taught and their knowledge and beliefs about dropout.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

Data was collected using the survey instrument described in Chapter 2. A copy of this survey is in Appendix A. The survey instrument was developed by the researcher to assess teachers' perception of dropout in their school, their knowledge of dropout, as well as their perceived role in dropout prevention.

#### Perception of Dropout in their School

##### Descriptive Statistics

Teachers were asked to respond to statements addressing their perception of dropout in their school. On a 4-point scale, with ratings from 1 (*not a problem*) to 4 (*significant problem*), teachers described dropout as being a moderate problem in their school ( $M = 3.35, SD = 0.76, n = 92$ ). On a 3-point scale, with ratings from 1 (*decreasing*) to 3 (*increasing*), teachers described their school's dropout rate during the last five years as "staying the same" ( $M = 2.00, SD = 0.81, n = 74$ ).

##### Comparative Analyses

School. Data was examined to identify relationships between teachers' school and their perception of a dropout problem. A *t*-test showed a significant difference between the means for the two schools in regards to the teachers' beliefs on whether dropout is a problem at their school ( $t_{90} = 2.628, p < .01$ ). Teachers at School B believed that dropout was a more significant problem at their school ( $M = 3.59, SD = 0.69$ ) than teachers at School A ( $M = 3.18, SD = 0.77$ ).

In addition, a *t*-test showed a significant difference between the means for the two schools in regards to the teachers' beliefs about their school's dropout rate during the last five years ( $t_{72} = 3.423, p < .001$ ). Teachers at School B were more likely to believe that the dropout rate was increasing at their school ( $M = 2.35, SD = 0.71$ ) than teachers at School A ( $M = 1.74, SD = 0.79$ ).

### Educators' Knowledge of Dropout

#### Descriptive Statistics

Next, teachers' knowledge of dropout factors was assessed. The survey asked teachers to identify the extent to which they believed 18 specific factors contribute to students' decisions to drop out of school on a 4-point scale, with ratings from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*significantly*). As shown in Table 1, frequent absences ( $M = 3.89, SD = 0.35$ ), frequent trouble at school ( $M = 3.67, SD = 0.52$ ), limited parental support ( $M = 3.62, SD = 0.59$ ), low academic achievement ( $M = 3.56, SD = 0.62$ ), and trouble with the law ( $M = 3.56, SD = 0.70$ ) were believed to contribute significantly to students' decisions to drop out of school.

Table 1

## Dropout Factors Believed to Contribute to Student Dropout

Variable	Mean	SD
Frequent absences (n = 92)	3.89	0.35
Frequently getting into trouble at school (n = 93)	3.67	0.52
Limited parental support (n = 92)	3.62	0.59
Trouble with the law (n = 92)	3.58	0.70
Low academic achievement (n = 93)	3.56	0.62
Not seeing a benefit to earning a diploma (n = 93)	3.42	0.81
Lazy and unmotivated (n = 90)	3.41	0.75
Parenting a child (n = 86)	3.34	0.76
No sense of belonging at school (n = 92)	3.20	0.76
Believing no one at school cares if they drop out (n = 91)	3.12	0.81
Working > 15 hours (n = 91)	3.07	0.93
Not having friends at school (n = 91)	2.96	0.88
Feeling emotionally unsafe at school (n = 90)	2.82	0.93
Being retained a grade (n = 87)	2.75	0.94
No close relationship with a teacher (n = 92)	2.74	0.82
Feeling physically unsafe at school (n = 90)	2.66	1.01
Believing adults at school want them to drop out (n = 83)	2.64	1.11
Working < 15 hours (n = 92)	2.29	0.87

*Note.* Factors were rated on a 4-point scale with ratings from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*significantly*). Raters choosing 5 (don't know) were ignored in the analysis.

### Comparative Analyses

School. Data was examined to identify relationships between teachers' school and their knowledge of dropout. Table 2 provides the *t*-test analysis of all the study variables in relation to teachers' school. Of the 18 dropout factors, the only *t*-test which showed a significant difference between the means for the two schools was in regards to the extent to which frequent student absences contribute to student dropout ( $t_{70} = 2.25, p < .05$ ). Teachers at School B believed that frequent student absences were a more significant contributor to dropout ( $M = 3.97, SD = 0.16$ ) than teachers at School A ( $M = 3.83, SD = 0.43$ ).



Table 2

## Comparative Analyses for School

Variable	<u>School A</u> <i>M (SD)</i>	<u>School B</u> <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>
Dropout problem	3.18 (0.77)	3.59 (0.69)	2.63**
Dropout rate during the last five years	1.74 (0.79)	2.35 (0.71)	3.42***
Influence on student dropout	3.21 (0.80)	3.03 (0.71)	1.21
Importance to schools' efforts to reduce dropout	3.38 (0.81)	3.19 (0.81)	1.12
Low academic achievement	3.48 (0.69)	3.67 (0.48)	1.53
Working < 15 hours	2.42 (0.87)	2.13 (0.86)	1.57
Working > 15 hours	3.15 (0.86)	2.95 (1.01)	1.03
Being retained a grade	2.80 (0.90)	2.67 (1.01)	0.67
Frequently getting into trouble at school	3.65 (0.56)	3.69 (0.47)	0.40
Trouble with the law	3.55 (0.70)	3.62 (0.71)	0.46
Frequent absences	3.83 (0.43)	3.97 (0.16)	2.25*
Parenting a child	3.41 (0.75)	3.23 (0.77)	1.10
Not having friends at school	3.02 (0.80)	2.87 (0.98)	0.79
No close relationship with a teacher	2.81 (0.83)	2.64 (0.81)	0.98
No sense of belonging at school	3.15 (0.72)	3.26 (0.82)	0.66
Not seeing a benefit to earning a diploma	3.48 (0.80)	3.33 (0.84)	0.87
Limited parental support	3.61 (0.56)	3.63 (0.63)	0.16
Feeling physically unsafe at school	2.75 (0.95)	2.53 (1.08)	1.04

(table continues)

Variable	<u>School A</u> <i>M (SD)</i>	<u>School B</u> <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>
Feeling emotionally unsafe at school	2.92 (0.94)	2.69 (0.92)	1.16
Believing no one at school cares if they drop out	3.21 (0.80)	3.00 (0.83)	1.23
Believing adults at school want them to drop out	2.64 (1.16)	2.64 (1.06)	0.02

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

\*\*\* $p < .001$

Gender. Data was reexamined to identify relationships between teachers' gender and the knowledge of high school dropout. Table 3 provides the *t*-test analysis of all variables in relation to teachers' gender. Of the 18 dropout factors, a *t*-test showed a significant difference between the means of both genders in regards to the extent to which the following factors contribute to student dropout: frequent trouble ( $t_{54} = 2.13, p < .05$ ), frequent absences ( $t_{35} = 2.33, p < .05$ ), no sense of belonging ( $t_{89} = 2.69, p < .01$ ), limited parental support ( $t_{84} = 2.12, p < .05$ ), and believing no one cares if they drop out ( $t_{88} = 2.91, p < .01$ ). Females believed that frequent student trouble ( $M = 3.75, SD = 0.47$ ), frequent absences ( $M = 3.97, SD = 0.18$ ), no sense of belonging ( $M = 3.34, SD = 0.63$ ), and believing that no one cares if they drop out ( $M = 3.31, SD = 0.73$ ) were more significant contributors to dropout than males ( $M = 3.50, SD = 0.57$ ;  $M = 3.75, SD = 0.51$ ;  $M = 2.91, SD = 0.89$ ;  $M = 2.81, SD = 0.86$ , respectively). Males, on the other hand, believed that limited parental support ( $M = 3.77, SD = 0.43$ ) was a more significant contributor to dropout than females ( $M = 3.53, SD = 0.65$ ).

Table 3

## Comparative Analyses for Gender

Variable	<u>Male</u> <i>M (SD)</i>	<u>Female</u> <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>
Dropout problem	3.18 (0.85)	3.43 (0.70)	1.51
Dropout rate during the last five years	1.93 (0.75)	2.02 (0.85)	0.47
Influence on student dropout	3.00 (0.87)	3.21 (0.71)	1.29
Importance to schools' efforts to reduce dropout	3.09 (0.84)	3.41 (0.77)	1.85
Low academic achievement	3.44 (0.67)	3.62 (0.59)	1.33
Working < 15 hours	2.34 (0.90)	2.27 (0.87)	3.76
Working > 15 hours	3.06 (0.84)	3.09 (0.98)	0.12
Being retained a grade	2.71 (0.97)	2.78 (0.94)	0.34
Frequently getting into trouble at school	3.50 (0.57)	3.75 (0.47)	2.13*
Trouble with the law	3.59 (0.67)	3.56 (0.73)	0.23
Frequent absences	3.75 (0.51)	3.97 (0.18)	2.33*
Parenting a child	3.41 (0.84)	3.30 (0.72)	0.61
Not having friends at school	2.72 (0.96)	3.09 (0.82)	1.91
No close relationship with a teacher	2.53 (0.88)	2.85 (0.78)	1.76
No sense of belonging at school	2.91 (0.89)	3.34 (0.63)	2.69**
Not seeing a benefit to earning a diploma	3.31 (0.78)	3.47 (0.83)	0.86
Lazy and unmotivated	3.34 (0.79)	3.44 (0.73)	0.57
Limited parental support	3.77 (0.43)	3.53 (0.65)	2.12*

(table continues)

Variable	<u>Male</u> <i>M (SD)</i>	<u>Female</u> <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>
Feeling physically unsafe at school	2.44 (1.13)	2.79 (0.92)	1.59
Feeling emotionally unsafe at school	2.63 (1.04)	2.93 (0.86)	1.41
Believing no one at school cares if they drop out	2.81 (0.86)	3.31 (0.73)	2.91**
Believing adults at school want them to drop out	2.38 (1.16)	2.82 (1.06)	1.79

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

Content area taught. Next, the study variables were examined through the lens of teachers' content area. Of the 18 dropout factor variables, only three factors produced significant results in terms of teachers' content area. The ANOVA on content area taught produced a significant result on the "frequent trouble in school" factor,  $F_{2, 90} = 3.31, p < .05$ . The Fisher Least Significant Difference (LSD) post hoc test was conducted to identify significant differences among the content areas. Post hoc comparisons indicated that the difference between teaching core classes (e.g., Math, Science, English) and teaching "other" classes (e.g., Art, Physical Education) was significant. Specifically, "other" class teachers rated frequent trouble at school as a more significant contributor to dropout than core teachers.

The ANOVA on content area taught produced a significant result on the "no sense of belonging at school" factor,  $F_{2, 89} = 7.37, p < .05$ . Post hoc comparisons indicated that the difference between teaching core classes and teaching "other" classes was significant. In addition, the difference between teaching core classes and teaching special education

classes was significant. Specifically, teachers of special education and “other” classes rated the “no sense of belonging at school” as a more significant contributor to dropout than core teachers.

The ANOVA on content area taught produced a significant result on the “lazy and unmotivated” factor,  $F_{2, 87} = 4.24, p < .05$ . Post hoc comparisons indicated that the difference between teaching core classes and teaching “other” classes was significant. Specifically, teachers of “other” classes rated the “lazy and unmotivated” factor as a more significant contributor to dropout than core teachers.

Years teaching. The study variables were reanalyzed to identify whether years of teaching experience produced significant results. Of the 18 dropout factor variables, only two factors produced significant results in terms of years teaching. The ANOVA on years teaching produced a significant result on the “frequent trouble in school” factor,  $F_{2, 90} = 3.27, p < .05$ . Post hoc comparisons indicated that the difference between teaching less than 10 years and teaching 11-25 years was significant. Specifically, teachers with 11-25 years of experience rated frequent trouble at school as a more significant contributor to school dropout than teachers with less than 10 years of experience.

The ANOVA on years teaching produced a significant result on the “trouble with the law” factor,  $F_{2, 89} = 3.57, p < .05$ . Post hoc comparisons indicated that the difference between teaching less than 10 years and teaching 11-25 years was significant. In addition, the difference between teaching 11-25 years and teaching more than 26 years was significant. Specifically, teachers with 11-25 years of experience rated trouble with

the law as a more significant contributor to dropout than teachers with less than 10 years and more than 26 years of experience.

Grade level taught. An ANOVA on grade level taught was originally intended but was not attempted due to an inability to meaningfully organize the data. Teachers were asked to list all the grade levels they currently teach. As a result, multiple grade levels were listed leading to an abundance of grade level combinations. With too few teachers in each of these combinations significant results would have proved elusive.

### Additional Factors

Of the 95 teachers who completed the survey, 36 (37.9%) listed additional factors they believe contribute to dropout. Of the 36 teachers who listed additional factors, 15 (41.7%) listed a lack of parent/family support as a factor that contributes to dropout. Although “limited parental support” was listed as one of the 18 dropout factor variables on the survey, 15 teachers listed it as an additional factor. Other factors included: substance abuse (19.4%), lack of extracurricular participation (16.7%), negative peer influence (11.1%), curriculum the student perceives as irrelevant (11.1%), gang involvement (8.3%), homelessness (8.3%), medical reasons (5.6%), frustration (5.6%), and low self-esteem (5.6%).

### Perceived Role in Dropout Prevention

#### Descriptive Statistics

Teachers’ perception of their role in dropout prevention was also assessed in the survey. On a 4-point scale, with ratings from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*significant*), teachers felt they had some influence on students’ decisions to stay in or drop out of school ( $M = 3.14$ ,

$SD = 0.77, n = 95$ ). On a 4-point scale, with ratings from 1 (*not important*) to 4 (*very important*), teachers felt they were moderately important in schools' efforts to reduce the number of students who drop out ( $M = 3.30, SD = 0.81, n = 92$ ).

### Comparative Analyses

T-tests. Data was examined to identify whether teachers' school and/or gender produced significant results in teachers' perceived role in dropout prevention. In terms of teachers' school and gender, *t*-tests did not demonstrate significant differences between the means for the two schools or both genders in regards to teachers' perceived influence on student dropout.

ANOVAs. In addition, data was analyzed to identify whether content area and/or years teaching produced significant results in teachers' perceived role in dropout prevention. The ANOVAs on content area taught and years of teaching experience did not produce significant results in regards to teachers' perceived role in dropout prevention. As noted earlier, an ANOVA on grade level taught was attempted but discarded due to an inability to meaningfully organize the data.

### Type of Influence

Of the 95 teachers who completed the survey, 81 (85.3%) described the type of influence they have on students' decisions to stay in or drop out of school. These factors were organized according to common themes. Four themes emerged from this analysis: (a) relationship-building, (b) communicating caring, (c) motivation and encouragement, and (d) pointing to the future.

Relationship-building. Of the 81 teachers, 25 (30.9%) described the importance of developing relationships with at-risk students. One teacher stated, “If a relationship is established or exists, some students will go to teachers for support.” Another teacher stated, “If a student connects with at least one adult, they are more likely to feel part of the school experience.” These teachers described students as needing a positive adult relationship at school to provide a support network as well as create a system where the student feels like an integral component of the school environment.

Communicating caring. Of the 81 teachers, 21 (24.7%) listed that displaying concern and care for students is crucial in their persistence. One teacher stated, “Even one adult who expresses concern lets a student know that someone is interested in his future. Some students are sadly in need of caring, supportive adults in their lives.” When students feel like they matter to someone, they often work hard to succeed because they recognize that their success is important to others. Another teacher explained, “Kids may feel that if a teacher is interested in their success, the student would not want to disappoint the teacher.”

Motivation and encouragment. Of the 81 teachers, 11 (13.6%) stated that they must encourage and motivate their students. For example, one teacher declared, “Teachers affect how students believe in themselves. We can either try to change attitudes or we can just let students continue on their course.” These teachers recognized a lack of motivation in their students and realized that they have the ability to increase this motivation.



Pointing to the future. Of the 81 teachers, 9 (11.1%) described the importance of demonstrating the necessity of a high school diploma on students' future. One teacher stated, "Educators have the ability to assist students in seeing their futures in a more holistic way, helping them understand the importance of education and how what they are doing in school relates to future career possibilities." Another said, "They need to see value in education."

No influence. Almost a quarter (24.7%) of teachers stated that teachers have little or no influence on keeping students in school. These teachers felt that outside influences and student characteristics were too strong to overcome by their own efforts. One teacher stated, "Outside factors (family, peers, environment) are the only influences. We can provide only the classroom environments we are given to work in and the instructional materials we are given to use." Another teacher explained, "Once the student entertains thoughts of dropping out, there isn't much an educator can do to change their mind." This appeared to be a common thought of these teachers. They believed that outside forces were too influential and that students did not care about teachers' opinions. One teacher even stated that teachers should not try to encourage student persistence. The teacher stated:

Compared to all of the influences outside of the school, I believe our influence is negligible. I do not believe, however, that it is any big deal. Our society could not cope with a population where everyone had a diploma. It couldn't in the past and won't be able to in the future.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

Historically, the focus of dropout research has been on the deficits of students who drop out of school (Lehr et al., 2003). Although this information can be helpful, teachers have little to no control over these factors. This may be a contributing explanation for the lack of success in reducing dropout rates over the past fifteen years. If schools want to reduce the dropout rate, teachers need to understand dropout and the role they play in the dropout process (Knesting, in press; Lehr et al., 2003).

Teachers in this study recognized dropout as a problem within their schools and did not feel that it was decreasing. They described it as a moderate problem and felt that it had stayed the same over the last five years. With NCLB legislation placing an emphasis on reducing dropout rates (Lehr et al., 2003), recognizing a dropout problem is the first step toward decreasing it. With this school district's graduation rate being well below the state average, high school dropout is a concern for these two schools. However, recognizing dropout as a problem is not enough to reduce it.

The focus of most dropout research has been on student deficits (Lehr et al., 2003). In this study, assessment of teachers' knowledge of dropout illustrated a focus on factors outside of teachers' control. Teachers rated low academic achievement, frequent trouble at school, trouble with the law, frequent absences, and limited parental support as the most significant contributors to high school dropout. Although all of these factors are not necessarily student deficits, they are primarily out of teachers' control. By pointing to factors outside of their control, teachers remove themselves from the problem.

Factors such as “believing adults at school want them to drop out,” “no close relationship with a teacher,” “feeling emotionally and physically unsafe at school”, and “believing no one at school cares if they drop out” were only described to contribute somewhat to high school dropout. Previous research has shown that communicating caring (Gallagher, 2002; Knesting, in press) and positive relationships (Brown et al., 2003; Knesting & Waldron, 2006) have significant potential in reducing dropout and decreasing the alienation that students at-risk of dropout often experience. When teachers believe they can make a difference, change is possible. It is essential to develop an accurate understanding of the factors that contribute to dropout, especially those in teachers’ control, if student persistence is to occur.

Although previous research has not examined the relationship of teachers’ demographic variables with their knowledge of high school dropout, it was hypothesized by this researcher that these findings could prove insightful. It is important to note, however, that any findings reported were based on a small sample size in which statistical significance could be due to chance. Therefore, these findings are interpreted with caution. In this study, females were more likely to describe factors within their control as more significant contributors to dropout than males. For example, females believed that “no sense of belonging in school” and “students believing that no one cares if they drop out” were more significant contributors to dropout than males. In addition, on all teacher control variables, the mean scores for females were higher than males (not statistically significant). Whether these differences in knowledge result in different behavior toward

students at risk of dropout is unknown. Further research is needed in determining whether dropout knowledge is related to teachers' gender.

In addition to teachers' gender, content area and years of experience were also examined to identify whether there is a relationship between these variables and knowledge of dropout. Only one finding is worth mentioning. Teachers of special education and "other" (e.g., art, band, physical education) classes rated the "no sense of belonging at school" as a more significant contributor to dropout than teachers of core classes. It is important to mention, once again, that this result was based on a small sample size and could therefore be due to chance.

As is the case with most survey research, the assessment instrument may not have listed everything the respondent believes contributes to high school dropout. For this reason, teachers were allowed to list any additional factors they believe contribute to dropout. A number of factors listed were outside of teachers' control. Factors included: limited parental support, substance abuse, lack of extracurricular participation, negative peer influence, curriculum the student perceives as irrelevant, gang involvement, homelessness, medical reasons, frustration, and low self-esteem. Although many of these factors may appear to be out of their control, teachers can have an influence on many of these factors. For example, working with families in after-school programs, implementing substance abuse programs at school, and motivation strategies are all ways in which teachers can play a positive role in limiting these negative influences.

The teachers in this study believed that they had some influence in reducing high school dropout. In addition, they described their efforts in reducing school dropout as

moderately important. However, they did not describe their role in preventing high school dropout as significant. With students spending the majority of their time in school, teachers can have a great influence on their future decisions. This includes staying in school. If teachers do not recognize their significant influence, students who need their assistance will continue to be ignored.

The teachers in this study did identify several areas of influence they have in reducing high school dropout. First, these teachers described a positive relationship with students as integral in their school persistence. They stated that students need an authority figure in school they can go to for support, as well as to feel a part of the school environment. Developing relationships with students can reduce the alienation that those at-risk of dropping out often experience (Dunn, Chambers, & Rabren, 2004; Kortering & Braziel, 1999). These relationships do not need to be intensive. Encouraging students to discuss their problems or simply establishing rapport can have far-reaching effects on engaging students. In Gallagher's (2002) study, many of the students felt that the teachers wanted them to drop out. They believed that the teachers had schemes to get them kicked out. If teachers commit to building relationships to students, they can make them feel like they are wanted in school, not unwelcome.

Second, teachers in this study recognized the importance of communicating caring to students. This is similar to building relationships. Communicating caring can be as simple as saying "hi" in the morning, giving a friendly wave, and recognizing any form of effort exhibited by *all* students, not just those used to success. Knesting (in press) conducted a qualitative case study of a group of high school students at-risk for

dropping out but managing to persist in school. Seventeen students were interviewed and observed to gather data. One of the major factors identified as a factor in student persistence was caring teachers. In addition, Lan and Lanthier (2003) identify the transition to high school as a difficult time period that can dramatically change students' perceptions of themselves and the school environment. Teachers must pay careful attention to students' needs during this transition (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). Having caring teachers within the school context can ease that transition if these teachers help these students feel comfortable in school and feel that they belong. Although caring for students may be especially important during the transition to high school, it must be maintained throughout high school as well.

Third, teachers in this study felt that students needed to be motivated to succeed. Research has shown that motivated students are less likely to drop out of school (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Vallerand et al., 1997). Although students may come to school with low levels of motivation, teachers are in a role to motivate them to succeed. One way teachers can encourage student motivation is to provide the experience of success (Williams & Riccomini, 2006). If students repeatedly fail at tasks, their motivation quickly decreases, leaving them with feelings of inadequacy and frustration. These feelings often result in school dropout. In addition, teachers should take time to focus on what students do well (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). By focusing on the positive, teachers empower students and encourage them to succeed.

Related to motivation, dropouts often do not see relevance in the curriculum (Baker et al., 2001; Dunn et al., 2004; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998). If

students do not see real-world application during instruction, they may become disengaged and lose motivation. Teachers can increase curriculum relevance by connecting content to real-world situations and building motivation into the curriculum design. It is important to note that teachers alone cannot motivate students to persist in school. Parents exert a greater influence than teachers on their children's perceptions of competence (Vallerand et al., 1997). Therefore, teachers and parents must collaborate in their efforts to increase students' perceptions of competence and, in turn, motivate them to succeed.

Finally, teachers in this study felt that students needed to see the importance of a high school diploma. Students at-risk for dropout do not necessarily believe that a high school diploma is a prerequisite for a good job or a contented life (Gallagher, 2002). However, low income (U.S. Department of Education, 2004a), unemployment (U.S. Department of Education, 2004b), and high risk behaviors (Brown et al., 2003) are just a few of the negative outcomes that individuals often experience as a result of dropping out of school. Teachers are in a position to point out the unfortunate consequences that dropping out may produce. Helping students realize the advantages of a high school diploma may have the potential to increase graduation rates.

Although some teachers recognized their role in dropout prevention, almost a quarter stated that they had no influence. Many felt that outside forces, such as family, drugs, and peers, are too influential for them to make a difference. However, students who have dropped out of high school have identified teachers as crucial in supporting their persistence (Altenbaugh et al., 1995). Altenbaugh et al. conducted interviews with

students who dropped out and then returned to earn their high school diploma and found that these students wished that teachers would have shown a greater interest in their school experiences. Therefore, it is crucial to raise teachers' awareness as to the role they play and the positive influence they can have on students at-risk of dropout.

### Limitations of Study

Several limitations of this study must be mentioned. Self-report data was collected and when studying issues such as dropout, participants may report what they believe society will accept rather than personal attitudes. For example, teachers who believe they can prevent students from dropping out may have participated, while those who believed they are not responsible and can not make a difference may not have participated. Second, participants were not randomly sampled. The study consisted of teachers volunteering to participate in the survey process. In addition, only a small sample of teachers ( $N = 96$ ) participated in this study. When reporting statistical significance with a sample this small, significant results may be due to chance. Finally, by studying medium-sized Midwestern schools, the results may not generalize to large urban or small rural schools. In spite of these limitations, empirical research in the area of dropout prevention is deeply needed. It is hoped that the results and conclusions of this study can be studied further to more fully understand the role of teachers in the lives of students at-risk for dropout.

### Implications for School Psychologists

Although the focus of this research has been on teachers' roles in dropout prevention, these efforts can not be placed on teachers alone. School psychologists can



play a central role in dropout prevention. Student advocacy is a crucial role for school psychologists and this can be utilized by attending to students' perspectives about dropping out and bringing these perspectives forward to teachers and school administrators. As stated earlier, teachers are often unaware of the influence they have in encouraging student persistence. Listening to students about school experience provides valuable information in creating quality dropout prevention programs (Knesting, in press; Williams & Riccomini, 2006). School psychologists could conduct survey research with students on school climate in their school and help craft dropout prevention program that focus on a positive school environment.

As active change agents and individuals with knowledge of school systems, school psychologists should investigate the school's existing social system and pay careful attention to factors within the school that may lead to student alienation. In addition, teacher alienation may play a significant part in whether students feel alienated (Brown et al., 2003). School psychologists should carefully investigate the teacher support system within the school to determine whether teachers are feeling alienated or overwhelmed. Researching patterns of teachers (e.g., attitude toward school and students) may be a productive first step in alleviating student alienation by first working with teachers to reduce their alienation. Then, programs can be designed that target students and teachers (Brown et al., 2003).

Since school psychologists serve as consultants to teachers, it is important that they carefully research school dropout and disseminate the most current findings. School psychologists should adopt a proactive role and stimulate preventive and strength-based

change by focusing on supporting school completion rather than merely curbing the rush of dropout (Lehr et al., 2003). In addition, it is important that this is done in a collaborative manner. In most cases, the teachers know the students better than anyone else in the school and, therefore, can contribute valuable information. If all members of the school community (including students) work together in a democratic fashion, an accepting environment has the potential to emerge.

If students at-risk of dropout are to persist in their schooling, they must feel like they belong in school. Teachers, as well as other school professionals, are in an excellent position to provide this sense of belonging. By listening to student perspectives, communicating caring, building relationships, and encouraging success, teachers are providing a solid foundation for student persistence. Although other factors will continue to influence dropout, a school climate with positive student-teacher relationships may encourage school completion among students at-risk of dropout.

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## APPENDIX A

## School Dropout Survey

Please do not mark in  
this box.

Survey Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Dustin Reese, M.A.E. and Kimberly Knesting, Ph.D.  
University of Northern Iowa

School: \_\_\_\_\_

## Content Area Taught:

<input type="checkbox"/> English/Lang. Arts	<input type="checkbox"/> Math	<input type="checkbox"/> Science
<input type="checkbox"/> Social Studies	<input type="checkbox"/> Band	<input type="checkbox"/> Choir
<input type="checkbox"/> Foreign Language	<input type="checkbox"/> Art	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____

## Current Grade Level(s) Taught (check all that apply):

 9<sup>th</sup>     10<sup>th</sup>     11<sup>th</sup>     12<sup>th</sup>

## Years Teaching:

 1-5     6-10     11-15     16-20     21-25     26-30     30+
Sex:  M     F

## How much of a problem do you believe dropout is at your school?

 Not a problem     Mild problem     Moderate problem     Significant problem     Do not know

## How would you describe your school's dropout rate during the last five years?

 Decreasing     Staying the same     Increasing     Do not know

## How much of an influence can teachers have on students' decisions to stay in or drop out of school?

 Not at all     A little     Some     Significant     Do not know

## How important are teachers to schools' efforts to reduce the number of students who drop out?

 Not important     Mildly important     Moderately important     Very important     Do not know

**What type of influence do educators have on students' decisions to stay in or drop out of school?**

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**How much do you believe each of the following factors contribute to students' decision to dropout of school?**

	Do not know 1	Not at all 2	A little 3	Some 4	Significantly 5
Low academic achievement	1	2	3	4	5
Working up to 15 hours a week	1	2	3	4	5
Working more than 15 hours a week	1	2	3	4	5
Being retained or held back a grade	1	2	3	4	5
Frequently getting into trouble at school	1	2	3	4	5
Getting into trouble with the law	1	2	3	4	5
Frequent absences from school	1	2	3	4	5
Parenting a child	1	2	3	4	5
Not having friends at school	1	2	3	4	5
Not having a close relationship with a teacher	1	2	3	4	5
Not having a sense of belonging at school	1	2	3	4	5
Not seeing a benefit to earning a diploma	1	2	3	4	5
Being lazy and unmotivated	1	2	3	4	5
Limited parental support for education	1	2	3	4	5

Feeling physically unsafe at school	1	2	3	4	5
Feeling emotionally unsafe at school	1	2	3	4	5
Believing no one at school cares if they drop out	1	2	3	4	5
Believing adults at school want them to drop out	1	2	3	4	5

If there are factors that you believe contribute to dropout and that are not identified above, please list them below:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_