



Going, Going, Gone **Elliot Washor**

The President has indicated that “dropping out is no longer an option,” signaling his intention to ensure that all young people obtain a high school diploma so they can earn higher wages, contribute to society, and lead happier lives. He is right to be concerned: About one million students leave school every year without a high school diploma, mostly because of academic problems, disinterest, behavior, and family issues. So, how do schools have to change to reduce dropouts?

One of the most significant changes actually runs counter to a growing trend in education. In order to keep students in school, schools must provide experiences where students learn out of school. Students don’t have enough opportunities in the daily school routine to pursue significant and enduring learning where they are treated like adults by the adults they will soon become.

Many students—even those with good grades—are bored and disconnected from what goes on in schools. They do not see schools as the place where they can do the learning they want and need to do when and where it makes sense to them. Robert Epstein, former editor in chief of *Psychology Today* has observed, “In America, most teens face a level of restriction in their daily lives that would not be tolerated for hardened felons. As a matter of fact, a recent study demonstrated that teens today typically have 10 times as many restrictions as adults, twice as many as active duty Marines, and twice as many as convicted felons.” It is these restrictions placed upon youth while they are in school that prevent them from having the productive learning experiences that past generations have had.

To understand this view on the dropout crisis, consider what essential conditions need to be in place for all youth to experience productive learning. Here are the questions students might ask about those essentials:

- Relationships: Do my teachers care about my interests and me? Can I work with and learn from adults who share my interests?
- Relevance: Do I find what the school is teaching to be relevant to my career interests?
- Choice: Will I be able to choose what, when, and how I will learn?
- Challenge: Do I feel sufficiently challenged in doing this learning and work?
- Practice: Will I have an opportunity to engage in deep and sustained practice of those skills I wish to learn?
- Play: Will I have opportunities to explore and to make mistakes without being chastised for failing?

- Authenticity: Will the learning and work I do be regarded as significant outside of schools?
- Application: Will I have opportunities to apply what I am learning in real-world contexts?
- Time: Will there be sufficient time for me to learn at my own pace?
- Timing: Can I pursue my learning out of the standard sequence?

Unfortunately, schools are not designed to offer these essential conditions for learning that youth crave and which figure in nearly every decision to drop out, including those students who stay in school but drop out psychologically. These essential conditions for learning are much more easily provided if schools take advantage of the world outside of schools, where young people can find adults who are doing the work they wish to do in order to develop the habits and practices they will need as thoughtful and productive adults. When students learn outside of school, time is more abundant and flexible. Practice and play focused on relevant and authentic work comes more naturally.

So, what are schools to do? Schools need to engage students with adults in and outside of school as a core part of the student experience. They need to treat students like adults who make real choices about their lives. Young people need to "drop back in" with the understanding that their teachers and mentors are with them, supporting and monitoring their learning when they are out learning.

The variety of ways to engage and bring students into the adult world include internships, service, shadowing, travel, courses on a college campus, field trips, obtaining a certification for work, entrepreneurial and social ventures, and taking a year off to work. These experiences can also be supplemented by connecting youth virtually to people and places around the world.

So, while we absolutely agree with the spirit of the President's statement, we would like to advocate for a focused effort to change schools so students can engage with adults outside of school throughout their high school experience in order to obtain the kind of learning—and conditions for learning—they see as essential while also staying connected to their schools. Dropping out, of course, should never be an option, but pursuing great learning opportunities should be, and schools should energetically support these choices and engagements as part of every student's learning portfolio.

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