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Strategy Development for Urban Dropout Prevention: Partnering With Formerly Incarcerated Adult Noncompleters

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This article highlights a research project that involved formerly incarcerated adults who were school noncompleters. The project engaged the participants in a series of activities to explore their experiences and gain insights into approaches to dropout prevention they believed would help students at risk to complete high school. This article focuses on the research participants' perspectives on strategies for addressing the problem that included a community mobilization approach, a family wraparound approach, a cultural and psychological awareness education approach, and an intensive recruitment approach to offering support to at-risk students.

Keywords: community-based projects, dropout prevention, formerly incarcerated persons, marginalized groups, school noncompleters

In a 2007 report on the plight of at-risk students in public schools, the Children's Defense Fund used the phrase "the cradle to prison pipeline" (p. 3) as an allusion to the high percentage of prison populations made up of young adults, the majority of whom are African American and Latino boys from inner cities, who received a jail sentence before a diploma (2007). Similarly, the economic effects of the dropout problem are expressed in public discourse through such colloquialisms as "cheaper to educate than incarcerate." Such colloquialisms signal a societal awareness of a deep seated problem with inadequate schooling and its relation to incarceration. In large, urban districts such as Philadelphia, as many as one half of each ninth-grade student cohort fails to complete high school within 6 years (Neild, Stoner-Elby, & Furstenberg, 2008). Despite the awareness and an extensive body of research on the topic, the dropout problem persists and along with it, the overincarceration of urban school dropouts.

Numerous studies illuminate which students are at-risk for dropping out and why. There is overwhelming evidence, for example, that students who dropout of school are disproportionately from African American, Latino, American Indian, low-income backgrounds, and attend large urban schools (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Finn (1993) referred to race/ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, and the primary

language spoken by the students as status indicators, and notes that status indicators are not alterable. He distinguished these from behavioral indicators, including school attendance, promptness, engagement during lessons, and the completion of assigned work. Additional common behavioral indicators include academic failure and poor behavior. Other predictors to the risk of dropping out include special education status and grade retention (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007). Efforts to slow or eliminate the emergence of any behavior indicators improve the chance that the students will remain engaged and complete high school.

Beyond understanding the status and behaviors of students, research on institutional correlates of dropouts examines the effects of school climate, organization, and culture on student disengagement and early departure (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Patterson, Hale, & Stessman, 2007). A seminal work in the field is Fine's *Framing Dropouts* (1991), which illustrates how the dynamics of an urban high school intersect with the students inside it to induce and, to some extent, excuse early school departure. Lee and Burkham (2003) also moved beyond the individual as a unit of analysis to focus on the dropout process. Students who are engaged in school and who perform satisfactorily generally do not adopt the attributes that lead to dropping out overnight. Prevention efforts that are retrospective and prospective account for process and tend to be more successful. Identifying patterns of behavior and interjecting assistance once these behaviors trend downward shows promise for dropout prevention. These findings shape current approaches to dropout prevention.

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An abundance of think tanks, task forces, commissions, and other collaborative initiatives convene annually to develop strategies to address the dropout problem in the United States. Clemson University's National Dropout Prevention Center/Network provides a comprehensive list of program models¹ that address prevention, intervention, and recovery/reentry. The 100-plus list of uniquely tailored programs underscores a widespread need and illustrates the complexity of providing supports to ensure successful high school completion for all students. Dropout prevention efforts are multifaceted and draw from the expertise and resources of multiple stakeholders.

Programs deemed effective emphasize the relevance of learning to students' lives, foster youth–adult and peer relationships, provide individualized instruction, create relaxed learning environments, and contend with external barriers to school achievement. Although the dropout process can begin as early as the primary years, prevention and intervention strategies typically target students during the ninth-grade transition year (Lever et al., 2004; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004) as opposed to the primary or middle years (Rodríguez & Conchas, 2009). Moreover, many prevention and intervention strategies implemented at the high school level focus on school-aged youth and young adults who have dropped out and are regarded as recovery efforts. Common across all prevention efforts is a consensus that successful programs should socially and academically engage students and take into consideration the overlapping contexts and variables that shape students' lives.

We conducted a research project to gain insights about the experience of dropouts from adult noncompleters who experienced incarceration with hopes of using the insights to reimagine dropout prevention strategies and efforts. We felt this population was valuable for three reasons. First, as adults, the participants are distanced from their dropout experiences, such that they can provide clear reflections on their educational experiences. Second, we felt that adults might have a broader view of the contexts that shaped their educational experiences and be able to speak to these issues, especially the role of status indicators and out-of-school contexts. Last, we felt that adults who have experienced dropping out and lived part of their adult life without a high school diploma should be key partners in addressing the issue in their communities. Throughout the research process, our research objective was to seek recommendations from the participants on how to address the problem of school dropouts in urban school districts.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing from standpoint theory, we frame this work as research for marginalized residents in poor urban communities, which can inform school leaders and policymakers. Standpoint theory rests on the assumption that a group of people's stigmatized, marginalized, and/or subordinated social locations and experiences confer them with unique insights into a society's ruling apparatus (Harding, 2004; Hill Collins, 1990; Smith, 1987; Wylie, 2003). The insights and perspectives from

the margins are more capable of challenging the societal status quo than the perspectives of more relatively privileged groups. This is so because privileged groups often “do not know, or are invested in not knowing, or are invested in systematically ignoring or denying” (Wylie, 2003, p. 32) certain societal truths that pose fundamental challenges to their privileged positions. African American writers have long articulated such standpoint perspectives in claiming that Blacks understand White America better than do White Americans themselves (e.g., Johnson, 1912; Wright, 1996). Truth claims, based in situated knowledge(s) of subordinated groups give them a relative epistemic advantage in a society where dominant power structures cloud the consciousness of dominant classes.

In academia, standpoint theory is usually associated with feminist research. Most notable is Smith's (1987) feminist theory and Hill Collins' (1990, 1997) scholarship, which considers race and class dimensions in addition to gender. Because marginalized standpoints offer a unique and broader perspective on society, the perspectives of marginalized populations are rich sites of inquiry to critically probe and challenge existing power relations to improve society. The standpoints are powerful insofar as they represent a shared group experience. Based on standpoint theory, there is power in the collective voices, insights, and narratives of people who understand life at the intersection of societal margins. The fact that the perspectives of marginalized adults are muted in dominant school improvement efforts may be part of why dropout prevention efforts in urban contexts remain minutely successful at best.

The adults whose perspectives we explored are relegated to U.S. society's margins in multiple ways and to various degrees by their race, class, low-educational attainment, and status as ex-offenders (many were convicted of felonies). The connection between non–school completion and incarceration is well documented (Children's Defense Fund, 2007; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Simmons, 2009). For example, among the prison facilities where our participants were once incarcerated, roughly 65% of the inmate population does not hold a high school diploma or GED. Not completing school is a process that is compounded by racial minority status, gender, poverty, and geographic location. In the long term, these factors prove particularly detrimental for African American males who, once labeled as convicted criminals, become part of the U.S. legalized caste system that socially, economically, educationally (e.g., ineligible for student loans), and in some cases politically (e.g., numerous states do not allow felons to vote) relegates them to second class citizenship (Alexander, 2010). Also, women's subordination is found in the relative irresponsiveness (and/or inability) of the dominant social service apparatus to ensure the physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing of women who endure traumatic life events that often are the roots to women's incarceration (Carlson & Strafer, 2010; Green, Miranda, Daroowalla, & Siddique, 2005) and primary barriers to achieving a functional life. Racism, in its various manifestations, compounds the experiences and process (Alexander, 2010).

Our goal in the analysis and interpretation of data is to recognize and honor the specific strategies and opinions of the participants as legitimate authoritative knowledge. Moreover, we acknowledge the distinct contributions the participants can

make to dominant conceptions of dropout prevention. Standpoint theory allows us to explore and privilege the perspectives of the participants by recognizing their central contributions make problematic the assumptions of actors who dominate and regulate society's institutions and policies. In our case, participants' standpoints illuminate problems with how policymakers and school leaders approach dropout prevention planning and strategies and help us to envision alternate approaches.

Method

We recruited study participants from Transitional Corrections Centers' alumni organization. Transitional Corrections Centers, a large in-prison treatment provider, houses approximately 30,000 male and female residents throughout the United States. Its residents are primarily incarcerated for drug-related offenses (distribution and addiction) and show promise for successful reentry. Many inmates are relocated to Transitional Corrections Centers to serve the final 6 to 24 months of their sentences. Unique to Transitional Corrections Centers is its active volunteer-based alumni support group. The group is open to any person paroled or released from a Transitional Corrections Centers facility and functions as a peer support network and group of motivational speakers who encourage current inmates to prepare for successful reentry. It has a general membership of more than 10,000 and an active membership of approximately 200. Its primary goal is to reduce recidivism. We worked with 9 men and 7 women whose ages ranged from late 20s to mid 50s. All participants self identified as African American or Black (Table 1).

The alumni members represent a group that seeks self and collective improvement grounded in their understanding of their subordinated position. Several evenings per month, they each dedicate their time to sharing their stories with current inmates. Collectively, they represent a "you can live as a productive member of society" ethos, despite the fact that a majority of alumni members remain severely marginalized, especially as it relates to employment and education. While they commit to others, they also do so for the therapeutic and supportive effect it has on their own lives. They openly acknowledge their personal and collective needs and seek supports (e.g., community, religion, employment, education) to improve themselves and their communities. In the alumni association, the primary vehicle for supporting others is through sharing personal stories of success and failure.

For the study, participants shared their educational life histories through interviews and engaged in a three-part interactive focus group series designed to enhance their understandings of their personal experiences, their knowledge of the dropout issue, and to discuss their reflections, insights, and knowledge with outside stakeholders. We conducted 15 in-depth interviews with formerly incarcerated adult noncompleters. The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to gain a better understanding of the participants' educational and life experiences, specifically those that relate to success and lack of success in K-12 school settings. All of the interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, with each interview

lasting approximately two hours. The first author interviewed the male participants, while the second author interviewed the female participants, with the exception of one male interview. We found, because of the sensitive topics that arose in the interviews, that participants were more comfortable with same gendered interviews. Both interviewers used a common protocol to ensure reliability. At the time of the one-on-one interviews, we invited participants to take part in the focus groups.

We opted to do focus groups, as there are benefits to this methodological approach. For example, focus groups allow participants to co-generate ideas and access information that would not be as possible through a strict interview approach (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Kitzinger, 1995). Kitzinger (1995) articulated this notion best by stating that, "group discussion is particularly appropriate when the interviewer has a series of open ended questions and wishes to encourage research participants to explore the issues of importance to them, in their own vocabulary, generating their own questions and pursuing their own priorities" (p. 299).

We acknowledge that the co-generation of ideas, and the power of group dynamics, could silence some voices (Kitzinger, 1995) within the focus group, which is a limitation to the approach. In contrast, as Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) argued, focus groups "often lead to the unearthing of information that is seldom easy to reach in individual memory" (p. 903). Because we aimed to generate new and original ideas concerning the dropout issue, the focus groups were the best methodological approach.

The majority of this article focuses on the data gathered during the focus groups. Of the 15 initially interviewed, 9 alumni members participated in Focus Group 1. In the session, participants worked to develop understandings of the school dropout problem. Participants identified, defined, and ranked the factors that contribute to or mitigate the dropout problem. Nine alumni members participated in Focus Group 2. Building from the factors identified in Session 1, participants problem-solved, analyzed, and assessed what needed to be done to address the school dropout issue. Participants critiqued shortcomings of popular dropout prevention strategies and developed their own set of loosely defined strategies for addressing the dropout issue.

In the final session, seven alumni members dialogued with five professional stakeholders about strategies to address the dropout issue. Outsiders included an attorney and former member of a board of education, a high-level city administrator, an executive in a department of health and human services, and a former executive officer at a major nonprofit organization in Philadelphia. Through semi-structured conversations, alumni members shared their personal and collective insights about what would help address the dropout problem and received feedback on their ideas.

Our research team met at least once or twice a week before each focus group. In these meetings, we generated essential questions for the participants to focus on during the sessions. Furthermore, we designed discussion activities that encouraged the participants to generate their ideas within small groups and then present out to the larger group. As with the interviews, we also audio-recorded the sessions with

Table 1. Participants

Participant name ²	Demographics		Interview	Research participation		
	Gender	Age (years)		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Aaron	M	45*	X		X	X
Antoine	M	35	X	X	X	
Barry	M	49	X	X		
Carl	M	44	X	X	X	X
Carol	F	40	X			
Crystal	F	36	X	X	X	
Deon	M	55*	X	X	X	X
Harriet	F	39	X		X	X
George	M	43	X	X	X	X
Kathy	F	39*	X	X	X	X
Lauren	F	50	X			
Leon	M	29	X			
Mark	M	39	X	X	X	
Shantel	F	38	X			
Steve	M	38*	X	X	X	X

Note. X denotes yes.

*Approximate age.

participants' permission. We collected and photographed all documents and artifacts produced in the focus group sessions. In addition, we drew from primary field notes, study protocols, internal email correspondence, monthly management and planning memos, meeting notes, information forms, sign-in and sign-out sheets, fliers, and other documents associated with project management.

Data Analysis

At the completion of the study, transcriptions of the interviews, focus groups, and other documents were uploaded into a Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software called NVivo to help guide the data analysis techniques. We used constant comparative analysis and classical content analysis as the main analytical techniques. We used constant comparative analysis to explore the comparison of themes from the focus groups across the various coded categories (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001), which was followed by classical content analysis to establish the frequency of the themes (Kohlbacher, 2006; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2006). The emergent themes we focused on were instances in which participants specifically described and discussed strategies for curbing the dropout issue. We focused on data that provided us with insights about the strategies and approaches promoted by the alumni members.

TCC Alumni Perspectives

Because we were most interested in the strategies proposed, we drew primarily from focus group data. In addition to summarizing strategies developed by alumni members, we presented three major recommendations. Lessons learned included that prevention efforts should focus on personal, family, and policy factors. Second, prevention efforts should be grounded within the community rather than school-based. Third, prevention

efforts should leverage the experiences and expertise of adults living within the community to assist social service agencies and schools with mitigating dropout risks.

Defining and Theorizing the Dropout Problem

In the first focus group, participants expanded our understanding of the dropout problem. Participants identified and defined dropout factors and developed a general theory of low school completion in poor urban communities. The theory centered on the need to address issues of joblessness and poverty. Addressing these factors would improve communities and family life for children, which would ensure that children would have adults who would become involved advocates in their school and personal lives. We facilitated the development of this perspective by asking participants to define and rank the importance of factors that contribute to dropping out. There was much disagreement about how the factors should be defined and ranked. To determine the categories and rankings, we hung the posters labeled *personal*, *in-school*, and *out-of-school* around the room. The posters were based on the areas that dropout prevention programs commonly address. We asked the group what other factors should be listed.

After much debate over the nature of categories, the group arrived (not agreed) at common definitions that primarily account for out-of-school factors. *Personal factors* directly pertained to an individual's emotional, physical, or attitudinal issues. Examples of personal factors included self-esteem, developmental stages, and emotional wellbeing. *Family factors* refer to household culture, quality of relationships, structure, and the involvement of people directly related to and involved with the child's household. There was extensive disagreement about how and if family factors could be distinguished from community influences because many alumni considered them too interconnected to stand as separate categories. Despite

this, the group defined *community factors* as out-of school events and problems that happen within the community, but do not stem from the home setting or household. Examples of community factors include gang culture, peer influence, and neighborhood violence.

Also, the group described *policies of government, in-school factors, and race, class, and ethnicity* as important factors to consider when developing dropout prevention strategies. To the group, *government* (the research team added policies for clarification) was a widespread category. It combined numerous factors that cut across municipal boundaries, agencies, and policy arenas. Alumni members eventually settled on a description for *policies of government* as the myriad of federal, state, city, district, and agency policies ranging from funding to the Department of Human Services' and the Department of Youth and Family Services, correctional policies, and school district governance. Also, *race, class, and ethnicity (culture)* was a broad category. It refers to individual and group cultural identity and development (in regards to pride and self-esteem), the culture of geographic units (neighborhoods, urban, suburban), as well as the societal racism, sexism, prejudice, and the ways a person or group is viewed because of these factors. Last, *in-school factors* refer to school curriculum, expectations, teacher quality, discipline, and structure.

After developing definitions, we provided participants with Post-It notes numbered 1–6. We asked participants to consider which factors are most important to address if we are to improve the rate of high school completion in urban communities. Participants ranked the identified factors, with “1” indicating a high priority and “6” indicating a low priority factor. On the basis of individual rankings, the following ranking of factors emerged:

1. Government policies
2. Family
3. Personal
4. In-school
5. Community
6. Cultural

The individual alumni members explained why they ranked the factors as they did. To be clear, the participants deemed all of the factors important and overlapping, making the ranking exercise quite difficult. In the end, some chose to rank what they considered the most important while others based their decision on pragmatism. For example, the participants shared that culture was perhaps the most important factor. Yet, they saw no pragmatic way to directly address the factor because of how deeply systemic racism, prejudice, discrimination, and even nihilism is within poor urban communities. The list, then, reflects on one hand a pragmatic assessment of the factors that contribute to high rates of noncompletion in urban communities and, on the other hand, the areas that can be addressed by participants within local communities.

The general theory of the dropout problem that emerged from the group was the following: government policies are discriminatory and do not address the needs of poor urban communities and their families. The government and its agencies rely on flawed policies and are unable or unwilling to address

the immediate needs of poor urban families (e.g., jobs, education). Community culture and conditions have deteriorated, and families suffer as a result. Children within the families suffer because parents are unable or unwilling to provide the children with the necessary supports to complete school. With this general theory of the problem, we designed the subsequent activities around government policies, family, and personal issues.

Critiquing and Developing Strategies to Address the Dropout Problem

The second focus group shifted from understanding the dropout problem to developing ideas to address the problem. Alumni members developed three strategic approaches to addressing the dropout problem in poor urban communities. These included (a) a community mobilization model, (b) a family/wraparound and life-long learning model, and (c) a sports inspired assessment and recruitment model. The models were generated by the guiding question of the session: “What should we do?” All activities revolved around critical thinking and developing strategies to help students stay in school. Because addressing the dropout problem requires multipronged and varied approaches, we were less concerned about developing one strategy. We did not suggest the group work toward a consensus. Also, we did not discourage consensus. Instead, we focused on arguments for and against certain strategies and prodded the alumni members to be creative in considering what approaches might reach and work for students identified as at-risk for dropping out.

Before asking participants to develop their own sets of strategies and recommendations, we first explored contemporary strategies (in broad terms) to addressing the dropout issue. We showed video vignettes of each approach on the basis of dropout prevention efforts spanning the United States. We then asked each participant to respond to the approaches/strategies by agreeing, disagreeing, or choosing no position, and then joining others who made the same choice. After that, we asked groups to collectively explain why they joined the group they chose. For example, we asked participants to agree, disagree, or remain undecided about strategy statements such as “mentoring is the key to improve student outcomes” and “schools need to hold parents more accountable for student outcomes.” We conducted this activity in anticipation of the follow-up activity. Exploring existing strategies primed participants to formulate their own strategies and approaches.

We developed a case study classroom to facilitate the discussion of participant solutions, strategies, approaches, and facilitate the decision-making process. We formed factor specific decision-making teams by placing participants with others who similarly ranked factors during the first focus group. We revisited and reminded participants about the themes from the previous group session, such as that in a first-grade classroom of 27 students, 7–8 are projected to not earn a high school diploma. We created case studies of students and asked the groups to randomly select students. On the back of each student card, we provided background information on the students, including their personal challenges, their family

structure, academic ability, neighborhood type and other factors that are known risk-factors for dropping out (the student information on the card was based loosely on the experiences of the alumni members as reflected in the one-on-one interviews). Using the small case study population, we asked groups to discuss strategies and interventions to ensure the students stay in school. The following questions guided the group conversations:

1. What are the issues that the students face?
2. Who are key people who need to be involved?
3. What are key resources that are required?
4. How can people and resources be used to ensure that students succeed?

Although each of the resulting strategies derives from these questions, the actions implied in each case have similarities. For example, each strategy focuses in some way on engaging adults who are familiar with the students' home and school situation. Each identifies a role for community-based social service agencies in the dropout prevention process. In addition, each highlights the importance of raising awareness within a broader community context and seeks to encourage some sort of broad-based improvement of school (e.g., the curriculum) and community conditions (e.g., employment for community residents). In what follows, we provide a description of the three resulting approaches.

Strategy 1: Community Mobilization Model

The *policy* group developed an approach based on the argument that education is a civil right. The approach they developed, we describe as a *community mobilization model*. Their idea is to advocate for educational success through raising awareness and mobilizing resources within local communities (especially the talents of people). Their approach to dropout prevention would revolve around, as a group member explained during the focus group session, "a town hall meeting twice a month. . . the town hall meeting would be run by the student council, the PTA, and the school leaders [with] the goal of creating solidarity and all coming together as a collective." The group explained that the meetings should be conducted using conference style workshops that facilitate processes that collectively empower people to address a myriad of social and educational issues in their communities. The dropout problem would be one among many topics. In addition, the workshops would function as think tanks where people shared ideas and strategies to produce favorable school outcomes, similar to the research study process. The overarching objective of the town hall meetings would be to articulate and promote the idea that access to high quality education should be framed as a "new civil right." Therefore, mass political awareness and mobilization is the best strategy to ensure such access is attained.

Strategy 2: Family Wraparound/ Life-long Learning Model

The *personal* group focused their solution on promoting family wellness and the psychological wellbeing of children and families. Their general theory of action was that the wellbeing of the child depends on the wellbeing of the family unit, in particular the knowledge and resources available to the parent. Empow-

ering parents must be a part of any strategy to help a student successfully progress through school. Within the model, the group explained that when "a student is showing some high-risk behavior in school and after school [and] that child is identified, the parents are identified as well." Specific help for the parents would include parenting classes, parenting support groups, one-on-one counseling and group support with a focus on helping the parents communicate with their child, and identify and connect their child to resources within their community and school to ensure the child's success. Schools could facilitate the process by developing relationships with community-based organizations and vice versa. In the event that school personnel or a representative from a community based organization knows of a parent's need, these workers should be prepared and willing to deploy resources in ways that allow parents to access them in either a school or community setting, whichever is most convenient.

An additional component of the model is what the family group's alumni members refer to as "a social engagement component" that prepared children for lifelong psychological well being and social engagement in urban communities. In addition to empowering parents, an effective dropout strategy should embed social issues that affect urban youth and communities directly into schools as a part of the curriculum. The facilitator summarized the goal of the program or class would be to help children at a young age, especially "kids who are in unhealthy homes," understand issues of poverty and the various challenges in their homes and communities so that they can start developing "that psychological understanding to help them deal with it as they go forward." The curriculum should "attend to the kids' social needs through teaching them psychology to help them understand better their own behavior and others" and focus on positively reinforcing a strong sense of self as a mechanism for encouraging at-risk students to stay in school. The group was undecided on if this should be a stand-alone program distinct from traditional academic classes. Key approaches to successful dropout prevention should educate children to engage with their circumstances, while also educating and empowering parents to garner resources on behalf of their children.

Strategy 3: Individual Assessment and Recruitment Model

The group that believed family-related risk factors were the most important issue to address argued that a model of intensive encouragement, mentoring, and coaching would help push at-risk students to succeed in schools. They likened the process to sports recruitment and used the fact that athletic programs are designed to help students overcome significant challenges and stay focused on sports. They used the sports model to imagine a similar process for promoting academic success. In the model, at-risk students would be individually assessed for their weaknesses and strengths. On the basis of the assessment, the student would be actively recruited to complete school in much the same way athletes are recruited and developed to achieve inside and outside of the classroom. Specifically, the group described using an assessment process that starts in the household and follows students through each stage of school. Aaron explained the model:

What they do is they come into the household and they assess the problems before you move into the next level. If you're in junior high at the time, you may have problems in English, math, and in your house. So they'll basically partner you up with other kids as you transition from junior high school to high school to teach you the social [and academic] skills to be successful in high school.

To administer the model would require job creation in local communities because the recruiters would need to be trained and hired as case managers who work with teams of at-risk students:

A person would go into that household or into the community, preferably like a parent on a PTA committee or somebody who physically (lives) in the community that came from that same background. So they would kind of know the nuances of really what's going on in the community and in the home. And the whole thing would be recruiting kids that lack the ability to be educated by being an encourager like you were actually recruiting them and you would sit down and talk about some of the positives of coming to whatever school that you were representing.

The recruitment model moves beyond a coaching approach to address the students' in-school and out-of-school needs. A case management approach acknowledges and commits to dealing with the home environment as well, so that students have supportive environments to study, rest, and feel safe. The final aspect of this model assumes that there will be a payoff upon graduating. Many athletes expect to use sports as a means of attending college or become sports professionals. A high school diploma must give students similar hopes of either college attendance or work.

Discussing the Dropout Problem: What Approach(es) Will Work?

In the final focus group, alumni members shared their approaches to dropout prevention through conversing with professional stakeholders. Two small group discussions were facilitated by burning questions developed in advance by researchers and alumni participants. The questions were based on the conversations and emergent themes from previous focus groups. We made follow-up phone calls to alumni members to ask them what they would like to discuss with the stakeholders. We compiled their responses and feedback into three guiding questions:

1. What structures are in place for making mental health resources available to families and youth in public schools?
2. What community-school linkages exist in schools around the dropout problem, and what stakeholder(s) are responsible for taking the lead in forging these linkages?
3. If most agree that social issues are the problem/catalyst for students dropping out, then why do many strategies remain focused on school improvement?

Although these questions were intended to guide the conversations, the exchange between the alumni members and

invited guests, they moved beyond the specific content of the questions. The conversations reinforced alumni beliefs that efforts to address the dropout problem should be grounded within community-based settings. One stakeholder believed that this was already the case and argued that the alumni members and researchers misunderstood current approaches. However, another invited stakeholders interjected to agree that nationwide, the focus primarily remains on school systems, rather than communities, as a focal point of dropout prevention efforts. In the following exchange, the alumni members and stakeholders dialogue about the challenges social service and school-based providers face when attempting to work in urban communities where people are often distrustful of government and school-based agencies:

Stakeholder: The services that I'm responsible for are predominately voluntary. So we go knock on the door and try to find out what's going on. The family says "I don't want you in my house. We don't want you here." So the pushback that we hear both from community leaders and services that try to go into the homes is the families don't want us there. That's one thing, and then one thing we hear from the schools is we want parent involvement, we want parent engagement, but we have a really hard time getting the parents involved.

George: But this is exactly what we can do, right. We're able to reach places where other people are not able to reach. We have a stake in this community, actually doing things with these people out in these communities. They're really more able to talk to us about whatever's going on. So if we can devise something that we can work with the guidance counselors, truancy officers, if they can give us these people's names and addresses we can actually go to these houses to build rapport, you know what I'm saying? They might not want to have an agency come in, but they know me from the neighborhood . . . We try to assess their situation and work as a network. If they have a problem, we'll say, "Okay, well, Agency Representative, this is the problem happening at the household. How can we address that?" And then you will give me information to address it and take it back to them and explain "This is how they want to address it. Are you okay with this?" We want to all meet together, and then we'll go on from there." That's how it could work.

Stakeholder: I agree with you on that. You have a passion for it. For many service providers in the schools, it's a job. It's not even a career for some people. That's the disconnect. It's just

some people—like what you talk about is perfect. It'll work. I know it'll work if people have a passion. And, in the community, people understand you.

The excerpt underscores an agreement that adults within communities should be included in the decision-making process. This approach requires looking to adults (e.g., the alumni group) as partners in dropout prevention efforts. Also, it is important to note the way that the alumni member presents the model for enhancing service delivery. Moreover, the stakeholders listened intently and seriously considered the perspectives and ideas of the alumni members. It is critical that opportunities for dialogue across perspectives are fostered. Such processes co-generate knowledge amongst groups who rarely encounter each other on a basis of balanced power. Most of the alumni members have experienced sitting across from service providers representing agencies similar to those of the invited stakeholders. Yet, it has not been in a position of mutual dialogue that empowers their voices. At the end of the focus group, the alumni members and invited stakeholders agreed that the rare opportunity to engage in genuine conversations across race, class, and power lines about deep-seated societal problems is itself a powerful strategy for solving problems.

Discussion

Three major themes emerged from our analysis concerning alumni perspectives. First, the alumni wanted to ground efforts within community-based settings and focus more attention on meeting the needs of communities. Focusing on schools is not sufficient because the root problem of the dropout crisis is not located in schools. During one-on-one interviews and in focus group sessions, alumni members focused little on the conditions of public schools. Alumni members did not blame teachers, principals, or school boards for their failure to graduate higher numbers of students. More criticism was leveled at *government*, and the lack of funding and political will to support neighborhood and school improvement. Most of the discussion focused on addressing issues situated in school communities and neighborhoods, such as the crack cocaine epidemic, the illicit drug economy as an alternative in the face of rampant joblessness, and overall physical and cultural decay of urban communities. If neighborhoods and families suffer from joblessness, poverty, and cultural decay, then the solution is to focus on strengthening and, in some cases, rebuilding communities as a way to improve rates of high school completion. As long as neighborhoods do not improve, the dropout rate will continue unabated.

Second, alumni wanted to leverage adults within the communities. Adults in poor urban communities have to be viewed as potential resources instead of potential detriments. The failure to actively involve parents and other significant adults signals a deficit model of prevention and intervention. The approach does not ignore or minimize the significant challenges that many parents face. Instead, social services and

systems of support must seek to move beyond providing supports to providing parents and adults with education and empowerment. Doing so will ultimately benefit the children because adults within the communities should be their primary supports and advocates, not schools. Facilitating such a process will involve creating jobs. Dropout prevention efforts could promote jobs by hiring and training adults in urban communities to better serve the youth within those communities. This approach is promising because people who live with the issues in the community have a stake in improving social service organizations and can act as liaisons, between school, home, and community life. These adults should primarily work in the community and in the homes of students rather than at schools. Their direct involvement in schools should be through an active participation in school meetings and connecting students and families with resources within the community.

Third, alumni thought schools should develop students' "knowledge of self." This idea of "knowing yourself" was an important reoccurring theme throughout the research project. Despite the stated importance of the factor, the alumni members only minimally integrated it into their recommended strategies. For example, one group's recommendation that psychology courses would help students develop a meta-cognitive awareness of their self and the actions of people in the community suggests that youth need an understanding of the structural conditions that shape their lives and actions. In addition, one group believed that a "new civil rights movement" was the most practical way that the dropout problem could be addressed. Such an approach calls for a level of community consciousness that current social service systems and schools are unable or unwilling to foster. Although allusions to the importance of historical, cultural, and psychosocial awareness were stated throughout, the alumni members did not perceive these approaches as primary models for addressing the dropout problem.

Conclusion

After reviewing the findings of the research study, it became apparent that several issues warrant further attention. First, the recommendations and strategies of the alumni participants were cast rather broadly and lacked specificity. This is likely a consequence of two factors. First, the study was conducted over a relatively short period of time. We met in focus groups on the dropout issue only four times over the duration of the project. As such, time constraints did not allow us to explore the strategies with more depth and detail. Second, there was a general lack of knowledge about what services and efforts existed locally. We focused our review and educational objectives on the national dropout crisis as opposed to specific locales. The fact that alumni members were residents of cities, communities, and neighborhoods across three states posed a challenge for understanding the local resources, efficiency of social services, and performance of schools.

Therefore, the remaining question that could not be addressed was, is it government policies per se or the lack of

coordination and difficulty accessing available services that pose problems for urban residents? Undoubtedly, the communities in which alumni participants reside have numerous private and public organizations that provide a range of services to help at-risk students and their families. The project was not designed to assess these services or their abilities to meet the needs of the local communities. Instead, we wanted to know the perspectives of the participants. Future research with marginalized groups might make such an assessment process a part of the research inquiry and rely on community residents themselves to collect data, conduct interviews, and make recommendations to various stakeholders about how to implement the strategies and approaches developed in the present study. Engaging in such a project would extend the current work and clarify many of the issues that were brought up but not fully explored in our project.

In addition, it would be beneficial to more fully explore some of the conceptual issues that emerged during the course of the research. For example, we are interested in what participants mean by education is a “new civil right.” What are the implications for action, and what might such a movement or campaign entail? Another question that remains unanswered is who are the stakeholders that the alumni members feel are important to have at the decision-making table in their respective communities? How can research processes facilitate bringing key players to the table? Last, from the perspective of participants, how can the findings of the research be used to promote action, advocacy, and research in the area of dropout prevention?

Even with these limitations and remaining questions, we encourage policy makers, educators, community residents, and other stakeholders to take seriously the potential input of adults in poor urban communities. Often overlooked, these adults have unique insights into the conditions, needs, and strategies that might work to improve the education of students attending urban public schools. The present findings are a case in point. Tapping into groups, such as the alumni organization, to participate in decision making, researching, and advocating for local educational and social issues will reveal that individuals who have or continue to experience the challenges we seek to solve are valuable partners in addressing societal problems.

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Notes

1. <http://www.dropoutprevention.org>
2. All names and places are pseudonyms in order to ensure anonymity.

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