Priorities in Dealing with School Dropouts

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A sample of 444 nationally certified school psychologists, supervisors of school psychologists and coordinators of school psychological services were surveyed to determine (a) if the causes differed for those who were supervisors/coordinators from those who were first line school psychologists and (b) if service location (urban, suburban, or rural) influenced the school psychologist's perception of dropout causes. The sample was composed of professionals listed in the Directory of Nationally Certified School Psychologists (NASP, 1989). For all respondents, the four most frequently identified causes of dropping out were dysfunctional family, no hope of graduating, substance abuse, and frustration. Supervisors gave a higher priority rating than first line school psychologists to no peer support for education, no parental support for education and no community support for education. Differences by location indicated that psychologists working in rural areas identified conflict with school administration and conflict with teachers as causes most related to dropping out. Factors identified by urban respondents were no peer support for education, no community (cultural) support for education, illiteracy, and peer violence.

As America moves from an industrialized nation to a more technological society, the need for more educated employees with basic high school competencies rises. To meet the growing need, local, state, and federal education departments are requiring high school students to complete a more rigorous program in order to graduate (Roderick, 1994). In contrast to this push for tougher standards, the number of dropouts and disenfranchised youths continues to present challenges to the educational system. It is estimated that 25 % of high school students do not complete high school (Wolman, Bruininks, & Thurlow, 1989). Aside from the societal disadvantages of dropping out of school, there are also personal consequences. Students who have not earned a high school degree will earn significantly less than high school graduates (Coley, 1995). This limited earning power may increase the need for social programs to educate and train individuals (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Finn, 1989). There are particular groups of students who face even greater difficulties in completing high school. These groups include students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, special education students, students living in rural and urban settings, and minorities (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996).

A number of reviews have identified a variety of school related and non-school related variables that are considered causes of dropping out (e. g., Bull & Garret, 1989; Bull, Salyer, & Montgomery, 1990; Coley, 1995; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Grossnickle, 1986; Helge,

1990; Rumberger, 1987). For example, school related variables, those which exist within the school itself (e.g., school conflict, retention, and curriculum), have been identified as contributing to school dropout (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Janosz et al., 1997). Some reasons are directly related to the way in which schools are conducted (Finn, 1989; Finn & Rock, 1990). Non-School Related variables, those conditions more closely related to characteristics of the student and the student's environment outside of the school setting (e.g., absenteeism, delinquency, family problems, pregnancy), also contribute to school dropouts (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996).

School Related Variables

A number of conditions that originate in the school setting can lead to students dropping out. Students who find themselves in conflict with individual teachers or with administrators frequently resolve the conflict by leaving school. This is especially true if the conflict leads to suspension (Comerford & Jacobson, 1987). No hope of graduating due to retention in grade for one or more years or to failing too many classes has also been found to lead to dropping out of school (Widmann & Hoisden, 1988). Roderick (1994) found that of the students who ended sixth grade over age for grade (due to retention), one quarter dropped out of high school. Unless special provisions are made, the number of students who find themselves with excessive failures is likely to increase as graduation requirements are raised and competency testing is required to

receive a diploma.

The lack of vocational or non-college curriculum often leads to student failures and eventually dropping out. This is especially true for special education students (Bishop, 1988; Weber & Sechler, 1988). In addition, Schultz, Tules, Rice, Brauer, and Harvey (1986) found minority students with low reading ability often respond to the frustration of schoolwork by dropping out. Finn (1989) investigated frustration and self-esteem and school participation in relation to school withdrawal and found that students who had less positive self-concepts or who were less involved in school related activities were at greater risk for dropping out.

The intolerance of school officials for cultural and ethnic diversity can also impact students' decisions to stay in school. For example, negatively stereotyping disadvantaged and minority students encourages them to dropout (Wheelock, 1986). Jordan et al. (1996) examined 1,000 eighth graders who were enrolled in school in 1988, but were no longer enrolled in 1990. The study looked at the factors related to dropout among ethnic and gender groups. In particular, one of the findings identified increased rates of suspension among African American males as a contributing factor to their dropping out of school. Another factor particularly related to urban school dropouts is peer violence. Students are likely to leave school if they feel unsafe (Perales, 1988).

Non-School Related Variables

Many causes of school dropouts do not originate in the school setting. Students who come from homes where education is not valued frequently drop out (Barr & Knowles, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Those who have no parent involvement in their schoolwork are also at risk of dropping out (RLEINI, 1987). Dysfunctional families, which are often characterized as having a higher incidence of unresolved conflicts, sexual abuse, physical abuse, psychological abuse, and parental drug dependency, may place a student at higher risk for dropping out of school. Coping with families such as these often becomes a higher priority to students than continuing in school. Other students may have responsibilities at home that interfere with school attendance. Some must care for younger siblings. Others must work in family businesses, or contribute to the financial support of their family (Tidwell, 1985). As the number of school days missed mounts up, students are likely to see dropping out of school as their only alternative. In fact, students who miss a large number of days of school are at risk of dropping out regardless of the reason for the absences. Missing school due to chronic health problems as well as due to truancy puts students at risk to leave school permanently (Levy, 1987; Raffe, 1986).

Female students who become pregnant frequently drop out before the child is born due to embarrassment or after the child is born due to lack of available child care options (Ediger, 1987; Hartford Public schools, 1987). In some instances, pregnant teens are excluded from attending school while pregnant and can miss up to an entire year of school

(Beck & Muia, 1980; Pallas, 1987).

Students who have friends who dropped out are often persuaded to drop out too (Dunham & Alpert, 1987). This occurs most frequently when both the student and peers are delinquents. Students may also choose to drop out if there is no group in school to which they can relate (Bull & Garrett, 1989). Students who abuse alcohol or drugs are also likely to drop out (Mensch & Kandel, 1988). Fagan and Pabon (1990) investigated the relationship between delinquency, substance use, and school dropout. They found that dropouts had more involvement in delinquency and substance use.

Role of School Psychology

In addition to the problems associated with identifying students who dropout and the reasons why they drop out, there is a growing need for school personnel who will be able to address the psychosocial risk factors associated with dropping out and provide effective intervention and prevention programs. Fish (1990) has suggested that school psychologists are in an optimal position to design and implement intervention programs for both dropouts and students at risk for dropping out of school by facilitating school/community relationships. Pagliocca & Sandoval (1995) discuss how school psychologists can work with school counselors to provide counseling for students. They identified 24 reasons why students may seek counseling. Among those reasons were conflicts with teachers, discipline problems, truancy, and alcohol and drug education, all variables associated with dropping out of school.

School psychologists are uniquely trained and qualified to deal with school dropout on individual and system levels as well as local and national levels. There are several reasons why practicing school psychologists are well suited for this role. Within the school itself, this can provide valuable services to students who may be at risk for dropping out. First, these psychologists can be advocates for students and serve as mediators between students and families and the school (Fish, 1990). Second, they are trained in designing intervention and prevention programs that can be individualized, are developmentally appropriate, and take into account many of the psychosocial variables associated with dropping out of school. Third, school psychologists can work with school counselors, provide counseling services, and identify themselves as resources to students who may be at risk for dropping out (Pagliocca & Sandoval, 1995). Lastly, they are trained in gathering and analyzing data so trends associated with dropping out can be identified and investigated.

On a more global level, school psychologists can act as advocates at the state and national level. Talley (1995) suggests that school psychologists should become involved in policy and advocacy work at all levels to communicate their, "expertise in providing solutions to the issues facing America's schools..." (p. 191). School psychologists can inform policy makers about the relevant issues in a particular area (Talley, 1995). Talley (1995) also suggests that before engaging in advocacy or policy work, the psycholo-

gist should consider, "characteristics, assumptions, philosophies, and goals" and articulate that position.

In order to advocate for youths that may dropout and design and implement interventions, it is necessary to conduct research that documents school psychologists' perceptions of school dropouts and investigate whether these perceptions are consistent with or different from those of other school personnel such as psychological service administrators. While school psychologists are well positioned to address the dropout problem, there is little in the school psychology literature that deals specifically with it. A review conducted by Egyed, McIntosh, and Bull (1998) identified only seven studies related to dropout problems and school psychology. Since school psychologists are likely candidates to address the needs of students at risk and their families, more research about school psychologist's perceptions of the school dropout problem is needed to substantiate this assertion.

Egyed, McIntosh, and Bull (1998) investigated school psychologists' perceptions of priorities for dealing with the dropout problem and found that they ranked school conflict as the most important factor which should be considered as a national priority. Other factors as ranked by them (in order of most to least important) included dysfunctional family/lack of support, criminal/victimization, family responsibility, and different from peer group. The results of the study suggest that these professionals perceive the need to address the dropout problem from the perspective of both the child (and their family) and the environment (school related variables). Likewise, McIntosh, Bull, and Salyer (1992) found that school psychologists rated dysfunctional and/or unstable family as the greatest priority in determining the causes of dropping out, however, the school psychologists also noted that factors such as undifferentiated instructions, inflexible teachers, and inappropriate programming should also be a priority. Again, school psychologists recognize the importance of school related factors in contributing to the dropout problem. In considering intervention and prevention programs school psychologists would be likely to consider many of the factors associated with dropping out and not place the responsibility for the problem solely on the student.

In contrast, many special education teachers, principals, superintendents, and central office administrators have different perceptions of the causes of the dropout problem (Bull, Salyer, & Montgomery, 1990; Montgomery, Bull, Hyle, & Salyer, 1990; Salyer, Montgomery, Hyle, & Bull, 1991). According to Hyle, Bull, Salyer, and Montgomery (1990a, 1990b) administrators tend to view student centered factors as issues that should be considered most important in discussions of national priorities. In addition, they viewed structural/educational causes of dropping out as lower level priorities. The educational factors, however, are most within the immediate control of the administrators. One result of this finding may be that administrators may overlook important factors related to dropping out when considering intervention and prevention programs.

In addition, there were also indications that administrators in different locations (e.g., rural, urban, and suburban) have different perspectives on the causes of dropping out which may be related to the environment in which they were embedded (Bull, Montgomery, Hyle, & Salyer 1991a, 1991b; Hyle, Bull, Salyer, & Montgomery, 1990b). Bull, Montgomery, Hyle, & Salyer (1991b) found that urban and suburban administrators have higher priorities in addressing minority dropout than do rural administrators. Hyle, Bull, Salyer, and Montgomery (1990a) examined superintendent's perceptions of priorities for dealing with the dropout problem by school locale. They found urban superintendents rated items such as too old for peer group, poverty, and discrimination as higher priorities than did rural superintendents. Suburban superintendents ranked no parental support for education, poverty, no daycare (for teen with children) and discrimination as higher priorities than did rural area superintendents. Suburban superintendents ranked too old for peer group, learning disabilities, and issues related to diverse populations as higher priorities than urban area superintendents. Rural area superintendents did not yield a consensus with respect to priorities. The authors speculated that this may have been due to the diversity of rural schools nationwide. These studies suggest that the factors related to dropping out are the same in different geographic locations, but the importance of each factor varies.

Differences between perceptions of practicing school psychologist and supervisors/coordinators of school psychological services need to be examined in order to identify areas that need to be further investigated before considering intervention and prevention programs. The purpose of this study was to examine the following issues: (a) How do practicing school psychologists differ from those who are psychological supervisors/coordinators and (b) Does the geographic location (e.g., rural, urban, and suburban) in which the school psychologist work influence their perceptions of dropout causes?

Method

Participants

The sample was composed of 326 school psychologists and 115 psychological service administrators (71 supervisors of school psychologists and 44 coordinators of school psychological services) who were listed in *the Directory of Nationally Certified School Psychologists* (NASP, 1989). This sample was part of a larger study reported by McIntosh, Bull and Salyer (1992) with a response rate of 57% following the initial survey and two mail follow-ups. As is typical in survey research some respondents did not respond to all items, therefore some of the totals do not add exactly. There were 245 males and 199 females in the sample. The sample included 175 with their masters' degrees, 156 with their specialist degrees, 113 with their doctoral degrees. The job locations for the sample were as

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Table 1

Descriptions of the 42 Individual Item Stems for the Questionnaire

Item #	Stem
1	Boredom
2	Frustration
3	Pregnancy
4	Need to support spouse/child
5	Medical problems
6	Emotional problems
7	Desire to earn money
8	Desire to get away from home
9	Conflict(s) with school administration
10	Conflict(s) with one or more teachers
11	No hope of graduating
12	No peer support for education
13	No parent support for education
14	No community support for education
15	Lack of noncollege bound education
16	Substance abuse
17	Being in special classes
18	No peer group
19	Too old for peer group
20	Too different for peer group
21	Truancy
22	Migrant family
23	Illiterate
24	Dysfunctional family
25	Victim of child abuse
26	Poverty
27	Involvement with a crime
28	No day care
29	Lack of teacher role models
30	Peer violence
31	Learning disabilities
32	Discrimination
33	Lack of multicultural training of teachers
34	Failure to pass minimum competency tests
35	Lack of daily attendance support
36	Ineligible to participate in sports
37	Runaway
38	Being in a foster home
39	Parental problems
40	Living on his/her own
41	Numerous home and family responsibilities
42	Alienated from school

follows: rural ($n = 102$), urban ($n = 150$), and suburban ($n = 162$).

Instrumentation

The 42-item questionnaire used for this study was modified from Bull, Salyer and Montgomery (1990) to make it applicable to school psychologists rather than to special educators. This involved modifying the directions and cover letter but no changes were made to the item stems. A brief description of each item stem is presented in Table 1. To assist in the development of the questionnaire, Bull, Salyer, and Montgomery (1990) conducted an intensive literature search, spanning a five-year period, to identify the most common causes of dropping out. Based upon this literature review, item stems were developed reflecting the most common causes of dropping out. For the present study, the questionnaire asked the respondents to complete a section on demographics and the forty-two item stems that reflected the primary causes of dropping out identified through the literature review. The respondents were asked to rate the stems from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree as to whether each cause should become a national priority in dealing with the dropout problem in the United States.

Results

Table 2 lists the top ten national priorities of causes of dropping out by location. These are the items with the high-est level of agreement ranging from 1.50 to 2.12. Table 3 lists the top ten priorities for first line service providers and for supervisors of school psychologists. One-way analysis of variances (ANOVA) were computed for each of the 42-items on the questionnaire to determine whether there were differences in the perceptions of causes of dropping out that should be national priorities between first line school psychologists and school psychological service administrators. There were three items out of forty-two that showed significant differences between first line school psychologists and supervisors. All of these items related to educational support and in all cases supervisors rated them more important than did first line psychologists. The items were: no peer support for education, $F(1, 405) = 5.668$, $p < .02$; no parental support for education, $F(1, 403) = 7.897$, $p < .005$; and no community support for education, $F(1, 398) = 4.388$, $p < .037$.

One-way ANOVAs were computed for each of the 42-items on the questionnaire to determine whether there were differences in the perceptions of causes of dropping out between locations. Seven items differentiated between locations. These were conflict with school administration, $F(2, 395) = 3.593$, $p < .028$; no peer support for education, $F(2, 401) = 6.273$, $p < .002$; no community (Cultural) support for education, $F(2, 398) = 5.530$, $p < .004$; illiterate, $F(2, 403) = 7.477$, $p < .001$; and peer violence $F(2, 399) = 4.268$, $p < .015$.

Table 2
Top Ten National Priorities of Dropping Out by Location

	Total			Rural	
	M	SD		M	SD
Dysfunctional family	1.57	.77	Dysfunctional family	1.56	.69
No hope graduating	1.68	.81	No hope graduating	1.73	.85
Substance abuse	1.81	.79	Emotional problems	1.77	.85
Frustration	1.83	.93	Frustration	1.78	.87
Emotional problems	1.84	.92	Alienated	1.91	.81
Alienated	1.85	.87	Parental problems	1.92	.91
Illiterate	1.94	.98	Substance abuse	1.95	.83
Parental problems	2.00	.90	Child abuse	1.99	.84
Child abuse	2.05	.90	Truancy	2.11	.92
Truancy	2.09	.97	No parent supported education	2.13	.91
No hope graduating	1.59	.74	Dysfunctional family	1.55	.75
Dysfunctional family	1.60	.85	Substance abuse	1.70	.71
Illiterate	1.72	.79	No hope graduating	1.71	.85
Frustration	1.74	.90	Alienated	1.82	.85
Alienated	1.83	.94	Emotional problems	1.86	.98
Substance abuse	1.84	.83	Frustration	1.94	.97
Emotional problems	1.86	.91	Parental problems	1.97	.82
Truancy	2.05	.97	Illiterate	2.05	1.06
Child abuse	2.06	.98	Child abuse	2.09	.88
Parental problems	2.11	.99	Truancy	2.11	1.01

Table 3
Top Priority Causes of Dropping Out Rank Ordered By Position

First Line School Psychologists			School Psychology Supervision		
	M	*SD*		*M*	*SD*
Dysfunctional family	1.58	.80	Dysfunctional family	1.50	.60
No hope of graduating	1.66	.80	No hope of graduating	1.64	79
Substance abuse	1.81	.83	Substance abuse	1.73	69
Emotional problems	1.83	.91	Alienation	1.78	.80
Frustration	1.83	.90	Frustration	1.79	90
Alienation	1.88	.90	Emotional problems	1.80	92
Illiterate	1.92	.94	Illiterate	1.86	1.02
Parental problems	2.01	.92	Child abuse	1.90	86
Child abuse	2.07	.90	Parental problems	1.94	86
Truant	2.11	.98	No parent supported education	2.01	98

Chi-square analyses were conducted to see if the two groups were equally distributed across location. The results showed (χ^2 [2, $N = 411$] = 8.19, $p < .02$) indicated that the proportion of respondents who were first line psychologists and those who were supervisors differed by location. Proportionally more supervisors were found in the urban than the rural or suburban settings. Chi-square analyses were also conducted for the two groups across the three education levels (masters, specialist, doctoral). The analysis revealed (χ^2 [2, $N = 411$] = 30.31, $p < .0001$) supervisors tended to have more advanced degrees than first line psychologists. A final chi-square analysis was conducted across location by education level (χ^2[4, $N = 525$] = 2.17, $p < .71$) indicated that highest degree obtained was independent of urban, suburban or rural educational setting.

Discussion

For the entire sample of school psychologists ($n = 444$) dysfunctional families was rated as being the most important priority that should be addressed within the schools. In comparing school psychologists working in urban, suburban, or rural locations, there was considerable agreement on which causes of dropping out should be national priorities. Across the three locations, the highest ranked causes of dropping out that should be national priorities were dysfunctional family and no hope of graduating. These results suggest that regardless of location school psychologists have similar perceptions of which causes of dropping out should be top national priorities. These results also suggest that school psychologists in urban, suburban, and rural areas are working with students who drop out of school for similar reasons. For example, dysfunctional families, which are often characterized as having higher rates of divorce, unresolved conflicts, physical and psychological abuse, and sexual abuse, appears to be a primary cause of dropping out regardless of location. This assumption is based upon the idea that school psychologists in this sample rated certain causes of dropping out, which should be national priorities, higher due to their experiences from working with at-risk youth within their school districts. However, additional research needs to be conducted to substantiate such a conclusion. In addition, future research should explore the nature of the dysfunctional families by location. For example, dysfunctional families within urban settings may have a higher incidence of parental drug dependency compared to dysfunctional families within suburban settings. This type of information would help school psychologists develop drop out prevention and intervention programs specific for their school districts. Rural, urban and suburban school psychologist groups each ranked dysfunctional family and no hope of graduating among the two strongest influences toward students dropping out. This suggests that students whose family members relate harmfully to each other and students who have experienced sufficient failure in school to preclude the expectation of graduation are likely to drop out regardless of their setting. While there appears to be a consensus on the most important factors, a number of differences among settings emerged from the data analysis. School psychologists in rural schools ranked conflict with school administration and conflict with teachers more highly compared to school psychologists in urban settings. School psychologists in urban areas ranked no peer support for education, being illiterate and peer violence as more influential causes of students dropping out.

The top causes of dropping out are areas that school psychologists are well trained to address. Most school psy-

chologists have had training in counseling, prevention, and program evaluation (Pagliocca & Sandoval, 1995). School psychologists can work with students and families by providing counseling or assisting them in attaining psychological services outside the schools. School psychologists can conduct program evaluation and needs assessments within their school districts to determine which problems should be addressed and which programs are the most effective. In short, school psychologists can potentially intervene with students regarding most causes of dropping out.

First line school psychologists and school psychology supervisors agreed on the most important causes of dropping out. However, supervisors gave more credence than first line service providers to: (a) no peer support for education, (b) no community support for education and (c) no parental support for education. Supervisors saw little advocacy toward education from any source for those who drop out. However, engendering such support would require changes in society to a larger degree than changes in the behavior of school officials. Therefore, school psychologists would most likely not see themselves as empowered to foster events to decrease the impact of these factors. As proportionally more of the urban school psychologists were in supervisory positions than the proportion of suburban or rural school psychologists, job location as well as job role may have influenced differences in ranked priority causes of dropping out.

Several conclusions may be drawn from this research. School psychologists across settings and job categories identify causes of dropping out which should become top national priority items. These are dysfunctional family and no hope of graduating. To affect the number of students dropping out, national resources need to be allocated toward assisting students to cope with dysfunctional families. This support could come directly to schools or through partnerships among school and other community agencies.

National attention should also be focused on preventing excessive failures for students. While national priorities currently emphasize excellence and high standards, the needs of students who experience difficulty in meeting such standards should not be neglected. Dissemination of information about programs and educational strategies which have been successful in regard to these as well as the other top priority issues needs to occur nationwide. In addition, national priorities should address the differences identified by locale. Urban districts need ways to overcome negative peer influences on students and lack of community support for schools. Rural districts, on the other hand, need support in mediation conflict between school staff and students.

Much is asked of public school educators. If those educators are to be successful, national priorities must focus on providing solutions to the challenges they face. This is especially true for urban and rural educators. Therefore, researchers and evaluators would do well to identify and publicize dropout prevention strategies that have been proven as effective means to address the causes of students dropping out of school.

Only limited research has been conducted exploring the effectiveness of school psychologists in working with dropouts. Therefore, future research should strive to demonstrate the role of the school psychologist in developing effective dropout prevention and intervention programs. Future research needs to be conducted to determine whether the perceptions of causes of dropping out that should be national priorities identified by school psychologists and school psychological service administrators are consistent with other school personnel (e.g., superintendents, special education teachers, principals, etc.). Finally, future research should attempt to determine whether there are differences in how the causes of dropping out are defined based upon location. For example, are dysfunctional families characterized differently in urban settings versus rural settings?

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