"Nobody Ever Asked Me Why I Left High School…"

A Literature Review of Recent Qualitative Studies About Why Students Leave Conventional School

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In 2019-2020, in partnership with the Civic Affairs Trust and Center for Policy Design, Wilder Research and High School for Recording Arts interviewed 70 students and young people about why they left conventional high school. Wilder Research interviewed 40 respondents who primarily lived in greater Minnesota (27 of 40 respondents) and about half of whom identified as White (21 of 40). High School for Recording Arts interviewed 30 respondents who lived in the Twin Cities metro area (30 of 30 respondents) and most of whom identified as Black or African American (26 of 30).

Despite the geographic and racial diversity in our respondents, the 70 students and young people we interviewed said similar things about why they left conventional school: 1) they wanted more holistic relationships with teachers and school staff, 2) they wanted personalized teaching and supports, and 3) they wanted to be taught subjects that align with their interests. The similarities in findings between our respondent groups prompted us to examine the degree to which our findings align with findings from other studies that focus on why students leave conventional school.

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Literature review purpose

We acknowledge that our respondent pool (70 students) is very small compared to the number of students who leave conventional high school in Minnesota. In the 2017-2018 school year, more than 140,000 students (16% of all Minnesota students) received alternative education[1] and in the 2018-2019 school year the dropout rate among high school students in Minnesota was about four percent (roughly 39,000 students).[2] We do not make claims about the representativeness of our findings for this total "leavers" population. That being said, we wanted to determine the degree of similarity between our findings and the findings from similar studies—that is, qualitative studies seeking to hear directly from students about why they left conventional school—as a limited examination of the generalizability of our findings.

We identified 21 articles published in the past 10 years that met our literature search criteria. Our search criteria included:

- Studies that used a qualitative methodology, such as interviews or group discussions (e.g., studies that relied heavily on or only used surveys or school data did not meet our search criteria)

- Studies that positioned students themselves as the primary data source (e.g., studies that relied heavily on adult perspectives did not meet our search criteria)

- Studies that focused on students' perceptions of their school itself—teachers, school staff, pedagogies, curriculum, physical space, and so on—in relation to why they decided to leave (e.g., studies that focused solely on challenges outside of school did not meet our search criteria)

Initially, we identified 23 articles based on a scan of pertinent literature. We selected six of these articles to serve as "anchor articles," or articles that were particularly aligned with our search criteria. The second step in our search process included using these "anchor articles" to search for additional literature, at which point we identified an additional 20 articles. Of the total 43 articles identified through this search process, we closely reviewed 21 for their pertinence for our learning goals.

See Figure 1 for the number of studies in this review that used a qualitative methodology—such as interviews, discussion groups, and student journals—to learn about students' perspectives. All of the reviewed studies that used a qualitative methodology did so to hear directly from students

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[1] Minnesota Department of Education. (2020). *Alternative learning*. https://education.mn.gov/MDE/fam/al/
[2] MPR News. (2020). *Minnesota students graduating high school at historic rates.* https://www.mprnews.org/story/2020/03/05/minnesota-high-school-grad-rates-hit-a-record-in-2019-officials-say

about how their school contributed to their decision to leave. As such, each of these 18 articles represents studies that are highly similar to ours. "Other methodology" in Figure 1 refers to survey studies as well as literature reviews about why students left school. While methodologically dissimilar to our study, studies such as these were useful for further contextualizing our study's findings and the findings from this literature review. The total count of methodologies in Figure 1 is greater than 21 because two studies used a mixed methods design, meaning that they used qualitative and quantitative methods. As a result, these studies were counted twice, in both methodology categories.

1. Study methodologies

Year published	Qualitative methodology (Number of articles; N=21)	Other methodology[b] (Number of articles; N=21)
2015 and newer	11	2
2010-2014	7	3
Total[a]	18	5

[a] *The total count of methodologies is greater than 21 because two studies used a mixed methods design, meaning that they used qualitative and quantitative methods; these articles were counted in both methodology categories.*

[b] *"Other methodology" refers to survey studies and literature reviews.*

Findings

Background and context: Why don't we ask students what they want from school?

In alignment with the motivation for our study, some of the articles we reviewed noted a lack of research that highlighted students' perspectives—namely, a lack of qualitative research seeking to learn directly from students about why they left school (Hardy-Fortin, 2012; Locke & Mackenzie, 2016; Lovelace et al., 2018). Of the 21 articles we reviewed closely, six were dissertations written as part of doctorate programs (Brown, 2017; Chou et al., 2015; Hardy-Fortin, 2012; Loomis, 2011; Rouse, 2019; Short, 2017). This suggests that qualitative inquiry into why students leave school is a relatively new area of interest for education scholars. As Locke and Mackenzie (2016) summarized, "Little is known from the student perspective…" (160).

Perhaps the reason for this lack of student perspective is bias against students who leave school, as noted by America's Promise Alliance (2016) and Doll et al. (2013)—the assumption being that students who leave school are unmotivated or deficient in some way. Further, America's Promise Alliance observed that much of the research about why students leave school elevates

students' deficits, rather than students' strengths. In contrast to this trend in "leavers" research, America's Promise Alliance found that students who leave school excel at decision-making and self-management, and that they have well-developed social and relationship skills. Likewise, our study began with the assumption that students who leave conventional school possess useful skills, including the ability to explain why they left school.

In our study and in the reviewed literature, students talked about issues that were not directly related to school but nonetheless impacted their decision to leave school (America's Promise Alliance, 2016; Brooks, 2015; Doll et al., 2013; Hynes, 2015; Hynes, 2014; Rahimi & Liston, 2018). In the reviewed literature, students mentioned family issues, high mobility, economic challenges, mental health issues, and histories of assault and abuse when talking about why they left school. Likewise, in our study, students mentioned mental health, family issues, financial issues, and involvement in criminalized activities. Although these factors must not be overlooked when considering why students leave school, they are outside of the focus of our study and this literature review. Our focus was specifically on school change. We sought to answer the following question: How can conventional schools change to better meet the needs of students who decide to leave?

The impact of supportive adult-student relationships: increased student engagement and improved academic performance

The most prominent finding in our study as well as in the literature was the power of adult-student relationships—and the power of in-school adult-student relationships in particular (Adams et al., 2020; Chou et al., 2015; Eschen, 2013; Guess & Bowling, 2014; Hynes, 2015; Hynes, 2014; Iachini et al., 2013; Keyes, 2019; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Rouse, 2019;). Hynes (2015) found that supportive adult-student relationships were strongly correlated with on-time high school graduation. Similar to our study, she also found that students appreciated multiple kinds of support from teachers and school staff, such as academic support, emotional encouragement, and help with issues that are not directly related to school. Similarly, respondents in our study mentioned "receiving help with issues not related to school" as well as "receiving help with academics" when talking about the benefits of having relationships with supportive adults at their school. To further supplement these findings, Chou et al. (2015) and Rouse (2019) each offered a quote from a student talking about the power of having a supportive relationship with their art teacher:

> *"'I had a really awesome art teacher. This woman—even when I skipped school or whatever, when I came to school hungover or still high or whatever, right?—she would sit down with me and she would work on my art with me and she told me like if you ever need anything let me know.'" (Chou et al., 90).*

> *"'The only place I felt safe and comfortable was in my art class because I had the most amazing art teacher ever. Still to this day he is one of my number one supports. He listened and understood mental health, and no one else in that school seemed to. I could go to him crying and he would understand. I could tell him I was having a panic attack but could not identify what caused it, and he made it seem like that was okay that I could not identify what caused the panic attack. He was just so supportive and nonjudgmental. And he would not judge me on what my art was. My art was my outlet. I remember during one class period, I was trying to draw with a crayon. That seemed simple, but I could not do it. He spent the entire class period helping me learn the technique to drawing with a crayon. That's how much he cared.'" (Rouse, 80)*

In addition, our study and the studies included in the literature review found that negative relationships with teachers and school staff pushed students to leave school (Brown, 2017; Chou et al., 2015; Hardy-Fortin, 2012; Iachini et al., 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Loomis, 2011). Most often, the impact of these negative relationships took the form of punishment and a lack of individualized attention or care from teachers and school staff. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) quoted one student who summarized their relationship with adults at their conventional high school: "'They only look at the bad things you do. They did not look at the good things that you do'" (108).

The punitive mindset experienced by students in conventional schools translated to additional barriers to learning, often because teachers and school staff were already overworked due to large class sizes and large school populations. Lagana et al. (2011), Loomis (2011), and Hardy-Fortin (2012) summarized the experiences of students in their studies, calling attention to the way that attitudes toward "at-risk students" or "problem students" affected respondents' experiences at conventional schools:

> *"'The teachers don't have any time to take you aside [and learn about what's wrong] because they have to grade 500 pieces of paper'" (Lagana et al., 108).*
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> *"'I was labeled as an at-risk student and they were not willing to help out. They were thinking, 'Why help the student? They're an at-risk student; they're going to fail anyway, what's the point of helping them?'"" (Loomis, 79).*
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> *"Another dropout reported, 'I felt like I wasn't getting the proper help that I needed from teachers.' Respondents spoke on several occasions of teachers who talked to each other in the teachers' rooms and judged or labeled students that they felt were problematic in some way—academically, behaviorally, or both. The dropouts reported that when they asked a teacher to help them in class, they were not supported in any way, especially if they had ever had a problem academically and especially behaviorally" (Hardy-Fortin, 67-68).*

What's more, our study and the studies included in our literature review found that positive relationships with teachers and school staff not only correlated with on-time graduation, but also translated to increased student engagement and improved academic performance (Brooks, 2015; Brown, 2017; Eschen, 2013; Gosine & Islam, 2014; Guess & Bowling, 2014; Hardy-Fortin, 2012; Hynes, 2015; Loomis, 2011; Short, 2020). According to the literature, this increased

engagement and improved performance stemmed from students receiving a more personalized education—because their teachers and school staff knew them personally and tailored their teaching and supports to them individually. Brooks (2015) found that students would have been less likely to leave school if they felt that an adult at their school cared about them, with one student saying: "'I feel like I fell through the cracks at school. No one cared what I did'" (22). Hynes (2014) offered a similar quote from a student who shared the feeling of no one at school caring about them:

> *"'I was trying to stay engaged as much as I could but it was like nobody was helping me—nobody. I would go to school. The teachers wouldn't even acknowledge me, I would say, 'I'm behind, can you do this for me?' They were like, 'No, all I can do is give you this; try to do what you can.' A lot of teachers didn't even know my name. It got really bad and came to the point where I wasn't going to graduate'" (Hynes, 2014, 25).*

Similar to our study, the literature review found that positive relationships with teachers and school staff were multi-faceted; for students to feel supported, teachers and school staff needed to do more than the minimum specified in their job descriptions. For instance, Guess and Bowling (2014) identified three important areas in which teachers and school staff should offer support: academic (how teachers support academic success), personal (teachers' interest in a student's well-being and life satisfaction), and social (teachers' facilitation of positive peer relationships). Similarly, Hynes (2015) outlined four types of support: emotional support (expressions of comfort, caring, and trust), information support (helpful insights or advice), appraisals (specific positive feedback and constructive criticism), and instrumental support (tangible resource or services, such as bus passes, connecting a student with an employer, or helping a student visit a college campus).

The importance of holistic relationships like this cannot be overstated for students and young people who have experienced a lot of serious challenges outside of school (America's Promise Alliance, 2016; Brooks, 2015; Doll et al., 2013; Hynes, 2015; Hynes, 2014; Rahimi & Liston, 2018). Hynes (2015) found that while supportive adult relationships are important for all students, they are even more important for students facing high levels of adversity in their lives. In another study, Hynes (2014) offered the following explanation from a respondent about how their experiences in the foster care system affected their school experience. This story illustrates the importance of holistic teacher-student relationships and the necessity of flexible approaches to education.

"'I've been in foster care since my twelfth birthday. So I moved around a lot and I've never been consistent with school. Back to childhood, I've missed like months at a time and things like that. The biggest issue for me was when I went to high school was the teachers not understanding how to deal with kids like me. I was really behind; I had been moving around a lot. They weren't sure what to do with me, how to help me. They eventually ended up writing me off. After a while I just stopped going to class, stopped doing homework, skipped school and got into doing drugs and things like that. I found out if I stayed in my high school I would have no chance of graduating on time. And the teachers just told me, 'Tough shit.''" (Hynes, 2014, 25).

Summary: Personalized education has many benefits—but how do we get there?

Our study and the studies in this literature review are clear on how to access the benefits of personalized education—by prioritizing more holistic, in-school relationships between students and adults. By developing meaningful relationships with students, teachers and school staff gain the ability to personalize education for their students—that is, they know what is going on in their students' lives, what their students are interested in, and what their students' life and career goals are, and they can personalize their interactions with students accordingly.

From a school redesign standpoint, prioritizing holistic teacher-student relationships demands some changes to conventional schooling. Our study and the studies in this literature review found students who left conventional school desired smaller class sizes—particularly because smaller class sizes allow for building relationships with teachers and receiving more personalized academic support (Brooks, 2015; Brown, 2017; Eschen, 2013, Iachini et al., 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Loomis, 2011). As Brown (2017) summarized, "Students appreciated that small class sizes allowed the teaching and learning at the school to be flexible and tailored to their individual needs" (46).

Respondents in Eschen's study (2013) reported that the self-paced curriculum at their alternative school was helpful, saying that their teachers "have some time limits but they allow you to work at your own pace and you have more time" (78). In addition, Eschen noted that teachers likewise appreciated this approach because it relieved pressure from the district and school to meet particular deadlines or standards, and instead shifted their focus to personalizing education for each of their students:

"Where traditional high school teachers feel continually under pressure to keep students on task, a self-paced curriculum correctly puts responsibility on the student. It frees the teacher and the student to adjust for individual student needs, and make individual pacing decisions rather than pacing based on the needs of the district or the other students in a class" (Eschen, 78).

Lastly, Eschen's study (2013) likewise explored an alternative to the punitive mindset held by some teachers and school staff, which our study and the studies in this literature review found to be detrimental to student engagement. The teachers at the alternative school attended by respondents in Eschen's study modeled a person-centered approach to discipline. They would ask—not demand—a student to stop misbehaving and then would follow up with the student to see if there was anything going in their lives or at school that prompted them to misbehave.

> *"'Normally teachers would just say, 'Hey that's not cool, you know, can you stop that?' They'd talk to you like a human being. They wouldn't give you a punishment right away. Just slow down and let's get back on track. I'm not sure why you'd have any problem with the teachers because really they were more like friends, but if you ignored them, then eventually, you're going to get in trouble. [They'd say,] 'So I want you to know that I'm not going to stop you but I'd recommend you stop.' And almost all the time students would stop because they had respect for the teachers and they knew them. They'd say, 'Is there something going on, is there a reason you were misbehaving?' And I think that always helped because then you could stop it before you got in really big trouble for it'"* (Eschen, 86-87).

Considerations for implementing personalized education

Our study and the studies in this literature review describe a model of schooling that is distinct from the model found in most conventional schools. In this alternative model of schooling, teachers know what their students are interested in, what is going on in their lives outside of school, and what they want for their future—and use this knowledge to personalize their teaching. In other words, they don't make their students fit the education system; they make the education system fit their students.

Inspired by our review of the 21 articles mentioned so far, we also searched for articles about implementing personalized education in schools. In total, we found 36 articles related to this topic; we reviewed eight of these because of their close alignment with our additional question: How can schools implement personalized education?

Two articles highlighted a nationally representative survey of teachers in which respondents said that the primary barrier to implementing personalized education was the pressure to meet district or state standards (Pane et al., 2017; Sullivan, 2019). In Esdal's study (2017), he critiqued state standards as overly prescriptive, too broad, and overly subject-oriented. Instead, he references Canada, Singapore, and Finland for examples of education standards that emphasize "enduring and foundational habits of mind" and "skills that will be used in life beyond school" (12). Similarly, four studies advocated for performance assessments and competency-based progression, rather than standardized testing, as measurements of students' proficiency (Esdal, 2017; Hernandez et al, 2019; Kentucky Department of Education, 2013; Pane et al, 2017). Regarding performance assessments, Esdal (2017) noted, "Students typically complete complex,

applied tasks designed by educators, which are embedded into and even part of student learning experiences" (15). In a similar vein, Pane et al. described competency-based progression:

> *"Each student's progress toward clearly defined goals is continually assessed, and assessment occurs 'on demand' when a student is ready to demonstrate competency. Assessment may take a variety of forms, such as projects or presentations, as well as more traditional tests or quizzes" (Pane, 16).*

This description of competency-based progression aligns with Eschen's finding (2013) about the usefulness of self-paced curriculum, which was mentioned earlier. A few studies in this additional literature search likewise noted flexible schedules and student-driven deadlines as a necessity for personalized education (Esdal, 2017; Hernandez et al., 2019; Pane et al, 2017). Hernandez et al. (2019) described the practice of using large blocks of time throughout the school day "for students to engage in project-based learning with their peers" and "for teachers to confer with students so that students can explore the interdisciplinary dimensions of their interests" (40). She likewise noted the practices of "teacher looping"—where students remain with the same teachers for multiple years—and "cross-grade collaboration"—where teachers from multiple grades share and plan curriculum for a group of cross-grade students (38–39). Considering these recommended pedagogical shifts, four articles noted the need for increased teacher development regarding personalized education, with Esdal (2017) recommending a specialized licensure for the personalized education field (Bingham, 2018; Esdal, 2017; Jenkins & Kelly, 2016; Leshnick, 2019; Sullivan, 2019).

While these recommendations offer a promising start, more changes would likely have to be made to the conventional schooling model in order to support personalized education (and thereby promote increased student engagement and improved academic performance). Similarly, the articles we found suggest that personalized education is a nascent field when it comes to implementation. The full implementation of personalized education will likely require ongoing participation from all parts of our education system—and importantly, a commitment from education professionals at the state, district, and school levels. The role of education professionals now is to listen to students when they express their educational preferences—and then do the work of adjusting policies and practices throughout our education system to fulfill those requests.

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