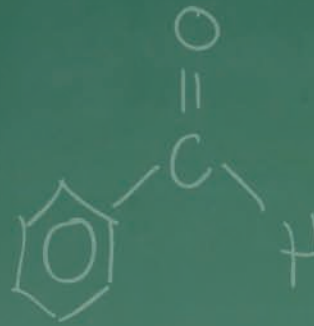


RAISING THEIR VOICES

Engaging students, teachers,
and parents to help end the
High School Dropout Epidemic

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A REPORT BY CIVIC ENTERPRISES

IN ASSOCIATION WITH PETER D. HART RESEARCH ASSOCIATES
For the AT&T Foundation and the America's Promise Alliance



DISCUSSION GUIDE

Section I—Research Methodology

In fall 2009, Hart Research conducted dialogues on behalf of the AT&T Foundation at four public high schools across the country—one each in Indianapolis, Indiana; Kingsport, Tennessee; Dallas, Texas; and Baltimore, Maryland. The dialogue at each school included approximately 15 participants, with an even mix of students enrolled at the school, parents of students enrolled at the school, and teachers. The four schools where the groups were conducted were selected to provide a diversity of geographic locations and demographic characteristics. The groups at each of the four high schools included students at-risk of dropping out and parents of at-risk students, as well as teachers of at-risk students. The schools are at varied stages in the implementation of educational reforms and innovative approaches to improve high school graduation rates.

These sessions were undertaken as a follow up to surveys that Hart Research has conducted among high school dropouts, parents of high school students, and high school educators on the dropout problem. The impetus for these discussions was to explore key disconnects revealed in the three surveys and to provide greater context and understanding of the findings from those studies through a forum for students, parents, and teachers to share their perspectives, opinions, and hypotheses related to the dropout problem.

Section II—Focus Group Recruiting Instructions

Overview

- Identify a point person at the school who will be in charge of recruiting the student, teacher, and parent participants, selecting and briefing the moderator, securing the room, collecting parents' permission slips for students, and coordinating the recording/transcribing of the conversation.
- Recruit a third party moderator from the community, who can act as an impartial moderator. A local business leader, elected official, involved citizen, with community knowledge and an interest in solving the drop out crisis is important. This needs to be a person the parent, teacher, and student participants can trust and view as a fair moderator.
- This will be a two-hour discussion. Food and drink should be provided. We recommend doing this after the school and work day and providing transportation to those who need it. Some sort of compensation for participating, if possible, would be appropriate.
- The discussion should be recorded and transcribed so it can be used appropriately to inform the community plan around the dropout issue, with the consent of participants and the understanding that the confidentiality of individual participants will be protected.
- For this discussion we are focusing on the “at-risk” community. We would like to recruit students who are struggling in school and at-risk of dropping out of school or not completing their education on time. In addition, the group will include parents and teachers of at-risk students.
- Recruit **15 participants**—**5** students, **5** parents, and **5** teachers.

It is important not to recruit participants who are directly related – the parents should NOT be parents of the students in the focus group, and the teachers should NOT currently have any of the students in their classes.

- Participants should reflect the racial diversity of the school.
- Recruit a fairly even mix of male and female participants.
- Specific instructions for these audiences are on the opposite page.

GUIDELINES FOR PARTICIPANTS:

Students – recruit 5

- Recruit a mix of at-risk 10th, 11th, and 12th graders who attend [HIGH SCHOOL].
- It is important to ensure that these students are truly those at-risk of dropping out. They may have failed one or more classes, had excessive absences, or other indicators of academic disengagement and underachievement. We do not want to include students who take advanced, AP, or IB classes and are clearly on-track to graduate and attend college.
- None should be the child or current student of any parent or teacher participant.
- Recruit 2–3 boys and 2–3 girls, none of whom are related to one another.
- They should reflect the racial diversity of the student body.
- Parents of these students will need to sign a permission form for the students to participate.

Please distribute the description of the focus group with the permission slip.

Parents – recruit 5

- Recruit parents of at-risk students who attend [HIGH SCHOOL].
- Recruit a mix of parents of 10th, 11th, and 12th graders
- Recruit 2–3 fathers and 2–3 mothers, none of whom are married to one another.
- They should reflect the racial diversity of the student body.
- Do not recruit parents of students who are in the focus group.

Teachers – recruit 5

- Recruit a mix of 10th, 11th, and 12th grade-level teachers who teach at [HIGH SCHOOL].
- They should reflect a mix of tenures – some who have been teaching a long time, some new teachers.
- Recruit a mix of those who teach academic subjects and would be great to have a guidance counselor. Please do NOT recruit teachers of physical education/gym, art, drama, music, or any electives.
- Do not recruit those who currently teach students who are in the group.

Section III—Information About Upcoming Focus Group and Permission Slip

A focus group will be conducted among a group of [high school] students, parents, and teachers on [date] in [city]. The discussion will be held at [location].

This discussion is being conducted to help improve educational opportunities in our community. In the focus group, we will be discussing the challenges facing students, teachers, and parents today and ways to address these challenges and improve student success. Results of these conversations will be used to supplement our district's goal to increase the number of students who graduate from high school ready for postsecondary education and training and the workforce.

An honorarium of [\$ dollars] will be provided to each student, parent, and teacher who chooses to participate in this discussion. The discussion will last two hours (from [time]), and a light dinner will be provided.

For research purposes only, the group will be electronically recorded. These recordings will be used for internal research purposes only and will never be released to the public. All names and responses are completely confidential. No names will ever be used outside of the focus group.

PERMISSION SLIP

In order for students to participate in the discussion, parents of students participating in the focus group must complete this permission slip.

PARENT'S NAME: _____

CHILD'S NAME: _____

CHILD'S AGE: _____

I have read and filled out all of the information above.

Signature of parent: _____

Name (print): _____

Date: ___ / ___ / ___

Section 4—Parent/Teacher/Student Discussion Guide

INTRODUCTION AND WARM UP [10 MINS]

Moderator:

Basic explanation of the focus group

1. Purpose of discussion, ground rules of respect and honesty.
2. Anonymous – first name basis only. Confidentiality.
3. Participant Introduction:
 - a) First name
 - b) If you are a teacher: what subject you teach and in which grades, and how long have you been teaching and for how long at this school?
 - c) If you are a parent: what grade your child is in, and if you have any other children, what are their ages/grades?
 - d) If you are a student: what grade are you in this year, and if you have any brothers or sisters, how old are they?

A. Perspectives on Their School Today [10 mins]

1. How do you feel things are going at your high school today?
2. From your perspective, what are the positive things happening at your high school today?
3. And what are the biggest challenges facing your high school today?
4. In an ideal world, if the school were working very well and doing the job that we would want it to do, what would be different than it is today?

B. The Dropout Problem [20 mins]

1. One thing that a lot of people talk about as an important goal is increasing high school graduation rates and reducing the number of students who drop out before finishing. Is this an important goal?
 - a) Why?

2. Is dropout a problem at your school?

a) Why? What makes you say that?

3. When you think about the kinds of students who don't make it through high school on time, who are they? What's their story? I would like each of you to visualize one particular student who could have graduated but didn't and tell me about that student.

4. Generally speaking, why do you think students at your school drop out of school or fail to graduate? Let's start with students in the group, then hear from parents, and finally teachers.

[DISCUSS AND WRITE ON EASEL]

PROBE: What factors or problems lead to a student deciding to drop out?

[PROBE AND DISCUSS DIFFERENCES IN IMPRESSIONS AMONG THE THREE GROUPS OF STUDENTS, PARENTS, AND TEACHERS.]

5. Looking at this list, what do you think are the top two or three most common reasons kids drop out?

a) Which of these are the easiest to solve? What would it take to address these issues?

b) Which of these reasons or problems are the toughest to solve?

i) Why are they so hard to deal with?

ii) What might it take to make an impact in these areas?

C. Roles and Responsibility [30 mins]

Give official dropout rate for the school so they have concrete numbers to work with for following questions.

1. What would it take to cut the dropout rate at your school in half in 5 to 10 years?

a) What are the biggest changes that would have to take place to cut the dropout rate in half?

2. What role do teachers, parents, and the students have in reducing the problem of students dropping out before they finish their high school degree? What is each group's role in addressing this problem?

a) How can teachers better help their students stay in school? What should they be doing differently or in addition to what

they already do? What can they do in the classroom? Are there things they could do outside the classroom that would help?

b) What can parents do to help their children stay on the right track and engaged in school? What should they be doing differently or in addition to what they already do?

i) What are the barriers to parents doing such things?

c) What is a student's responsibility when it comes to successfully graduating from high school? What should they be doing differently or in addition to what they already do?

i) And what about when it comes to their peers – who they interact with and how they interact? What should students be doing differently when it comes to the peers?

d) Are there any other groups that need to be involved, such as principals, school district leaders, or those in local, state, or national government? What is their role?

3. I would like you to visualize the same student who could have graduated but didn't. Do you feel there was anything more you could have done to help that student stay in school and complete their degree?

a) Looking forward, what would you be willing to do that you are not doing now to help reduce the problem of dropout at your school?

4. What if, to help reduce the number of students who drop out and do not complete high school, teachers, parents, and students all agreed to do their fair share in a sort of "contract"? What would the contract look like? What would each person's role be in increasing the number of students who graduate? [Write on easel.]

a) What should each group – students, parents, and teachers – be willing to do as their fair share?

b) Which of these things would YOU be willing to do?

c) Are there any you would not be willing to do?

[WRITE ON EASEL]

D. Discussing Disconnections [30 mins]

Research among high school dropouts, high school teachers, and parents of high school students reveal some disconnections in the perceptions of these three groups. I would like to get your thoughts on these differences in opinion and ask you to help me understand them based on your experiences.

1. One disconnect involves differing opinions on the role of parents.

On the one hand, the majority of teachers felt that a lack of parent engagement was a key factor in cases of dropout.

On the other hand, parents of students in low-performing schools see the need for a rigorous curriculum and their own involvement the most, and most of these parents don't feel their children's schools effectively communicate and engage with them.

- a) How do you think about these issues?
- b) What is your reaction to the findings? Why do you think teachers and parents have such different perceptions?
- c) Is there a part of this story that is missing that would help us understand these different perspectives?
- d) How can we bridge this divide and address this problem to help students stay on track to graduate?

2. Another important disconnect involved the expectations and demands placed upon students.

On the one hand, the majority of dropouts said they would have worked harder if more were demanded of them through higher academic standards, more studying and homework. They wanted to be inspired and motivated to work harder.

On the other hand, the large majority of teachers we surveyed did NOT believe students at risk of dropping out would work harder if more were expected of them. In addition, the majority of teachers did NOT believe we should expect students to meet high academic standards and graduate with skills to do college-level work, with extra supports.

- a) How do you think about this issue?
- b) What is your reaction to the findings? Why do you think there are such varied expectations from these two groups on

whether at-risk students would work harder if more were demanded of them?

- c) Why do you think most teachers believe we shouldn't expect all students to meet high academic standards and graduate ready for college?
 - d) Is there a part of this story that is missing that would help us understand these different perspectives?
 - e) How can we bridge this divide and address this problem to help students stay on track to graduate?
3. We also found that many former students said they stopped going to school because they found it boring and uninteresting or they did not see the relevance of school to real life. Teachers, however, were divided about whether these students were speaking to an important cause of dropping out or were just making excuses.
- a) How do you think about this issue?
 - b) Is there a part of this story that is missing that would help us understand these different perspectives?
 - c) How can we bridge this divide and address this problem to help students stay on track to graduate?

E. Dropout Prevention Proposals [15 mins]

1. [HANDOUT] We have been talking about some ways to keep students in school. Now I'm going to mention a small number of proposals that have been made for reducing the dropout rate, and for each one, let's do a quick tally of who thinks it's a good idea, who thinks it's a bad idea, and why. [CANVAS GROUP. TALLY ALL FIRST AND THEN DISCUSS EACH]
- a) Providing a single point of contact at the school for parents to get information about student attendance, successes and challenges for students, and what parents can do to help keep students on track to graduate.
 - b) Establishing electronic tools that enable schools and teachers to communicate with parents so they can be more informed and engaged in their child's day-to-day education. These tools could include websites, text messaging, and a homework hotline where parents can get up-to-date information on his/her child's homework.
 - c) Providing parents information on requirements to gain admission to college and how to secure financial aid.
 - d) Requiring all students to meet high academic standards linked to a rigorous college and work preparatory core curriculum for high school, with extra supports to help them succeed.

- e) Connecting classroom learning to real-world experiences for students (e.g., through service-learning, work-study, job shadowing) so they see the relevance of classroom learning to their career dreams and job prospects.
- f) Providing alternative learning environments with more individualized instruction that gives students at-risk of dropping out more choices to make school more relevant to the lives and goals of students, such as schools of technology, sciences or the arts, 9th Grade Academies that support incoming freshmen, or more personalized learning environments with high expectations and more supports.

[DISCUSS REACTION TO EACH POLICY PROPOSAL.]

[PROBE FOR DETAILED REACTIONS ON REQUIRING HIGH ACADEMIC STANDARDS FOR ALL.]

F. Wrap Up [5 mins]

1. Do you have any other thoughts you want to share about how we can increase graduation rates and reduce the number of dropouts?

THANK AND DISMISS PARTICIPANTS.

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