

# WHY LEAVE SCHOOL? ASK THOSE WHO DO

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EDUCATORS ARE WELL AWARE THAT ONE OF THE MOST CRITICAL ISSUES facing the educational system in North America is the problem of early school leavers.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, it is currently estimated that 12 percent of students do not finish secondary school.<sup>2</sup> In 2001, 18.4% of Canadian men and women between the ages of 20 and 24 did not have a high school degree, certificate or diploma. The rate of early school leaving varies considerably among provinces and territories, with Nunavut having the highest rate at 67.4%. Across the provinces, the highest percentage of early school leavers is in Manitoba (26.9%). In contrast, Ontario has the lowest rate with 15.9% of youth between 20 and 24 not completing high school in 2001<sup>3</sup> – although a recent cohort study suggests that secondary school graduation rates in that province have decreased substantially in the last four years and that currently as many as one-quarter of students may not graduate.<sup>4</sup>

**YOUNG PEOPLE'S OWN ACCOUNTS** OF THEIR GRADUAL DISENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOL SUGGEST  
A NON-LINEAR AND FRAGMENTED PROCESS.

The problem is made worse by the fact that a large proportion of Canadian youth who leave school before graduating do so at an early age and thus at low levels of education. Approximately one third of early school leavers drop out with Grade 9 or less, and almost two thirds drop out with Grade 10 or less. Four in ten early leavers have left school by the age of 16.<sup>5</sup>

The research literature suggests that early school leaving, as a long term, multi-dimensional process, is influenced by a wide variety of in-school and out-of-school experiences with broad social and cultural implications.<sup>6</sup> These implications include costs and consequences that are becoming increasingly serious both for young people and for society.<sup>7</sup> Although many early leavers pursue a GED certification, they are not adequately prepared for attaining well-paying employment or for accessing higher education.

This article provides a brief overview of the findings from a large qualitative study designed to understand the processes of disengagement from school and early school leaving from the point of view of young people in Ontario who have left school, are at risk of doing so, or have left and returned. It focuses on the voices and experiences of these young early leavers, voices which are rarely heard in Canada. The full report also includes data from educators and parents and an international review of the literature and can be accessed at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/schoolleavers.pdf><sup>8</sup>

## RESEARCH METHODS

Research studies rarely include the perspectives of the individuals being studied. Our methods were chosen to describe the lived experiences of disengagement

## YOUTH OFTEN DESCRIBED SCHOOL-RELATED RISK FACTORS, INCLUDING SCHOOL POLICIES UPHELD BY TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS THAT ARE COUNTERPRODUCTIVE TO KEEPING STUDENTS IN SCHOOL OR ALLOWING THEM TO RETURN.

from school. We used ethnographic methods to describe the lives of young people and the contexts of schools and communities. We conducted community consultations and established a provincial advisory committee to provide insight into specific and/or unique risk and protective factors, seek information regarding contextual issues, help ensure that research instruments were culturally and linguistically competent, and facilitate participant recruitment.

We then interviewed 193 youth across Ontario from communities reflecting an urban-rural continuum: a metropolitan area (Toronto), a major city (Ottawa), smaller cities (Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo, Thunder Bay, Sudbury), and rural areas (outside Sudbury and Thunder Bay, Owen Sound). Participants were further divided into categories based on the following criteria:

- Rural to Urban (spatial context)
- Visible and Non-visible ('racial' identifications)
- Newcomer to More Established (civic status)
- Aboriginal (key visible minority population)
- Francophone (key linguistic minority population)
- Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Trans-sexual (LGBT) (key sexual minority population).



### WHO THEY ARE

Of this group of 193 young people who had either left school early or were at risk of doing so, 68 were identified as third-generation (or more) Canadians, 41 as visible minority newcomers, 16 as non-visible minority newcomers, 31 as Aboriginals, 27 as Francophones, and 10 as LGBTs. Two-thirds were early school leavers, while the remainder were either at risk of early leaving or had returned after leaving. Nearly 59 percent were male, and the majority were 18 or 19 years of age and not living with a primary caregiver. Most of the youth came from low-income families, with close to 50% living with under \$30,000 per year and nearly 60% living below the \$40,000 cut off point.

Their experiences in school varied. Many (37 percent) had been identified as special needs students with a wide range of difficulties. Of the 60 percent who had taken the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, two-thirds had passed it. Twenty of the students had repeated at least one grade. More than half reported an interruption in their schooling in the past; 88 percent reported skipping classes while in secondary school, and 67 percent reported up to five suspensions. Sixty of these students had been expelled, some as many as four times.

Those are the numbers. The stories behind the numbers uncovered a more personal dimension and gave us a better understanding of the life experiences and circumstances that led these young people to leave school early.

### PATHWAYS TO DISENGAGEMENT

Through our interviews, we found that, before leaving school early, students entered into a process of disengagement. Our interviews suggested that these pathways to disengagement are varied and complex. We characterized the three most common pathways as: starting from scratch; mostly protected; and the in-between.

**Starting from Scratch:** Those who were starting from scratch had multiple risk factors at all levels: family, community, and school. These were youth for whom schooling posed yet another risk within an already difficult life trajectory. For example, they may have been experiencing abuse or neglect at home as well as struggling in a number of ways at school.

**Mostly Protected:** On the other end of the continuum, young people who were mostly protected benefited from numerous protective factors within their families, communities, schools and themselves. For instance, they may have come from caring homes with educational advantages and have been enjoying school before leaving. They often had plans to negotiate their way back in, or were already in the process of doing so.

**The In-Between:** The young people who were in-between experienced both risk and protective factors at many levels. They faced numerous challenges, but also had distinct possibilities for success. For example, a poor start at home might have been met with a caring educational environment and outreach.

When we examined 80 percent of our Anglophone transcripts, we found that 42 percent were starting from scratch, 28 percent were mostly protected, and 30 percent were in-between.

Young people's own accounts of their gradual disengagement with school suggest a non-linear and fragmented process. They described their experiences in a 'back and forth' manner – the past, present and even the future were intertwined in the retelling of their experiences. There were no simple constructions of the phenomenon of "dropping out". Common throughout, however, was the thread of struggle, complexity, multiple tensions and subversive forces. Many of the youth were balancing multiple adult roles such as parenting and working while attempting to continue their studies.

The majority of our transcripts clearly depict youth who, although struggling with a multitude of risk factors, are at the same time determined to make better lives for themselves. This was evidenced by the fact that virtually all of the young people had plans to return to school in the future. This often included a resolve to complete their high school education.

"First get off the streets, second get a job, third finish your education so you can get a career. So it is like steps at a time. It is like some people have those things already and they are lucky that they have those things already handed to them and they don't have to start at the bottom and work their way up. They don't understand what that is like. Starting at the bottom – I am slowly getting there. I'm not there, but I am slowly getting there"

Youth often described school-related risk factors, including school policies upheld by teachers and principals that are counterproductive to keeping students in school or

allowing them to return. In short, they cited passivity and/or a lack of flexibility on the part of school personnel or school policies. Many spoke of negative relationships with principals and teachers, a curriculum that was too difficult, a lack of support with schoolwork, a lack of recognition of differing learning styles, and a climate that is simply not enjoyable and thus not conducive to learning.

"Because some people need the slower pace, give them the slower pace. Some people need faster, have faster pace. But don't do the same thing for everybody. So in my case, I fell behind by one day, and they were going that fast. Like, I had no way of catching up."

Nevertheless, the youth pointed to numerous protective factors suggesting that many things go "right" in their schools, families and communities, including alternative schools, caring and supportive teachers, and school climates which were caring, inclusive, flexible, and proactive. Family support and self determination also played a major protective role for these young people. For many, encountering excellent programs and supportive adults was critical in keeping them engaged as long as possible.

## IMPLICATIONS

The youth we interviewed provided a detailed picture of the process of disengagement and early school leaving. They also made suggestions for improving their prospects of completing secondary school. Our research findings suggest that policy and practice initiatives will be most successful if they have a broad focus and include academic, social, and supportive activities that are responsive to a wide range of student needs. All approaches to reducing early school leaving and improving school success must take into account that the youth who are most likely to disengage from school come from diverse circumstances, face daunting developmental challenges, and often have needed to assume adult roles which require attention to effective work/life balance strategies. Policy and practice implications can therefore be conceptualized under four broad categories as follows:

**Early prevention strategies** at the level of professional development for teachers, improved school-home relations, meaningful recognition of the diversity of youth, enhanced literacy and numeracy, and recognition of the links between elementary and secondary school.

**Core secondary school structure strategies** including further caring mentoring/tutoring; continued alternative schooling; continued out-of-school enhancement; ensuring and encouraging sufficient re-entry points; effective school leadership; fostering of a safe, inclusive, positive, school climate; and ensuring equitable, effective, and consistent disciplinary procedures.

**Core secondary school class room strategies** including ongoing professional development addressing the unique challenges of youth and the complexities of the process of early school leaving; continued consultation and discussion with youth; enhanced career readiness; openness to diverse

**EN BREF** Cette étude a été réalisée afin de permettre aux chercheurs de mieux comprendre le processus de désengagement scolaire. Elle porte sur les opinions et les expériences des élèves qui abandonnent prématurément leurs études et auxquelles on s'intéresse peu au Canada. Les chercheurs ont constaté que, avant de quitter l'école, ces élèves vivent un processus de désengagement qui est influencé par une combinaison de facteurs de risque et de protection qui les affectent à l'école et au foyer. Tout effort pour réduire les départs prématurés de l'école et améliorer la réussite scolaire doit tenir compte du fait que les élèves qui sont les plus susceptibles de se désengager viennent de divers milieux, font face à des défis développementaux importants ou ont dû assumer très tôt dans la vie des obligations d'adulte qui les obligent souvent à concilier études et emploi.



linguistic, cultural and ethno-racial identities; and curricular delivery and pedagogy in line with various adolescent developmental needs, lives, and learning styles.

**Wider school-community strategies** including a strategy for developmentally appropriate school system renewal as informed by the realities of youth; addressing the specific slippage points occurring in the process of disengagement (eg. transition into Grade 9); increased communication, interaction, and consultation with youth's families; greater community collaboration, particularly forged links between child welfare, children's mental health, youth justice and education as well as more informal collaboration with community volunteers.

These recommendations can inform current Student Success plans in Ontario in which many innovative programs are currently being developed. Such programs

should take into account the often difficult and marginal lives of youth who leave school, the varied pathways to disengagement and early leaving, and the tenacity of youth in attempting to return. There is unprecedented opportunity to develop and evaluate a range of intervention programs aimed at retaining students in secondary schools and ensuring that every youth successfully graduates prepared for further study, additional training, or direct workforce entry. This is necessary in order to ensure that all youth are able to achieve their full personal and academic potential. |

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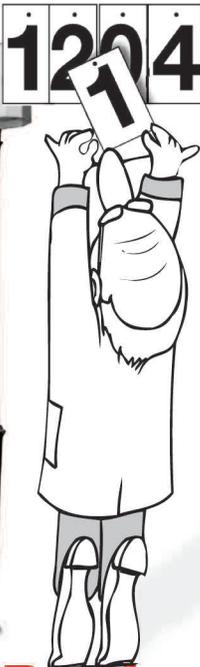
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#### Notes

- 1 No universally accepted definition of dropout/early school leaver exists. Leavers are typically defined as students who leave school (not including transfers) before they graduate from high school with a regular diploma. Some students leave school before entering Grade 9, but most withdraw during their high school years.
- 2 T. Bushnik, L. Barr-Telford and P. Bussiere, *In and Out of High School: First Results from the Second Cycle of the Youth in Transition Survey, 2002* (Statistics Canada. Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics Division, 2004). Catalogue number: 81-595-MIE2004014
- 3 *Dropping Out of High School on the Decline* (Statistics Canada, February 2003). [www.statscan.ca/english/freepub/89-001-XIE/2002001/drop.htm](http://www.statscan.ca/english/freepub/89-001-XIE/2002001/drop.htm)
- 4 A. King, *Double Cohort Study: Phase 3 Report* (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004).
- 5 *Dropping Out of High School: Definitions and Costs* (Human Resources Development Canada, Applied Research Branch Strategic Policy, October 2000). Catalogue No. R-01-1E. <http://www.11.sdc.gc.ca/en/cs/sp/arb/publications/research/2000-000063/page00.shtml>
- 6 S. Foster, K. Tilliczek, C. Hein and J.H. Lewko, "High School Dropouts" in P. Anisef (ed.), *Learning and Sociological Profiles of Young Adults in Canada* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 73-104.
- 7 R.W. Rumberger, "Why Students Drop Out of School and What Can Be Done" (paper presented at the Conference on Dropouts in America, Graduate School of Education, Civil Rights Project, Harvard University, 2001). <http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/dropouts/rumberger.pdf>
- 8 B. Ferguson, K. Tilliczek, J.A. Rummens, and K. Boydell, *Early School Leavers: Understanding the Lived Reality of Disengagement from School* (Toronto: Hospital for Sick Children Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005).

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