

Factors that Promote High School Graduation

KEYWORDS

graduation, positive youth development, early school leaving, academic attainment

RESEARCH SUMMARY

DESCRIPTION

Young people who do not finish high school suffer from a lifetime of poor health and economic outcomes. They often have to contend with poor employment prospects and low-income jobs, interactions with the justice system, and higher reliance on social assistance. Previous research has identified several risk factors at the individual, family, school, and community levels that are strong predictors of early school leaving. Little is known, however, about factors that promote high school graduation and continued enrollment. The authors of this study analyzed 25 years of research on high school graduation in the United States and identified twelve factors at the individual, family, peer, school, and community levels that promote graduation.

METHODOLOGY

In a pioneering approach, the authors used a Positive Youth Development framework and combined it with ecological systems theories to identify factors that promote graduation. The authors began this study by identifying negative forces that consistently predicted early school leaving and used them to identify potential positive factors that promote graduation and continued enrollment. The authors conducted a literature review that included 250 journal articles and reports. Based on these studies, they identified twelve factors that could be leveraged and implemented in various programs and practices to promote graduation and continued enrollment.

KEY FINDINGS

The authors identified twelve strongly interconnected predictors of successful graduation and continued enrollment. They grouped them based on the five most important aspects of a young person's life: individual characteristics, relationships with family and peers, the school environment, and the community.

Individual-Level Factors Promoting High School Graduation

Intrinsic motivation, school engagement, expectations of academic attainment, and internal locus of control (believing one can control one's academic outcomes)

have all been found to impact high school completion. These strengths are also correlated with each other, so that an intervention focused on one of them can help improve the others.

Parental Factors Promoting Graduation

Research shows that parents who are involved in their children's school life increase the likelihood of graduation. The closeness of the parent-child relationship is also important. Furthermore, research evidence suggests that when schools and community programs engage parents in their children's education, the effects on academic attainment can be significant.

Peer-Related Factors Promoting Graduation

Positive peer norms – values, expectations, and behaviours of young people who interact regularly as part of a social group – have been proven to have a significant impact on high school graduation. Positive relationships with peers can act as a protective factor that buffers stress and promotes educational attainment and positive engagement with school.

School-Related Factors Promoting High School Graduation

The following school-specific factors are key to helping youth build developmental relationships, gain exposure to positive peer networks and academic values, strengthen school attachment, and develop closer connections to peers and teachers:

- (i) positive student-teacher relationships;
- (ii) school-sponsored extracurricular activities;
- (iii) small schools;
- (iv) career and technical education.

They also help to develop agency and high levels of social competence. These factors also help young people understand the relevance of high school education to their future plans and aspirations.

Community-Level Factors Promoting Graduation

Studies show that community-based Out of School Time (OST) programs promote graduation by providing supportive developmental relationships with adults and opportunities to develop a variety of skills and competencies. They also expose youth to positive social norms and help instill a sense of belonging. Youth who live in communities that offer quality after-school programs where they experience positive social networks and norms are likely to graduate from high school.

WHY THIS MATTERS

This is the first time that a study has combined ecological systems theories and Positive Youth

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

This study uses ecological systems theories and Positive Youth Development frameworks to identify factors that promote high school graduation and continued enrolment. It outlines twelve individual, family, peer, school, and community factors that promote high school graduation.

Development frameworks to identify factors that promote high school graduation and continued enrollment. The authors reviewed research from the past 25 years and arrived at a set of twelve assets and accompanying insights that can be used by policy-makers, educators, and community organizations to provide young people with effective supports they need to stay in school and graduate.

“Prior syntheses of the research on graduating or leaving high school have focused largely on risk factors. This article complements and extends those efforts by examining assets across a youth's ecology that directly predict high school graduation or continued school enrollment.”

Zaff, et al., 2016

RECAP

This study identifies twelve interrelated factors in a young person's personal, social, academic, and community contexts that promote successful high school graduation and continued enrollment.

APA CITATION

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