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School Dropouts: A Global Issue

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The challenge of school completion is not confined to the United States; millions of children and youth around the world are denied or have limited access to education. For those who are fortunate to have the opportunity for some level of public schooling, it is often limited to a primary education. For those who attend school, the promise for a future based on their education is dim, causing countless numbers to drop out of school and look to survive on the streets.

By examining the dropout issue globally, it becomes clear that many of the challenges around completing school are the same—what varies is the scope and depth of the problem. In January 2008, the United Nations established the Millennium Development Indicators. The second goal of this auspicious list references education, and it reads as follows:

> "Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling."

United Nations Guidelines (2008)

Students in class at Ngunyuma Primary School.

Although a worthy goal, it pales in comparison to the educational needs of children and youth around the world; even with a primary education, the opportunities to a sustainable future are minimal at best. Yet there is hope. There are strategies and techniques that are proven to reduce school dissatisfaction and they transcend all regions, national borders, and cultures. The National Dropout Prevention Center has identified 15 effective strategies for reducing school dropouts. These strategies, listed below are the cornerstone of any effective dropout prevention initiative and can and are being applied globally.

School and Community Perspective

1. **Systemic Renewal**—A continuing process of evaluating goals and objectives related to school policies, practices, and organizational structures as they impact a diverse group of learners.
2. **School-Community Collaboration**—When all groups in a community provide collective support to the school, a strong infrastructure sustains a caring supportive environment where youth can thrive and achieve.
3. **Safe Learning Environments**—A comprehensive violence prevention plan, including conflict resolution, that must deal with potential violence as well as crisis management. A safe learning environment provides daily experiences at all grade levels that enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all students.

Early Interventions

4. **Family Engagement**—Research consistently finds that family engagement has a direct, positive effect on children's achievement and is the most accurate predictor of a student's success in school.
5. **Early Childhood Education**—Birth-to-five interventions demonstrate that providing a child additional enrichment can enhance brain development. The most effective way to reduce the number of children who will ultimately drop out of school is to provide the best possible classroom instruction from the beginning of their school experience through the primary grades.
6. **Early Literacy Development**—Early interventions to help low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills in order to establish the necessary foundation for effective learning in all other subjects.

Basic Core Strategies

7. **Mentoring/Tutoring**—Mentoring is a one- to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust. Tutoring, also a one-to-one activity, focuses on academics and is an effective practice when addressing specific needs such as reading, writing, or math competencies.

8. **Service-Learning**—Service-learning connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning. This teaching/learning method promotes personal and social growth, career development, and civic responsibility, and can be a powerful vehicle for effective school reform at all grade levels.

9. **Alternative Schooling**—Alternative schooling provides potential dropouts a variety of options that can lead to graduation, with programs paying special attention to the student's individual social needs and academic requirements for a high school diploma.

10. **After-School Opportunities**—Many schools provide after-school and summer enhancement programs that eliminate information loss and inspire interest in a variety of areas. Such experiences are especially important for students at risk of school failure because these programs fill the afternoon "gap time" with constructive and engaging activities.

Making the Most of Instruction

11. **Professional Development**—Teachers who work with youth at high risk of academic failure need to feel supported and have an avenue by which they can continue to develop skills, techniques, and learn about innovative strategies.

12. **Active Learning**—Active learning embraces teaching and learning strategies that engage and involve students in the learning process. Students find new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong learners when educators show them that there are different ways to learn.

13. **Educational Technology**—Technology offers some of the best opportunities for delivering instruction to engage students in authentic learning, addressing multiple intelligences, and adapting to students' learning styles.

14. **Individualized Instruction**—Each student has unique interests and past learning experiences. An individualized instructional program for each student allows for flexibility in teaching methods and motivational strategies to consider these individual differences.

15. 15.**Career and Technology Education (CTE)**—A quality CTE program and a related guidance program are essential for all students. School-to-work programs recognize that youth need specific skills to prepare them to measure up to the larger demands of today's workplace.

National Dropout Prevention Center (n.d.)

When teachers are absent there are no substitutes, a lead student at the school will take on the responsibility of teaching the class for the day.

One example of the implementation of the 15 strategies in the developing world is at the Ngunyumu Primary School in the Korogocho slum settlement in Nairobi, Kenya. The Ngunyumu Primary School has a student population of approximately 1,100 students from ages 4-13 (often there are overage students attending the school—many times students are not sure of their age). The faculty consists of a headmaster and 10 teachers who in many cases have limited professional credentials. Often teachers do not come to work because they are not paid on a regular basis.

Korogocho is one of about 200 informal settlements recognized in Nairobi. It is located in the Kasarani district, 11 kilometers northeast of the business district and is adjacent to Dandora, the main dumpsite of the city (Korogocho Situation Analysis: A Snapshot, 2010). Approximately 200,000 people inhabit the settlement where there is no electricity, no safe water supply, and crime and violence are the norm. Life expectancy in Korogocho is 30 years (Oronje, & Crichton, 2008).

Children from slums like Korogocho are not likely to enroll in school, and if they do. it is unlikely they will complete primary education due to the high level of poverty. High levels of poverty often force households to choose between food for the family and school for the children. This situation becomes magnified when looking at higher levels of education and contributes to the cycle of poverty passed on from generation to generation.

Often families choose to take their children out of school and involve them in activities that produce income, and many times these activities are illegal, immoral, and extremely detrimental to the lives of the children. In Kenya, primary education is free. In Korogocho, there are only two public primary schools, which service a small number of children (Chiti, 2010).

The conditions in the Korogocho Slum are among the most dire in the world, and yet the 15 strategies for dropout prevention apply. A number of these strategies are currently being implemented at the Ngunyumu Primary School with marked results. The following are examples of the 15

strategies and how they are being applied at the Ngunyumu School.

Systemic Renewal. At the Ngunyumu School they have made several modifications to school policies and structures. An example of this is allowing overage students to continue their education. Primary education typically ends at age 13, but for countless children there has been so much disruption in their education that starting school at age five and finishing public primary education at 13 is not realistic.

Good hygiene is taught and encouraged.

School-Community Collaboration. A community advisory committee has been established. Members of the community, both parents and nonparents, participate in regular meetings about the school structure, student life in and out of school, and school-community relations. The committee is acutely aware of the high mobility of the student and teacher population and high number of students who drop out and never return.

- Students not understood by both teachers and parents
- Lack of space to do homework at home
- Child labor at home
- Lack of electricity at school
- Poor student-parent-teacher relationships
- Lack of adequate and modern school facilities
- Lack of exposure to the outside world
- Lack of common school report book and diary
- Dilapidated fence
- Peer to peer conflicts

At a recent meeting of the advisory committee, school administration and student leaders identified these items as key contributors to students dropping out of school.

Safe Learning Environment. Efforts are being made at the school to address the learning environment both from a facility standpoint and a programmatic perspective. The community advisory committee, school administration, student leaders, and representatives from The Abbas Project have identified and prioritized a list of facility needs at the school. Efforts have already begun to improve safety by addressing the school buildings and grounds.

On the programmatic side, the school has begun a martial arts program, incorporated an athletic program, and adopted the iLead 21 youth leadership program. Initial training for students and staff took place in June 2012, and a follow-up session will take place in August 2012, with implementation beginning when school starts again in September 2012.

Early Childhood Education. The school has encouraged parents in the slum settlement to take their children to school starting as early as four years old. The headmaster and his team have gone door-to-door to encourage parents to get their children started in school at an early age. The faculty and administration have had some success, but they face many challenges; many parents are unaware that they can send their children to school and that it is free. Also when teachers do not come to work, parents lose interest and keep their children at home to perform duties in the home. Once this happens, it is unlikely that the children will ever return to school.

Mentoring and Tutoring. Because of the high student-to-teacher ratio, mentoring and tutoring become a challenge. This has been a topic for the advisory committee, and one of the goals of The Abbas Project is to provide mentors, both face-to-face and virtual mentors. This is a new endeavor and has begun with a small number of students.

Typical Classroom at Ngunyumu Primary School

Service-Learning. Currently students play an essential role in the maintenance and care of the school facilities and school grounds. It is a regular practice to see students picking up the school grounds and scrubbing classroom floors.

After-School Opportunities. The new headmaster, in his fourth year at the school, has worked with the faculty to implement a number of after-school opportunities for the students. As mentioned earlier, a number of athletic programs have been started, along with a music program and a scouting initiative.

Professional Development. Opportunities for professional growth for faculty and administration are extremely limited. As part of The Abbas Project, efforts are being made to provide professional development services to the faculty and administration. Plans include educators from the United States conducting field experiences in Nairobi for visits ranging from one to four weeks. Through The Abbas Project, the school has been provided an iPad, and can communicate via skype with the world.

Educational Technology. With the addition of the iPad, the schools first piece of technology, children at the school are beginning to make use of Web sites that enhance their learning experience. The goal (with additional resources) is to add more technology. With no electricity, this presents a problem, but alternative energy sources are currently being considered.

At the Ngunyumu Primary School, the challenges are immense, yet the students, faculty, and administration approach each day with hope and promise for the future. The school has made significant progress in creating an environment where children cannot only survive but also actually thrive. By adopting and embedding the proven strategies a shift is taking place. This will take time, but there is excitement and energy based on the successes to date.

Although the depth and scope of the challenges vary, the solutions remain relatively similar. The research on dropout prevention is consistent; adapting the strategies to each unique context is required. Applying proven practices will yield results regardless if it is in the slums of the developing world or in our most affluent communities.

Videos from Ngunumu Primary School
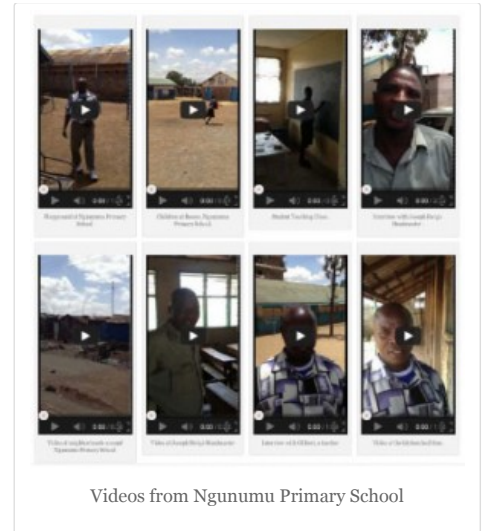
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