



Giving a Student Voice to California's Dropout Crisis

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Why do students drop out of high school? California's high school students give numerous reasons, describing a high school experience where—in spite of generally high levels of engagement in school—classes are often boring, teachers don't seem to care, and there is little room to negotiate between family responsibilities and academic expectations.

Recent research suggests that almost one-third of California students will never graduate from high school—and about half of the state's minority students will fail to do so (California Department of Education, 2007; de Cos, 2005; Swanson, 2005). Given that 48 percent of California school children are Latino and eight percent are African-American, these dropout rates hold stark implications for their economic and social opportunities, and affect overall state and U.S. productivity (Barton, 2005; California Department of Education, 2007; Laird, DeBell, Kienzel & Chapman, 2007; Orfield, 2004; Swanson, 2004; White et al., 2006).

California's evolving demographic profile—as it is now a “minority” majority state—may complicate strategies to keep students in school. Current approaches may not address the complex needs of students from a wide variety of language, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds that influence their experience of school. This lack of consideration for changing contexts may exclude many students from graduating high school, in spite of their aspirations and efforts.

While students leave high school without a diploma for a variety of reasons, there is growing consensus among researchers that dropout is best viewed as the culmination of years of academic disengagement from the schooling institution (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Fine, 1991; Finn, 1989; Rumberger, 1987; Rumberger, 2004). At the same time, research studies have found that many high school students report feeling engaged in school, and have high aspirations for their futures (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). In this report, we unpack this culmination into components to make sense of the contradiction, by asking students themselves about the individual, family, peer, and school influences associated with their school experience. We learn directly from students about the factors they see as motivating or alienating, as they engage with the social and academic demands of high school, and balance them with the rest of their lives.

Research Questions

Specifically, this study will address the following questions:

- a. What do students find motivating or discouraging in their first year of high school?
- b. How do students view the common wisdom about dropping out—how do they judge potential individual, family, peer, and school factors?
- c. How are students' demographic characteristics, attitudes toward school, and support networks related to their risk status for high school dropout?

Background Literature

Previous research has addressed the reasons why high school students drop out of school, most linked to individual factors—namely, students' lack of engagement—and to causes associated with characteristics of their families, peers, and schools. While some of these variables, like socioeconomic status or school size, are quantifiable through U.S. Census or state education

data, other important ones are investigated only through talking to the students themselves. In this study, we provide depth and context to the issue of dropping out by examining students' perceptions of the individual, family, peer, and school factors associated with it. Each dropout factor is reviewed briefly below.

Individual Factors

Much of the research on individual factors contributing to students' dropping out of school has centered on their engagement in school, both academically and socially. *Academic engagement* is embodied in students' motivation to learn and their active participation in school, ranging from attending class to completing assignments. *Social engagement* refers to students' school-friendly identity, sense of belonging or connectedness, and involvement in non-academic activities. These two forms of engagement are integrally related and also associated with family, peer, and school factors.

Academic Engagement

Goals/Expectations for the Future

Students' motivation at school is closely linked to their future expectations. Many students—particularly those in low-income communities—have low expectations for the future (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). They may have big dreams, and want to graduate from high school, go to college, and pursue success in the world, but many of their day-to-day experiences do not support these aspirations (Lee & Burkham, 2003). In fact, their expectations (what they *think* will happen) are not aligned with their aspirations, or what they *want* to happen. Students can differentiate between them, as shown in past research, with their expectations being more “realistic” (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Exerting Effort/Trying Hard at School

Ethnographic and quantitative studies have found large subsets of students—those most likely to drop out—who feel little efficacy in trying to do well in school (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Ogbu, 2003; Solomon, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999). Given the opportunities they see for the future—through their parents, older siblings, extended family, and others in the community—in terms of childbearing or working, high school graduation may not be necessary, or even deemed desirable (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Many low-wage jobs do not require a diploma, and staying in school to pursue one may only serve to prolong the time spent without contributing to the household income. In addition, students' parents may have negative feelings about their own school experiences, which are tapped when their children face school-related challenges (Solomon, 1994; Ogbu, 2003).

Class Attendance and Completing Homework

The day-to-day behavioral manifestation of academic engagement is going to school and doing class work, and is directly tied to achievement, which—in turn—is highly predictive of dropping out (Lee & Burkham, 1992; Rumberger, 2003). Attendance is a necessary condition to achieving in school, although many students may attend classes without being fully engaged in the work, and fail to understand the materials, participate in lessons, and/or complete class work and homework. Students may have other demands that preclude them from attending class or focusing adequately; they may have fallen behind and be unable to catch up; they may find their

coursework irrelevant to their lives and futures (Conchas, 2006; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Romo & Falbo, 1996).

Social Engagement

Sense of Belonging Related to Identity

The sense of belonging that invests students in school involves their emotional connection and identification with the school community. The more students' identities are associated with their school, the more likely they are to feel engaged in their experience, which is linked to their efforts and eventual graduation rates. Conversely, students who feel disenfranchised from school—that it is a source of stress rather than support, and a source of frustration and hopelessness rather than challenge—are more likely to drop out. (Wentzel, 2002). Having a “pro-school” identity—one that is not oppositional to school—is essential to being socially and academically engaged (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Ogbu, 2003). Schools that align their every day practices and policies with students' cultures and values are more likely to have students who feel enthusiastic about school.

Having a close friend or group of friends at school is also strongly related to students' social engagement in school. This is detailed below in Peer Factors.

Participation in School Activities

One of the ways students are engaged in school is through their involvement in non-class activities including sports, clubs, and teams (Rumberger & Arellano, 2007). Many students have the opportunity to develop a talent or pursue an interest that complements their academic success or provides a positive experience when academic success is limited or elusive (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). Many of these extracurricular activities have school attendance and grade requirements tied to participation, which elicits strong motivation to stay academically engaged in school. These activities also draw in students through the associated relationships they form with teammate peers and adult leaders and coaches. The importance of these relationships is discussed below.

Family Factors

Family characteristics have consistently been shown to predict academic achievement, both in terms of family structure and process (Pong & Ju, 2000; Plunkett & Bamaca-Gomez, 2003; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). While structural factors, such as socioeconomic status (Pong & Ju, 2000; Rumberger & Larson, 1998), are repeatedly implicated in dropout, their influence may be particularly salient to students in their effect on proximal family process variables. For example, being of low socioeconomic status affects the availability of social support and social capital, and the burden of family responsibilities.

Family Support Networks

Family and school relationships have been shown to play a pivotal role in students' academic lives, building the motivation needed for academic success (National Research Council, 2004). These social support networks shape the learning process and can serve to provide the motivation necessary to coalesce students' expectations with their aspirations (Cohen and Ball, 1999). Research indicates that most students glean support from their families, with parents and other

extended family members often providing both the expectations for the future and the social, emotional, and financial resources to meet them (Chope, 2005; Gonzalez and Padilla, 1997). Many students do not have this luxury, however, with parents struggling to support their families, perhaps disenfranchised themselves from the system. Other students have emotional support from their families but direct academic help is limited because parents may be unfamiliar with the language and/or the materials covered in their children's classes—lacking what is called “social capital” (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Coleman, 1988; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

Family Responsibilities

Many high school students have extensive family and household responsibilities that make it hard for them to commit the amount of time, energy, and focus that their teachers may desire or demand (National Research Council, 2004). Some adolescents are expected to help out extensively with household chores—cooking, cleaning, and providing care for younger siblings or sick family members, while parents work long hours. Others may have to get jobs themselves to contribute to rent or grocery bills which conflict with school demands (Seltzer, 1994). Young pregnancies also result in some students needing to care for infants, or financially support their children (Romo & Falbo, 1996). These responsibilities may interfere with time spent doing homework, and even school attendance (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Dynarski, 2001).

Peer Factors

Sense of Belonging and Peer Support Networks

Students' sense of belonging at school is largely dependent on the relationships they have with friends (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001). Peers become particularly important in high school, as adolescent students grow more independent from their families and increasingly oriented to peers, using peers as a reference group for their attitudes and behaviors (Eccles, 1983; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004). Spending time at school often means spending time with friends—which makes school more appealing to many. However, peer groups vary in their connection to school, with some strongly supporting school achievement and others embodying alienation from school, endorsing associated negative behaviors (Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004; Kasen, Cohen, & Brook, 1998). Moreover, some students struggle to make friends and form peer relationships, which further reduces the likelihood that they will feel a sense of belonging and become engaged in school, increasing their risk for dropping out (Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997).

School Factors

Schools are implicated through the structure and process variables that support and/or undermine student engagement and performance. Important structural factors include the classes and academic support offered, graduation requirements such as the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), and strict rules and policies. Teacher expectations and the social support they provide, as well as school climate and safety, are some of the school process factors that are also associated with dropping out.

School Structural Characteristics

Classes and Coursework

Many students—particularly those who are at risk for dropping out—may question the relevance of their classroom experiences. This mass institution—still called a “school plant” by many educators—feels disconnected from popular culture and the expected jobs and economic futures perceived by urban youths (Ogbu, 2003). For example, college preparatory coursework (A to G) may seem like a strange requirement when students realistically have little hope of going to college. Moreover, if calculus and physics don’t feel relevant to students’ future aspirations, they certainly do not seem pertinent to their current lives, and may increase students’ disenchantment and disengagement from school. Yet, the University of California has proposed that all students be required to follow the A to G course requirements, and several districts (including Los Angeles and San Jose Unified) have adopted this policy (CDE, 2007). Research indicates that demanding classes—known as *academic press*—may support higher achievement when paired with strong social support from teachers (Lee & Smith, 1999), although the needed supportive teacher-student relationships may prove rare. While this rigorous approach may alienate some students from school, others want the access it provides to college preparatory coursework, and the academic support needed to be successful on that track.

Tutoring and Academic Support

In order to graduate from high school, many students need supplemental academic support to pass their courses. Particularly in large classes, students often have broadly varied backgrounds; some students start behind others, or need slower or different pacing to be able to keep up with classmates (National Research Council, 2004). This may be particularly true for English language learners, who are learning not only the subject, but the language in which it is being taught. Research indicates that those students in need of extra academic support—English language learners, those placed in special education, and students who have been retained—are at dramatically greater risk for dropping out (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Oakes, 2006; Rumberger & Arellano, 2007). The availability and types of academic support offered varies across schools, as does students’ willingness to use it. Regardless, tutoring or having a teacher who spends extra time, makes the difference between passing and failing courses for some students.

The CAHSEE

California implemented an exit exam (the California High School Exit Exam or CAHSEE), as part of the state accountability system, to create a standardized value for the high school diploma. Starting with the high school class of 2006, all students must pass the CAHSEE in order to graduate (CDE, 2007: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/>). Many states have implemented similar examinations in the last decade (Center on Education Policy, 2004, 2005), although evidence regarding their effects on high school graduation, and achievement generally, is mixed. Several recent studies, addressing methodological concerns of previous work, indicate that mandatory exit exams tend to increase dropout rates, particularly for Black students and students in low-income schools (Dee & Jacob, 2006; Warren, Jenkins, & Kulick, 2006).

Strict Rules

While school rules are supposed to promote a safe learning environment, research indicates that strict or “unfair” school rules, like zero-tolerance policies, may be linked to dropping out (Rumberger, 1995; Schargel & Smink, 2001). School rules such as being on time to class (no tardiness), wearing “appropriate,” non-gang-affiliated clothing, treating others with respect (no fighting), and obeying laws (no drugs, alcohol, or weapons on campus) are used to hold students accountable for their behavior. Violating school rules usually results in consequences, dependent on the degree of the violation. Some schools have implemented zero-tolerance policies, which entail automatic and severe discipline in response to minor and major incidents, and are designed to deter unwanted behaviors (Elliot, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998). Research suggests that zero-tolerance policies may push youth of color out of school—through suspension and expulsion—at rates disproportionate to their White counterparts, without improving student behavior or increasing school safety (Skiba & Leone, 2000).

School Process Characteristics

Teachers’ Expectations for Students’ Futures

Teachers’ expectations are also implicated in low levels of student achievement and dropping out. Evidence verifies that teacher and staff expectations are low for certain subgroups of students; and many students of color believe that teachers hold low expectations regarding their ability and motivation to learn (Education Week, 2006; Oakes, 2005).¹ This has become apparent over the past quarter century with studies of curricular tracking and the seeming warehousing of many Latino youths in low-level “bilingual” course sequences that manifest low expectations for learning (Callahan, 2005; Oakes, 2005; Valdes, 1998). Particularly for those students whose parents have low levels of education and familiarity with the school system, the social capital and academic expectations supported by teachers may be imperative to their graduation.

School Support Networks

Research indicates that if family support is lacking, children can benefit from the attention and mentoring of another interested adult, such as a teacher, school counselor, or coach (Werner, 1993). Students’ positive school experiences are dramatically shaped by feeling “cared about” by teachers (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999; Wentzel, 1997, 2002), which in turn reduces the number of dropouts (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Large, comprehensive high schools may fail to facilitate meaningful relationships between students and teachers—especially for those students who do not stand out or excel in a particular way (Lee & Loeb, 2000). With little family or school adult supervision or encouragement to achieve, many students develop powerful ties to peers who share weak interest in academic work (Romo & Falbo, 1996; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992).

School Climate and Safety

Many students face harassment and violence at school, with the most severe often linked to gang activity (Elliot, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998). Given the prevalence of violence, some students feel vulnerable at school, and experience school authorities as unable to protect them. Students who are involved in gangs may face threats at school from rival gang members because of these

¹ For example, polling of high school students reported by *Education Week* (2006). Black, Hispanic students cite problems in their schools, June 7, 2006.

affiliations (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002). Students who are not involved—or do not want to be—may feel compelled to get involved to gain protection from the violence around them. Finally, some students try to avoid problems altogether and keep to themselves, but given the prevalence of incidents, get caught in the middle (Elliot, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998). Metal detectors, random searches, and roaming security guards are increasingly common in urban schools, although their effectiveness in reducing school violence is not clear.

Method

Previous reviews have elucidated many of the demographic and school structural factors that are in part responsible for high dropout rates (Lee & Burkham, 2003, Rumberger, 2005; Rumberger & Arellano, 2007). We attempted to put these earlier findings in context by discussing them directly with students, and asking the students at risk for dropout how they are motivated or discouraged by school. To accomplish this, we surveyed and conducted focus groups with 133 ninth grade students in five California high schools. We then collected course enrollment, attendance, and grade data on participants, as well as school district data on key school features, such as size, ethnic breakdowns, and teacher characteristics. In this way, we used previous research as a foundation to understand—from the students’ perspectives—how these dropout predictors unfold in students’ complex lives amidst the influences and demands of their families, peers, and schools. Below, we present our approach and review our findings.

Schools

For this study, five California high schools were located across the state: one in Southern California, two in the Central Valley, and two in the San Francisco Bay Area. They varied in size from 262 to 4,320 students in the ninth through twelfth grade, with approximately four to 11 percent of the students departing (and presumably changing schools) over the course of the school year. Many of the students in these schools came from financially disadvantaged families, with four schools classifying at least half of their students as eligible for free or reduced lunch. Participating schools were chosen purposefully, to generate a sample of students who varied in their risk for dropping out. The student bodies were ethnically diverse, although largely Latino (51%-95%). At two of the schools, more than half (52% and 57%) of the students were designated as English language learners; at the other schools the range was very few (1%) to just over one-third (36%).

Participating schools reported that up to seven percent of their teachers had emergency credentials, with some 11 to 29 percent of teachers lacking full credentials. Of the students who graduated from these schools in the previous year, their fulfillment of meeting the A through G requirements for CSU/UC schools was very low. While one school had more than half (53.9%) of its graduates fulfill these college requirements, the remaining schools graduated few students who would be eligible (0, 6.7, and 14 percent).² The schools’ students were generally challenged with graduation requirements as well; of the first-time (tenth grade) CAHSEE-takers, at least one-third did not pass the English Language Arts section (ranging from 33 to 45 percent) and a quarter to one-half did not pass the math section (ranging from 28 to 49 percent). These students have four additional opportunities to re-take the exam, so overall rates eventually rise. According

² One school was new and did not have any data for the previous school year.

to NCES calculations, dropout rates (for these schools?) are surprisingly low—lower than state averages. Three of the schools had official dropout rates of less than 10 percent (2.6% to 9.1%) and one school had a rate of 18.2 percent. While staying in school does not ensure graduation, most of these students appear to be on track for surpassing their parents' education levels; at three schools, at least half of the students' parents had not completed high school. For further detail, please see Appendix 1, Table 1.

Participants

The focus of this work was on ninth graders, since most are still in school—few have dropped out—and academic performance in ninth grade is highly predictive of graduation (EPE, 2007). We collected data from 133 students, aged 14.5 to 17.5 years, attending the ninth grade in five California public high schools (see Table 1). The sample was nearly split between male and female students, and was three-quarters Latino, but included several ethnic groups. Seventy-seven percent of all participants were Latino, 12 percent were African American, five percent were Caucasian, and the remaining three percent were Asian American.³ Approximately fifteen percent were born outside of the U.S.—most in Mexico—although almost all of the participants had been in the U.S. for at least five years, and many for most of their lives. The majority of students (86%) reported being fluent in English, and almost 70 percent reported being bilingual in English and Spanish. About half of the students stated that their mothers had not graduated from high school.

³ Four percent of participating students did not specify their ethnicity.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	Total
Number of Participants	35	28	26	21	23	133
Mean Age in Years (SD)	15.12 (.48)	15.38 (.63)	15.23 (.47)	15.18 (.62)	15.23 (.35)	15.23 (.52)
% Born in US	83	89	65	95	83	83
Length of Time in US (%)						
• Entire Life	86	86	58	100	78	81
• At Least 10 Years	6	0	31	0	4	8
• 5 to 9 Years	9	11	4	0	17	8
• Less than 5 Years	0	1	4	0	0	2
% Male	60	54	46	38	48	50
Ethnicity (%)						
• African-American	3	11	4	33	17	12
• Caucasian	3	18	0	0	0	5
• Latino	91	57	96	62	70	77
• Asian/P.I.	0	0	0	5	13	3
• Multi-Racial	3	14	0	0	0	4
Maternal Education (%)						
• Less than HS/GED	51	32	69	38	39	47
• HS/GED	14	25	19	29	35	23
• College Graduate or More	9	29	4	29	13	16
Language (%)						
• English Only	9	36	0	48	35	23
• Spanish Only	3	11	8	0	0	5
• Bilingual	83	54	92	43	65	69

It must be noted that selection effects with the sample may affect results. Ninth grade students in participating schools volunteered to take part in this project about school engagement and factors associated with dropping out. While most potential dropouts are still in school in ninth grade, they may be substantially disengaged, and not attending school regularly, let alone participating in research studies. On the other hand, if the students were in class to hear about the project, it was introduced to students as an opportunity for them to voice their personal opinions about motivating and discouraging factors in school. Many students seemed eager for the chance to be heard.

Design/Procedure

We talked with school principals and district administrators to gain access to ninth-grade study participants. Researchers visited ninth grade classes in each participating school to introduce the project and pass out consent forms for students and their parents (in Spanish and English). All students who returned signed consent forms on the data collection day were invited to participate. Participating groups ranged from 21 to 35 students across the schools.

Researchers met with groups of six to nine students in private rooms on their campus during the school day. Participants completed a short survey, including demographic information, their educational goals, attitudes toward school, and perceptions of academic support (see Appendix). Immediately following, researchers facilitated 45-minute focus groups (in Spanish and English), discussing things that the students found motivating and discouraging about school, their perceptions of common reasons for high school dropout, and recommendations for helping students graduate. All questions were translated into Spanish and back-translated into English to ensure their accuracy and validity.

Following the focus groups, researchers collected coursework, grade, and absence data for participating students from each school.

Our approach to examining research questions with the survey and in the focus groups was multifaceted. In the survey, we asked students how they felt about school, as well as who and what motivated and/or discouraged their efforts. These were posed in both rating scale and open-ended formats. The survey contained questions based on the following measures:

Table 2. Constructs and Measures

Construct	Measure
Student Demographics	National Education Longitudinal Study questions (NCES, 1988)
School Experience	National Education Longitudinal Study questions (NCES, 1988) Youth Adaptation and Growth Questionnaire (Portes, 1995) Attitudes Toward School (ATS; Portes, 1995)
Expectations	Plans for the Future (Portes, 1995); Educational Aspirations Scale (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001)
School Participation	National Education Longitudinal Study questions (NCES, 1988)
Relationships & Support	Significant Other Academic Support Scale (SOASS; Sands & Plunkett, 2005)
School Performance	Grades and absences from school records

Expectations

The *Educational Aspirations Scale* consists of two-items; students are asked what level of education they would like to achieve, and what level of education they realistically will achieve. Student responses regarding their future education consist of a five-point rating scale: (1) *less than high school*, (2) *finish high school*, (3) *finish some college*, (4) *finish college*, and (5) *finish a graduate degree*. Portes and Rumbaut pilot-tested this scale on national samples of immigrant and non-immigrant ethnic minorities, and report its validity for use with first and second generation immigrant students, as well as other low income and racial minority groups.

School Attitudes

Using the “Attitudes toward School” scale (Portes, 1995), we assessed students’ endorsements of positive viewpoints about their efforts in school (“*I try hard in school*” and “*I usually finish my homework on time*”); their general thoughts and feelings about their coursework (“*I am learning things that I will need to know later*” and “*In general, my classes are interesting to me*”); and their opinions of school safety and resources (“*I feel safe when I am at school*” and “*My school has enough textbooks and instructional materials to help me do well*”). Students endorsed responses, which were rated as level of agreement: *strongly agree (1)*, *disagree (2)*, *agree (3)*, and *strongly disagree (4)*.

Support

Support networks were analyzed based on students’ reports of the academic support they received from family members, friends, or school teachers, counselors, or coaches, using the *Significant Other Academic Support Scale* (Sands & Plunkett, 2005). This six-item scale measures how adolescents view academic support by key people in their lives: mother, father, teachers, and friends. We added “other family member” to this list of people, and had participants specify the person to accommodate the importance of extended family members in many students’ lives. For each question, participants responded for all key individuals, using the following response categories: *strongly agree (1)*, *disagree (2)*, *agree (3)*, and *strongly disagree (4)*. This scale was originally used on two sub-samples of Mexican and Central American origin high school students from the Los Angeles area. Factor analysis indicated high internal consistency reliabilities for all four sub-scales.

In the focus groups, we asked students who and what motivated and discouraged them, and why they thought others dropped out. Finally we asked them to discuss the merits and validity of the common empirical wisdom about why students drop out (Bridgeland, DiIulio, Morison, 2007; National Research Council, 2004; Oakes, 2005). These dropout explanations are centered around individual, family, peer, and school factors, including: 1) a sense of belonging; 2) support networks; 3) family responsibilities; 4) classes and coursework; 5) tutoring and academic support; 6) the CAHSEE; 7) strict rules; and 8) safety.

Analyses

First, we used the qualitative data, collected in focus groups, to identify the key predictors of high school dropout. With quantitative data collected through surveys and school records, we then examined these predictors in regression analyses to ascertain whether or not they varied by students’ risk for dropping out. Finally, we used the qualitative data to interpret the results, and provide a deeper understanding of how the processes associated with dropping out develop.

Data from the surveys and school records were entered into SPSS and double-checked for accuracy. Designated items were composited to calculate the two scales used: The Attitudes Towards School Scale (Portes, 1995) and the Significant Other Academic Support Scale (SOASS; Sands & Plunkett, 2005). The SOASS was also used in its component parts (maternal support, paternal support, support from other family members, support from teachers, coaches, and counselors, and support from friends) to ascertain the relative predictive value of the various sources of support. Grade point averages were calculated for each student across all classes, as

well as for their A to G and “core” coursework. Absences were standardized for students across schools into the total days absent.

As shown in Table 3, students were divided according to their academic risk status in regards to dropping out (“at-risk” or “resilient”) using school record data. Previous research indicates that two of the strongest academic risk factors for dropping out of school are course failure and frequent absenteeism (Lee & Burkham, 1992, 2003; Rumberger & Arellano, 2007). Thus, students who had failed at least one course in the fall semester of ninth grade or who had been absent at least one standard deviation above the mean (equal to 12 or more days during the semester) were classified as at-risk for dropping out. Other students were considered “resilient.” It must be noted that the majority of participants in this study were at “social” risk for dropping out linked to their demographic characteristics, such as race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Rumberger, 1987, 2004); any that were not *also* at risk academically were considered resilient.

Table 3. Risk Levels of Participants

	Frequency	Percent
Resilient	78	59
At-Risk: Failed at least one course OR were absent 12 or more days the previous semester	55	41
Total	133	100

The focus group data were transcribed and responses to each question were recorded and tallied. In this way, we determined themes about students’ experiences in school that facilitated or impeded their motivation, and the prevalence of these themes across students and schools. These rich data—also retained in the students’ voices—impart the stark complexity about how participating students are contemplating their engagement in and completion of high school. Participating schools varied enormously and some of the students’ responses highlight their different experiences. Data are presented to reflect this variation when possible.

Logistic regression was conducted using the survey data to determine whether or not students’ expectations, school attitudes, and social support varied by their risk status, while controlling for gender and maternal education level.

Results

As noted above, we asked participants about their experience at school, why (other) students dropped out, and how they judged the common individual, family, peer, and school explanations of dropping out.

Individual Factors: Academic Engagement

Motivation and Attitudes Toward School

Participants endorsed positive opinions about school, generally agreeing—sometimes strongly—with a range of affirmative statements about their school experience. Details of their responses are shown in Table 4. Three-quarters of students endorse liking school generally, and even more

(81%) report that education is so important, that it is worth putting up with the things about school that they don't like. The vast majority of participants claim to "try hard" in school. Surprisingly, these attitudes toward school did not differentiate between students based on their risk for dropping out; even students who were frequently absent and/or who had failed a course were generally as positive about school as their more resilient peers.

Table 4. General Attitudes About School (Percentage of Total)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I try hard in school.	1	6	64	27
Grades are very important to me.	1	7	50	41
I usually finish my homework on time.	2	31	47	19
Education is so important that it's worth it to put up with things about school that I don't like.	1	15	44	36
In general, I like school.	5	19	53	22
I am learning things that I will need to know later.	1	7	50	40
In general, my classes are interesting to me.	2	25	56	16
I feel safe when I am at school.	8	25	41	23
My school has enough textbooks and instructional materials to help me do well.	4	16	52	27
I will pass the CAHSEE (CA High School Exit Exam).	1	6	48	41
My participation in school activities makes me feel like I belong.	2	12	52	28

Most students said that they generally liked coming to school. One explained, *"I come to school for my education, but most of the time it's partly because you have friends and [it's better] than just sitting at home where you can't do nothing."* Another concurred, *"...if I stay home it'll be boring, but if you come to school you have more things to do—like to learn and you hang out with your friends."*

School and the prospect of graduating also provided a sense of self-worth for students—both positive and negative. Students explained the affirmative message that graduating would convey to others about them. One student reasoned, *"...if you travel to other places and tell them you finished high school and your grades and all of that, they will be more accepting of you than if you dropped out of schooling, and you're not able to keep your promises and stay in one place."* Doing poorly in school, and dropping out seemed also to convey a powerful message: *"They're like... once they think that they don't know how to do anything, or once they're failing, they give up."*

In contrast, some students reported feeling like school was "a waste of time" and "pointless," that they just didn't like school and were "tired of it." One student explained, *"I think a lot of kids in high school just come to high school like to get their parents happy. I don't think they come because they like it. Some kids do, but I would think that most of them don't."* For those with this outlook, there often were challenges that made getting a more positive experience of school difficult. Also, for students who thought they could not go to college, finishing high school often seemed less important, particularly when it could be so frustrating.

Students described downward cycles in their school experiences that were hard to reverse once they started, and which led to dropping out. For example, if one fell behind in classes, it was increasingly difficult to catch up—doing poorly in classes set a negative tone in relationships with teachers and school counselors, which made it even harder to ask for needed help. Without that help and support, students reported feeling like they might as well drop out, because they certainly weren't going to graduate. One student described the process, “...*they start getting bad grades and no one helps them, so they feel that they can't do anything. They don't want to deal with it—they can't do it—so they just drop out.*”

Goals and Expectations for the Future

Why do students drop out of high school? “It's probably 'cause... they have no hope...”

Students' feelings about school and graduation—and their behaviors related to it—are complex and varied. Similar to findings reported by Portes and Rumbaut (2001), participants reported higher aspirations than expectations; students were extremely optimistic about the education levels they would achieve. Almost a third of students reported *wanting* to finish college, and substantially more than half of respondents reported *wanting* to finish graduate school (58%). When asked what they thought they would realistically achieve, almost two thirds of students think they will finish college or graduate school (39% and 26%, respectively). These plans for achievement are far above state and national averages (U.S. Census, 2003). Details are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Participants’ Academic Goals and Attitudes (Percentage of Total)

What is the highest level of education that you would like to achieve?						
	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	Total
• Finish HS	20	0	8	5	0	8
• Some College	6	0	4	5	4	4
• Finish College	29	25	31	43	26	30
• Finish Graduate School	46	75	54	48	70	58
Realistically speaking, what is the highest level of education that you think you will get?						
	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	Total
• Less Than HS Graduate	6	0	4	5	0	3
• Finish HS	34	4	15	5	0	14
• Some College	6	21	15	19	26	17
• Finish College	37	36	31	33	61	39
• Finish Graduate School	17	39	31	33	13	26

Both students’ aspirations and expectations were significantly related to their risk status for dropping out. Those students who were at-risk for dropping out had lower aspirations and lower expectations for their future education. Most students, however, expected to be in school in five years (63%)—technically, when they could be in their second year of college. In addition, many of these students (42%) expected to be working, presumably while they are in school, with very few imagining other circumstances, like having families. See Table 6 for details.

Table 6. Participants’ Expectations for the Following Five Years (Percent of Total)

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	Total
School	37	53	53	47	61	49
Working	37	32	19	33	17	29
School & Working	17	11	12	10	17	14
Other	9	4	12	5	4	7

The benefits of graduating. Students spoke plainly about why they hoped to stay in high school and graduate; many of the sentiments were about the future opportunities that they would have, and the difficulties they would avoid. One student summed it up, “*I come to school to learn...—for my education—to graduate, and then to get like my diploma, to go to college, to get a job.*” Graduation was seen as an instrument to grant them access to jobs. One student expressed the need for a high school diploma, in order to find work, “*cause without a high school diploma you can’t work anywhere—not even at McDonald’s or a restaurant.*” Another student said that going to school and studying would provide the opportunity to choose a career. He said, “*...if you study*

hard...it's going to pay off and you are going to be able to become something that you have always wanted. You are not going to...end up in the fields like everyone...does here..."

Avoiding common fates—ending up at a low-wage job or pregnant—motivated other students. As one student reasoned, *"If they don't stay in school, they're gonna have to work in the fields, in the hotness."* Another student shared how she was motivated by breaking the low educational attainment cycles in her family and community. She viewed school as the only method to combat replicating this pattern. She said, *"...what is getting me through school is similar to what got [my cousin] through school. There is a cycle that goes on, and the cycle is repeated here a lot. Unless you go to school, you end up either pregnant... or you make bad decisions and you get kicked out of school and you... end up struggling through life. And I want to break the cycle that's been going on as long as I can remember in my family; I want to be one of the first to get out of it—that's what motivates me..."* This sentiment is repeated by many; another reiterated, *"To make a difference in your family, maybe nobody's gone that far, and you want to be the first...maybe that can be the motivation that keeps you going—the thought that you can be the first one to succeed in your family."*

Students appeared to equate college generally with immense opportunity. One explained, *"...it's really great because college—besides like teaching you about stuff—it's a lot of fun, and it ensures your future..."* In discussing the benefits of school illustrated by a relative who graduated, one student explained, *"... he doesn't worry about that [work] as much as a kid that dropped out. He has money, he has a car—he has everything that he wants. He doesn't really have to worry about saying that he's going to get fired, you know, or looking for a new job at minimum wage. He's been pretty well off with the career that he has right now."* Going to school was viewed as ensuring an easier life. One student said, *"I've got a cousin in Mexico, he worked for BMW, but he doesn't do anything. He just tells people what to do and he finished high school and college. Yeah, he's like the boss and he's traveling around the world."*

Schooling was associated with being able to acquire important possessions—cars and houses. One student explained, *"I've got another cousin, he's a doctor and most of them [people who graduate]... have their cars and everything..."* Another student concurred, *"Like if you graduate from a college, you can pretty much—if you have a four-year-degree—you can pretty much get a really decent job, and then you can have like a nice house and things."*

Without much hope for getting a good job in the future, the pull of being able to have money and buy things *now*, drew some students out of school before graduation. As one student explained, *"They prefer the money over the education."* Another student reiterated the point, by saying, *"I think a lot of kids just drop out because they think that they don't need the materials, so they just try to go for the things they need in the future—money—so they start getting jobs, but since they can't get decent jobs, they work at Burger King or McDonald's."*

Career options. These students were clearly motivated to graduate from high school, and bolstered by their future job prospects. As noted above, many reported wanting to go to college and even graduate school. Some of the careers they mentioned wanting—being a singer, carpenter or party planner—may not require a college degree, but students appeared to equate college with getting good jobs.

For some, graduating from high school didn't lead to a great job—yet. One student recounts his sister's work, “*Well, it's the most cliché [for] high school graduates. She's working in fast food, but yeah, she's thinking about how it might add up though.*” Other students reported the disillusionment of graduating from high school and still not getting a good job, or an easier life. “*They say it's [high school] a waste of time and it's not going to help you. Well, at least my sister, she says, she's like 'I work so hard, and high school doesn't help you. What am I doing now? I'm working as a cashier. It doesn't help you; it just takes time away from you.'* That's what she said.”

Grade Point Average and Class Failure

Students reported that grades provided substantial motivation in school; more than 90 percent stated that grades were very important to them. Students also portrayed the consequences associated with grades—either rewards or punishments/sanctions from parents and school administration based on their report cards. In talking about grades, one student said, “*It's also like a motivation too... to pass your classes. You know if you pass your classes, you know you're going to get something you like... But if you don't [pass], you're going to get something taken away.*” At home, the consequences were often relinquished privileges, like not being able to go out or spend time with friends; at school, participation on teams or in clubs was curtailed.

Grades. Students' grade point averages for the first semester of their first year of high school varied from zero to a 4.0, or straight A's. On average, students were getting a 2.25 GPA, or a little under a “C+” average. When their GPAs were adjusted to include only the A to G requirements, the average dropped to a 2.0 or “C” average. If the GPA were further adjusted to include core classes only, the students GPAs dropped to 1.95, or a little under a “C” average. Non-academic courses were providing some boost to students' grades, but their GPAs were relatively stable. See Table 7 for students' grade point averages across schools.

Table 7. Participants' Grade Point Averages

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	Total
Mean GPA	1.59	2.73	2.52	2.06	2.50	2.25

Class failure. About 40 percent of students failed a class their first semester of high school—and most (33%) failures were in A to G courses. When the classes were limited to “core” courses, the number of failing students dropped to 29 percent. Course failure was not an isolated incident for many students in our sample. Approximately 14 percent of students failed one course; seven percent failed two courses; and 19 percent of students failed three or more courses their first semester of high school. Course failure was significantly more likely at some schools than at others. See Table 8 for course failure rates across schools.

Table 8. Class Failure

	School 1	School 2 ⁴	School 3	School 4	School 5	Total
Percentage Failed a Course	63	4	39	52	39	40
Percentage Failed an A to G Course	60	4	35	33	26	33
Percentage Failed a Core Course	51	4	35	19	26	29
Of Those Who Failed Courses, Median Number of Courses Failed	4.5	4	1.5	1.0	1.0	2.0

The emotional toll of low grades or failure. Low grades were a tremendous source of frustration and despair. One student explained, “*What really gets me, like not wanting to come to school is... when I try and I fail—that’s what discourages me, that’s what makes me want to think, you know I don’t need school. A lot of other people drop out because... if you go and you fail—after you’ve got so many F’s and F’s and F’s—you’re just like, what the hell, why even bother?*” As noted above, getting low grades caused distress to students and teachers alike, and seemed to initiate a downward spiral, fueled by frustration and misunderstanding on both sides. Few such situations led to a supportive dialog between them, or efforts to work together constructively to change the student’s low achievement.

School Absences

Students were absent an average of six complete school days in their first semester—more than a week of school. The number of days absent varied dramatically, with some students having no absences and one student being absent over 40 days. The reasons for student absences varied, but inevitably frequent absences made it harder for students to succeed academically, which was likely to reduce their motivation to stay in school. See Table 9 for details on students’ days absent.

Table 9. Median Number of Days Absent across Schools

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	Total
Median Number of Days Absent	6.9	2.0	5.1	7.0	3.9	4

Individual Factors: Social Engagement

A Sense of Belonging

Students reported the feeling of “belonging” as essential to their school experience and motivation to stay in school. Embodying Flores-Gonzalez’s (2002) “school kids” identity, many students identified with their school—particularly when others criticized it—and they had the opportunity to defend its reputation. Students spoke of standing up for their schools—saying it was good and that they were learning a lot—in the presence of people who challenged its worth. Some even claimed that they were more motivated to graduate and go to college just to prove to others that their school provided a good education.

⁴ Only one participating student at this school had failed at least one course the first semester of high school.

In contrast, a small group of students exemplified the “street kids” identity (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002), feeling like they didn’t belong at school, and couldn’t unless they relinquished an important sense of themselves and “sold out” to teachers and school norms (Ogbu, 2003). These students were faced with a dramatic dilemma, choosing between maintaining their personal integrity and graduating from high school. Some appeared to feel so disenfranchised from school that there was little chance they could stay in school—given that following certain rules and meeting certain performance standards were required—over the long term.

Academic belonging. In addition to feeling school spirit and connecting with friends, academic competence also provided a sense of belonging to the school community. This was mostly discussed as being problematic when it was lacking. If students were doing poorly in classes, they tended to feel like they did not fit in. When asked if feeling like you didn’t belong could lead to dropping out, one student summed it up, *“Yeah, maybe if they’re not smart enough. They feel surrounded by smart people, and they feel like they don’t belong.”* Thus, failing courses could disenfranchise students from the academic community, and make it harder for them to seek the support they need to improve their class experience and performance.

Participation in School Activities

About 80 percent of students reported that their participation in school activities contributed to their sense of belonging, whether it was being on a sports team, or in band or a club. Some students had a lot of pride in their schools; schools tried actively to foster it. At one school this was done with spirit rallies: *“Oh, the rallies. The rallies, you get to participate against the other classes, freshmen, sophomores, seniors, and you get to make a wave or whatever it takes. You get class points, for whoever wins.”* School sporting events also promoted this kind of enthusiasm among students, and encouraged them to identify as a member of their school.

School clubs and sports were a definite source of motivation for students to stay in school, providing them with fun and interesting activities, making them feel like they “belonged,” motivating them to get better grades to meet eligibility requirements, and providing positive relationships with coaches. About 39 percent of students reported being involved in one or more activity at school. Most students expressed the many benefits of involvement with clubs and activities. One student said, *“I like the school activities—if you’re involved in school, then you’re gonna wanna do more, but you have to also learn how to respect yourself before you can go and do stuff for the school.”* Activities, clubs, and sports offered students who were less interested in the academics to be fully engaged in a productive, school-based activity and identify with their school. See details of students’ participation below in Table 10.

Table 10. Percentage of Students Participating in Clubs, Sports, or Other Activities

School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	Total
23	43	35	33	70	39

Many talked of playing football and basketball, or being in clubs that sponsored special activities which kept them engaged in school. One student described the appeal of being on a team, *“I like sports because it keeps me entertained, and like I like to play sports, they’re funner [sic]... it matters to me if like I learn a lot from them, and if I’m physical.”* Activities also generated enthusiasm for school. At one school, students described their spirit rallies and how they got

everyone involved and excited; *“Oh, the rallies. The rallies, you get to participate against the other classes, freshmen, sophomores, seniors, and you get to make a wave or whatever it takes. You get class points, for whoever wins.”*

The lack of resources at some schools reduced the number and type of activities that were available. Students explained their dilemmas: *“We’ve got some band—we’ve got band equipment, but we have no band teacher.”* Another school did not have sports teams, and felt like they weren’t able to be as fully involved—or as involved in as many different ways—in school as they would have liked.

Eligibility requirements for sports. Many athletes had a powerful motivation to do well in their classes; schools had grade eligibility requirements for playing games. One student explained why he worked hard in school, saying, *“... in order to play football—last year it was a 2.0, but they raised up the grade point average, so it’s a 3.0—you have to have a 3.0 or higher to play. So that motivates you to get your grades, to keep playing.”*

Many athletes felt inspired to do well in school by their coaches. One student recounted, *“Actually, our football coach, I socialize with him a lot. We talk a lot. He actually motivates me to do better in school... Like knowing that if I don’t get the grades that I won’t play... ‘cause last semester I was playing football and I didn’t get the grades and I didn’t get to play the last two games. And he tells me, every day that I see him, to get the good grades... he’s like a friend to me...”* The expectations are clear: good grades equals playing in the games. And, the students express their confidence that the coaches want them to do well in school, and are pulling for them.

Family Factors

Family Influences on Goals and Expectations

Students were strongly influenced by their parents’ experiences, taking advantage of opportunities that their parents did not have. Describing the phenomenon, one student said, *“...most of our parents didn’t finish high school and they want us to go to college and have a better future.”* Another student agreed, portraying the circumstances of many recent immigrants, *“Basically because they [parents] need to work, like when they first get here from Mexico they don’t come to school, they just go to work.”* Parents have instilled upon their children the importance of going to school. One student recounted the conversation with his parents, [they ask] *“‘Why did we come to this country? ...for us [he and his siblings]—to get a better life.’ That’s the reason I’m in school.”* In discussing what motivated students to graduate from high school and go to college, one participant reiterated the importance of family; *“I think it is a lot of what the person wants, and... what their family taught them when they were younger... I was told my whole life, you know, ‘You’re gonna go to college. You’re going to graduate college.’ And, so now I know that that’s what I am gonna do.”*

Siblings and other family members also provided motivation and inspiration for setting high goals for the future. One student shared her source of motivation, saying, *“I think it is seeing other people succeed, and do well in life, that makes you want to do it also.”* Another student

clarified, *“I think it’s mostly like in your immediate circle, but that you could also see...like famous people succeeding and it makes you want to do it, also.”* One student expressed the motivation he got from his sister, saying, *“My sister she graduated with honors from [high school] and right now she’s a real estate—she works in real estate and, like, she tells me—she encourages me—she’s like, ‘You can do good; you actually [can] do better than me.’ and I’m like, ‘I don’t think that’s possible,’ but she’s like, ‘Yeah, you could.’ She’s done really good ever since then [graduating].”* Another student was inspired by his brother’s example, saying, *“My brother he’s in college, he’s like a chef and...and he’s always telling me I can do better than him and have a better life.”*

Family Support Networks

Unanimously, students cited social support as being an essential part of staying in school. As one student asked, *“What the heck am I doing here if I don’t get any support?”* Another linked this support directly to dropping out, saying, *“Sometimes for people it’s that nobody cares. Nobody cares if they stay in school or not. So they just drop out.”*

The participants’ reports of academic social support from family members are provided in Table 11. Family relationships played a pivotal role in students’ academic lives; having parents care whether or not students stayed in school was vital. One student explained why many students drop out, *“The kids feel like their parents don’t care. Or that their family doesn’t care whether they’re in school or not, so like they just decide not to go.”* Among the sources of family support, most students endorsed statements about their mothers providing essential support for their education. Interestingly, however, perceived parental academic support did not statistically differentiate between at-risk and resilient students.

Table 11. Academic Support Scale from Family Members (Percentage Participants Endorsing)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable
This person has helped me do well in school					
• Mother	2	2	26	69	2
• Father	14	10	20	49	8
• Other Family Member	7	11	32	38	12
This person has motivated me to stay in school.					
• Mother	2	2	17	79	2
• Father	9	6	15	61	8
• Other Family Member	3	8	17	60	13
This person has been important in helping me to make my educational plans.					
• Mother	2	8	17	71	2
• Father	10	14	17	50	10
• Other Family Member	6	14	23	41	15
This person has encouraged me to continue my education beyond high school.					
• Mother	2	4	9	81	5
• Father	11	7	14	60	9
• Other Family Member	2	8	21	56	14
This person is able to give me good advice about my education.					
• Mother	4	7	17	68	4
• Father	14	10	18	50	9
• Other Family Member	5	8	18	54	16
This person cares about my education.					
• Mother	2	0	6	90	2
• Father	9	2	14	68	8
• Other Family Member	4	4	14	65	14

When family members did care—and encouraged students—it provided powerful motivation to students to do well and graduate from high school. One student described the influence of his parents, saying, “*Home... like... your home relationships, you know, they’re your family, they support you to do better ... they love you, they know you since you were born, and... when my mom tells me, like when my report cards come—straight F’s, you know—she tells me, ‘I’m disappointed.’ You know, I try... but when she tells me, ‘Please do better.’ That would motivate me more than if one of my friends or school were to tell me, ‘Do better.’...*” As has been shown in previous work, many students—particularly first- and second-generation students—felt motivated to pursue the education that their parents could not or did not pursue (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). As one said, “...*what motivates me is like my parents—like they encourage me, you know [imitating parents]: ‘Oh, go to school so you can learn, and you won’t*

have to work hard like we do’.” Another student concurred, *“They don’t want us to make the same mistakes they did.”*

In terms of practical help, however, some parents did not have the educational backgrounds or familiarity with the school system to provide instrumental help, in the form of advice on which classes to take, or help with homework. Parents facilitated their children’s success in school in the ways they could—and their resources in this respect varied tremendously. Recounting a neighbor’s support from his parents, one student recounted, *“My neighbor? He had a lot of support from his parents, ‘cause they bought him a car to take him to school; they gave him some money to buy the materials he needed and stuff for projects...”* Many students relied on school staff—teachers, counselors, and coaches—and friends for academic assistance.

Family Responsibilities

Many students had family responsibilities that rendered school challenging, making regular attendance, adequate time for homework, and—at times—concentration, difficult.

Families could be a tremendous source of support and motivation for staying in school, yet they also could be an incredible source of stress and responsibility. Some students were in charge of many of the household chores, including going to the market, cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings. One student described his overwhelming responsibilities at home, saying, *“Whenever I’m home, like very rarely I get to go out and when I do wanna go out, I have to do everything that has to be done you know—make sure my mom and dad are right, because I live with my grandparents. They’re my mom and dad, so I have to make sure they have all their pills, make sure the grass is cut, and make sure everything’s done. And once all that’s done then maybe they let me go out.”*

Contributing financially to the family. Many students were expected to help out when their families were struggling financially. One student clarified the relative value of school and doing his part at home, by saying, *“... sometimes, stuff needs to get done, like work, if they have a family business, and... they need another person around. And, putting a roof over your head is more important than education.”* If parents were working at minimum-wage jobs, their high school-age children were often able to earn a similar hourly wage, which was a remarkable contribution to the household. As one student explained, *“... if your parents get paid minimum wage, they can’t really afford to buy anything, so the kids like try to get jobs and help out with their families and their little brothers, and they [provide] support—to buy food, to buy clothes, to do whatever they can to help.”* Working to support the family financially was more often a responsibility that fell on the shoulders of boys.

Within some financially disadvantaged families, students took responsibility for buying themselves the extra things they wanted. Several students explained, *“Sometimes your parents divorce and you live with your mom and still don’t have [help] economically—your mom doesn’t help you that much...”* Students wanted to get the cell phones, iPods, and clothes that their friends had, and to be able to go out. Often students needed some regular source of income to pay for these things, potentially including monthly cell phone bills.

Limited time for homework. Going to work directly after school left little time for students to complete homework. One student reportedly worked the night shift, getting off shortly before

school started in the morning. Such responsibilities left students to choose between completing homework and sleeping, and fatigue made it hard to concentrate during classes. Many students had trouble fitting everything in: *“Sometimes they [teachers] give you like too much homework and you have other things to do—like sometimes you have to clean your house, clean your room, take care of your brothers...and sisters, and if they [teachers] like give you a lot of homework, it’s like, you don’t have time for it, like you have other things to do—not just homework.”* Teachers were supposedly largely unsympathetic to students’ home responsibilities. One explained, *“...when you go home, you don’t have time... and when you go the next day, you tell the teacher [that] you didn’t have time.. [Teachers say], ‘There’s always time for homework. You gotta do it—that’s your responsibility.’ And you tell them you got a lot of responsibility at home and you didn’t have time. They say they don’t care; that’s your problem.”*

Caring for family members. For some students—mostly girls—their family responsibilities took them out of school entirely—albeit temporarily: *“... one of my friends, she comes to school once in a while, but she stays at home and takes care of her little nephew because the mom is working. And she still has one more year to complete here. She’s probably gonna keep coming to school here—she’s trying to come every day now.”* For others, “helping out” precludes them from finishing school. One student explained, *“...I had this friend that was coming here [to this school] and then her mom... got hurt so she couldn’t work anymore, so she [the friend] had to work to take care of her mom and her little sisters. So, she had to drop out.”* Older siblings often were responsible for their younger sisters and brothers. One student reasoned, *“...like nowadays when somebody gets married there’s not really a chance that they’re gonna stay together. And most of the time, they have kids and then they break up and its always the oldest one that gets stuck—they have to take care of the little kids, or maybe they have to take care of older [family] like your grandpa and grandma, and you can’t be taking care of all your family and [do all your] work, its just too much.”* Another student reiterated the scenario, *“Some parents work a certain amount of jobs and can’t watch their kids, so the other, the oldest has to stay home from school and watch the kids. They don’t have enough money for daycare.”*

Again, in this scenario, students reported that teachers did not understand their dilemmas. One said, *“Like let’s say...you need to take care of your little brother because your parents aren’t there or anything. And you come to school and they’re like, ‘Why you absent so much?’ [You reply], ‘Because I have to take care of my little brother.’ They’re like, ‘Well, I don’t care, you have to come you know—school’s school—you have to put everything aside.’ And, you’re like, ‘Well home is home.’ You know, it’s your family, you have to take responsibility of that, too. And they just don’t care—the fact that we’re like taking care of our families—they don’t care.”*

Pregnancy. For students who have babies in high school, care and financial responsibilities increased dramatically. The young mothers often dropped out to take care of their infants, and the young fathers often dropped out to work and provide financial support. As one student pointed out, some mothers tried to stay in school, but it was a challenge. She said, *“Like if you’ve got a kid, you’ve gotta take care of him. You got a baby, ‘Oh, I can’t do my homework. I’ve gotta sleep with the baby, feed him.’ That affects your grades, too.”* On the other hand, another student pointed out, *“A lot of us are dropping out ‘cause we’re pregnant, but what’s the point of dropping out when you’re still gonna have to come back and finish it[school], because you can’t support a baby without an education?”*

Peer Factors

A Sense of Belonging through Peers

Notably, friends were the most often mentioned reason why students liked school and felt connected to it (Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004). Several said that if you didn't have friends at school then there would be no point in going. As one student plainly stated, "...because there's... some kids that you see alone, or they might have like two friends, and...they feel like nobody ever wants to talk to them or nobody wants to be friends with them. So like, why come to school...?" Another student clarified the importance of fitting in at school—with at least a few friends. She said, "...I think it's also the emotionally safe thing—'cause if you have like a group of friends, then you feel safer, because you can talk about it [trouble], and you can make fun of the person who was making fun of you. Or, just do whatever, and like cope. But, if you are on your own, it's hard—you can't really cope with it."

For some students, friends provided companionship *and* physical safety. With violence perceived as presenting a threat to students' physical well-being, most felt safer within a broad network of friends or a clique. As one student pointed out, some students "...feel unsafe because sometimes they're not protected by friends."

Peer Support Networks

As noted in the discussion of "belonging," peer support was considered essential for wanting to go to school. In describing friends, one student said, "*They're fun to talk to, to kick it with, to do whatever, you know... like if they're real good friends, they're always there for you...*" Some students spoke plainly about the social aspect of school keeping them engaged—including the parties.

In addition to influencing students' basic school engagement, friends also affected grades and whether or not students stayed in school (Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004). As one student explained, "...sometimes you can have a good relationship with a teacher—that doesn't mean you're just not going to drop out. Your friends, they can have a big influence; they can play a role: [imitating friends] 'Take drugs—just drop out and work at McDonalds or Burger King.' And I think that's a big influence." Another student agreed, saying, "...if you're easily influenced, and you have friends that are idiots and they think that being stupid and having, like, horrible grades is cool—then if you follow that, then most likely you are going to end up dropping out."

Some students got a lot of academic support and motivation from friends. One explained, "*It... depends on the kind of friends you have. I have the kind of friends that support me. When I get home [and say], 'Oh, could you help me out?' [They say] 'Yeah.'*" Another student agreed, "*Or sometimes, they could probably give you pointers on how to solve certain problems—for like math homework, for instance.*" Friends provided extra motivation for school, "*Because you do need...like an extra push, your friends telling you that...like, 'Do your homework.' and 'Try hard.'*" Other students are not so lucky, "*Cause sometimes they don't have friends, like... to help them do the work. They tell them [imitating friends], 'Oh, what you don't know how to do it? You're dumb.' or whatever.*" See Table 12 for students' perceptions of academic support from their friends.

Table 12. Academic Support from Peers (Percentage Participants Endorsing)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable
This person has helped me do well in school	8	15	38	25	14
This person has motivated me to stay in school.	4	14	32	35	14
This person has been important in helping me to make my educational plans.	11	25	26	23	16
This person has encouraged me to continue my education beyond high school.	9	20	29	29	14
This person is able to give me good advice about my education.	9	28	28	23	13
This person cares about my education.	9	18	29	32	12

School Factors: Structural Characteristics***Classes and Coursework***

Students report taking a range of courses, including honors, advanced placement, and remedial courses—and everything in-between. About 20 percent of students are taking at least one remedial class—usually English language development or math—and about 13 percent are taking at least one honors or AP class. See Table 13 for details across schools.

Table 13. Percentage of Ninth Graders Taking AP or Remedial Courses First Semester

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	Total
AP or Honors Courses	14	0	27	24	0	13
Remedial Courses	6	7	46	19	26	20

Generally, students report positive opinions of their classes. Some of the teachers made classes “fun” and taught them “step by step,” in a way that made learning easier. More than 70 percent of students (72%) concurred with the statement that their classes are “interesting” to them, with the vast majority (90%) agreeing that they are learning things they will need to know later. Most (91%) endorsed the claim that they “try hard” at school, and almost two-thirds (65%) reported that they usually finish their homework on time.

The teaching approach. In our discussions, students described their classes as varied: some were interesting and some were boring—definitely a possible source of disengagement from school. Most participants liked at least some of their classes, and believed that the teachers’ approaches made the difference in whether or not they found the subject appealing. One student complained, “...teachers won’t even help us. Like, well some do, but like they don’t make it fun in the class. They just put [out] the work and [say], ‘Do it!’ you know. They don’t teach us the work. They just give us the work and we do it. [Imitating] ‘Be quiet.’ We don’t get to talk or anything—get a little bit happy in the class. That’s what keeps us down. The classes are boring.” Another student concurred, “Like me, myself, if my parents didn’t make me come to school, I don’t think I would come to school. ‘Cause I don’t find it very interesting... They’re boring to me—all my classes.”

And some students craved more challenging coursework, like the honors English students who were frustrated by spending their course time doing “word searches.”

Course relevance. Students were eager to see the relevance of what they were learning; they wanted teachers to help them understand how their classes would be useful to them later. One student reasoned about why some students might find their classes irrelevant to their lives. She said, *“I think the reason that students would think that is they [the applications] don’t get explained to you—how this will help... later on. Like here they teach us the practical applications of things. So, when we were doing trigonometry, that’s when we built the trusses...we were studying sociology, and we studied people.”*

Not all students, however, thought that their courses could be pertinent to their futures. In speaking of his history class, one student complained, *“This ain’t gonna help you get a job.”* Another opined, *“...and like some science, they teach us...what astronauts do, you know [imitating teachers], ‘You have to learn this; this is what astronauts do.’ What are the chances we’re gonna become an astronaut...?”*

Course options. When asked about whether or not they liked their classes, one student responded that, *“There’s no electives. We need more electives.”* Another student agreed, *“They don’t have all the fun classes, where you’d be able to do projects and things.”* Instead, as part of providing greater access to A to G courses, the students had only academic courses offered, saying, *“...for us, some of the...extra classes that we get would be like science and history and stuff like that, instead of having something fun that we’d enjoy.”* This sentiment—a desire to have more electives, such as auto repair, art, electronics, or woodshop—was repeated across several schools. One student pointed out that having one of these “fun” classes would motivate a kid to come to school and pass *all* of his/her classes. Others noted that some of these elective classes could teach students skills or trades which would be useful to them later.

Another discouraging aspect of their course selections was their apparent lack of choices. Of the electives that were offered, a student said, *“We don’t even get to choose them. They choose them for us.”* Another student spoke longingly of a school that granted students more autonomy: *“My cousin’s school, they put up bulletins on the bulletin board and you get to sign up for the electives that you want. You put your name on whichever one you want. If you get lucky, you get to go to it. You can go to whatever one you want, you just sign up for it. Here, like they said, you don’t get to choose.”* Schools have a challenge with granting students occasions to exercise autonomy, while still providing future academic opportunity through encouraging their completion of A to G course requirements.

One of the schools in this study had a project-based curriculum, which allowed the students to apply their knowledge to practical problems, like learning math and physics by studying how their building was engineered, or by making musical instruments. The students liked not having textbooks, and the creativity and choices that were built in to the curriculum.

Two of the participating schools had block scheduling, which had both benefits and disadvantages. Some students noted that the extra time allowed them to do more interesting activities—create a model United Nations, for example. Other students talked about how long

classes were, and how they had trouble staying focused. One student explained, “...*sometimes being with the same teacher for 130 minutes, that’s not right. It gets boring... And sometimes, you know, you don’t get along with the teachers and you pretty much... get stuck with them for a long time.*”

Course resources and facilities. Most of the schools had more traditional curricula with textbooks and lessons drawn from them. Yet, the lack of resources, and the poor condition of the resources they did have, interfered with their lessons; “...*there’s not enough books,*” and the ones they do have “... *are all ripped, we don’t have like new books, so things are missing.*” Other students explained that graffiti covered their textbooks—“...*they’re all tagged out*” and “*written in.*”

Admittedly, this depiction reflects how school resources were lacking generally. For example, one student pointed out, “...*In ceramics, we’ve got clay we have to use over and over.*” In describing his classroom, one student said, “*The desks are all broken and they’re all different.*” Another concurred, “...*and there’s all the tags on the desks.*” Students in one of the focus groups recounted their excitement during fourth period that day, which they spent trying to catch mice during class. They explained that their school was “*kinda ghetto.*”

Career preparation. Schools provided some opportunities for students to learn about careers and the college options to help them prepare. Some exposure was available through classes, such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), which prepares students for college with academic survival skills, and encouraging rigorous course loads. Students were motivated by school-based trips to visit colleges. One student explained, “*They took us to UC Merced, and for the parents, [there were] the meetings they had to attend. They took us to Santa Barbara, so that was pretty rewarding.*” Schools provided information about financial aid for college, and, one student confirmed, “*They help us with scholarships.*”

For students who were not necessarily bound for college, schools provided other options. Some schools offered work programs, allowing students to work at school or in the community during school hours to gain valuable job experience and training. And, several of the schools had active military recruitment presences on campus, with colorful flyers for the different divisions and promises of signing bonuses, job training, and adventure. Some students even had the chance to experience the military through the school JROTC (Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps) program. For many students, who did not see college as an option, the military appeared to be an appealing alternative route to a better life.

It was not clear, however, that the students always understood the training and education required for particular jobs. One student mentioned his sister wanting to be a doctor; “*My sister...she’s planning to go to Cal State LA for the nursing program, I think. Medical field. She wants to be a pediatrician.*” Admittedly students were only in ninth grade, but it was not clear that they understood the type and amount of education that is linked to specific jobs. Moreover, given the low levels of education in their families and communities, it is not apparent that this information would be readily available to them at home.

Tutoring and Academic Support

As noted above, about a fifth of students were taking at least one remedial course, and the low grades suggested that some of the at-risk students in particular would need extra academic support to succeed in high school.

Availability of tutoring. Generally speaking, tutoring was discussed as something that was readily available, but still hard to benefit from. One student explained, “*Well, there’s always people out there to help you. There’s even commercials that tell you [imitating the voice in the commercial]: ‘If you need help, there’s tutors.’*” Schools make tutoring available to students in a variety of ways. One explained, “*We have this tutoring—we have a private tutor—you can get that at the office. There’s like this form you fill that out when you meet with a tutor for free, every Tuesday and Thursday at a library, at your house, at the school. Or you can have online tutoring.*”

A few students reported trying to get extra academic help, but did not find it available. This seemed particularly true of academic counseling—that it was offered at school, but really hard to access. One student explained, “*There’s like more than, probably one thousand kids in here, and there’s only three [counselors]. And at times—like at the beginning of the year...—people go to change their classes for the credits and everything, and they just help, like, only five at a time. They make you sit there a long time.*” Another student complained, “*You don’t really see them a lot... When you need their help and you go to their office, they’re not there... Like if you come like during between periods or something, you’ll have to go back to your class and get a note. You can’t go in between...*”

For tutoring, some students conveyed that only particular classmates—those who were actually failing classes—were eligible for official tutoring services. Others complained about how the support was provided; teachers were present but simply told the gathered students to do their class work, without explaining it more or differently than had been done in class. The students described their frustration as the so-called tutoring was what they could be doing at home alone.

Another issue was the lack of time; not all students can stay after school or come in on weekends when tutoring is available. One girl explained, “*...sometimes they would have their family problems, and they can’t stay after school...*” Others admitted that it was hard to spend your lunch at tutoring, even if you were struggling in a class, because school was mentally tiring, and lunch was one of your few times to visit with friends. Particularly for the students who found school really challenging intellectually, breaks were essential. One explained, “*It is because at lunch, that like the only time that your mind relaxes of all the classes you’re having, and after school you’re gonna be like, ‘Yeah, classes are over. Oh damn, I have to go back to tutoring.’ If it was during classes, probably it’ll be better...*”

Emotional obstacles to getting tutoring. One of the biggest problems with getting the needed academic help was emotional. Student illustrated the problem thus, “*You definitely need to be willing to like, go find them. A lot of people want it, but don’t want to ask for it, or don’t know how to.*” Another experienced the problem as students’ struggling with their pride and self-reliance. She said, “*Maybe they have too much pride, so they are like, ‘I can do this on my own; I don’t need any help.’ And then they mess up really badly...*” Other students asked their teachers for help, and were told to try harder, which they found demoralizing. One student

described his experience, "...some of them [the teachers] say, "Oh, you can't really do anything, you just need to work harder." It's like "Ok, I'm working harder, but like what do I need to do so I can pass the class?" But they usually don't tell you nothing; they just say 'Work hard' and that's it..." Many students experienced their interactions with teachers as deteriorating (further) when they were struggling academically in that teacher's class, which made it especially difficult to ask for help.

There often appeared to be stigma attached to the need for tutoring. One student explained, "People might not sign up for it because they're gonna think they're dumb or something." Others report feeling more comfortable asking their friends for academic help, "I know my friends, they'll say 'If y'all need help...' Normally, if I know what I'm doing and they need help from me, they'll get help." Approaching peers for help doesn't work for everybody, "'Cause sometimes they don't have friends, like... to help them do the work. They [supposed friends] tell them, 'Oh, what? You don't know how to do it? You're dumb,' or whatever."

The CAHSEE

While many students dreaded taking the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) as another big test they had to take, the majority did not view it as something that would necessarily precipitate dropping out. About 90 percent of students believed they would pass the CAHSEE. For the students who were doing well in their classes, the CAHSEE appeared to be more of a hassle than an impediment to staying in school. One confided, "I really don't think that students drop out because they couldn't pass the exit exam, because supposedly it is at the eighth grade level. So, if you got out of eighth grade, you should be able to pass this test. Even if you can't, you can take it so many times...you just keep taking it until you get it right."

Test anxiety. Several students talked about test anxiety, and how many students, who knew the information covered in the CAHSEE, would fail because they tended to "freeze" during tests. "They freak out when the test is right in front of them. They're like 'Oh god, I just blanked out and forgot everything!'" Another described a similar phenomenon; "...some people when they're taking the test, they like start panicking 'cause they're like 'Aww, it's a big test and it's going to depend on my high school!' and they start panicking and they start losing the information that they've learned and they don't know what to do. And then once they start panicking, they just lose focus..." Students were generally nervous about the CAHSEE, with rumors circulating about its difficulty. One student reported, "I heard that the average [number] of seniors right now—passing the exit exam—out of all seniors: one. That's what I heard."

Requiring the CAHSEE to graduate. Some students thought that requirement of passing the CAHSEE to graduate was not fair. They cited that high school graduation should be based on acquiring credits for classes, not a big standardized test. One reflected, "...it's not fair because even though you have good grades, and you have even more credits than your school says... and you only miss the CAHSEE by like three points, you still can't walk the stage." Similarly, another student described the frustration felt by others, "...they have all their credits and all their work done. They're ready to graduate and they've got their cap and gown, but they can't because they can't pass one simple test." It seemed particularly unfair, they said, given that their older siblings, and others who had graduated just a few years prior, did not have to pass it.

English Learners and the CAHSEE. Students reasoned that the CAHSEE should be offered in other languages—or at least major ones, like Spanish—if schools are trying to help students learn. They should, “...make it [the CAHSEE] in Spanish. ‘Cause most of the kids here that don’t pass it, they’re usually Spanish speakers. ‘They’ should probably do one in English and in Spanish ‘cause, like, they came over here to learn. And, if they can’t pass the CAHSEE, what do they do—go back?”

Strict Rules

Most students thought that school rules were excessive at times, but consistent with their experience everywhere: rules were a fact of life. In school there were school rules, and once you graduated, there were society’s rules. As one student explained, “When you drive, you have to stop at stoplights, turn on certain signals... So, if people do that [drop out because of strict rules], they’re stupid, because you leave here [school], and you have rules out there. And, they’re stricter—you go to jail...I mean, you get a detention here, but out there if you break a law, you go to jail.”

Some students were convinced that school rules could cause classmates to drop out of high school; they may get expelled for getting bad grades, fighting or being affiliated with gang activity, or having numerous unexcused absences. However, more students believed strict school rules led indirectly to dropping out. For example, students who were expelled were forced to transfer schools, which may involve time and cost burdens related to transportation to the new (non-neighborhood) school. Thus, transferring schools may be too much of a burden for students, especially if the school is far from their home, and lead to their dropping out.

Unfair rules. Students disliked many of the rules at their schools—including not having iPod (or digital MP3 music players) or cell phones, which were routinely taken away, and not being able to, “...come into the school, or to your classes unless you’re wearing your id badge, and it has to be on a lanyard around your neck.” Many of these rules were upheld in the name of safety. There were rules about not wearing certain colors, because of their potential relation to gang membership; not going to the bathroom during class; and even about “hanging out with friends.” One student described the rule against “Loitering.” *Like you know loitering, like when we’re at lunch, I’ll be with my friends right, just kicking it in one spot and when the security and the teachers see that there’s too many people in one spot, you can’t stay there... [imitating security personnel] ‘You guys gotta leave; you’re loitering...’*

Ineffective rules. Rules seemed to be implemented in an uneven and, at times, ineffective fashion. Some teachers interpreted rules “by the book,” while others did not. This made it difficult for students to understand the parameters, particularly when many were testing boundaries. “...Some teachers are different. Some teachers handle the rules, like, strictly, and others, they like give you chances and tell you not to do it again.” And, other students felt that the rules, even when implemented strictly, were ineffectual in changing students’ behaviors. One student expressed this sentiment, “...why would you have rules knowing that they’re gonna be broken or they’re being broken already, and you won’t enforce them? Or, you’ll say you’re gonna enforce them and you don’t. What’s the point of having them, if you’re not gonna do anything about it? ...there’s fights at school and all they get is suspended—and...come back five

days later. What's the point of getting suspended if you're coming back to do it again? If they did it once, I'm pretty sure they're not gonna care if they get suspended five days." And, suspension admittedly was a strange punishment for some of these students who did not want to come to school in the first place.

Students expressed frustration that sometimes rules were imposed without any effort to understand the circumstances and why the rule was broken. For example, a difficult family situation or an incredibly long commute may have made it hard to get to school on time. One student explained, *"There could be somebody who is always breaking the rules. Maybe there is something behind it, behind the behavior. Maybe there are problems going on inside 'cause maybe something previous happened to them, so they are looking for attention. And the zero tolerance policy, I guess it's just going to get them kicked out of the district eventually... and that's not going to do anything about it [the trouble]."*

School Factors: Process Characteristics

Support Networks at School

Support from teachers. While family members—often parents—provided the most basic support for the majority of students, school adults (teachers and coaches) were also important. In fact, those students who were at risk for dropping out perceived their teachers, counselors, and coaches as providing significantly less academic support than their more resilient peers perceived. The direction of this effect is not clear, however, and as discussed below, the effects may be reciprocal. Frequent absences and course failure may lead some students to receive less academic support from teachers and school staff, and receiving less academic support could lead to course failure and less frequent attendance.

School could provide the support that was missing at home: *"...like some people they have problems at home so they come to school because it's like better, you don't have that many problems. Sometimes the teachers do help you out, so that's good."* Many students talked about how meaningful having good teachers was—and to some, how rare. One student effused, *"We're really lucky; we have really good, supportive teachers. I've heard stories from people at other schools, and like, you're lucky if you have one good teacher that you can talk to and we have, like, three."* Although, admittedly, having just one caring teacher may make all the difference. Another student gave details, *"I think maybe it's important to have like one good teacher. In middle school, I was really lucky, I had like my band teacher, who was like my best friend, and I had my eighth grade English teacher, and I spent like all of my lunches in his room, and we'd just like talk. But not everyone has that and I think it would have been like really hard for me in eighth grade if I couldn't be in there [the English teacher's room]."*

Supportive student-teacher interactions. While almost all students' reported a vast range of experiences with their teachers, most students had some teachers who were enormously supportive. *"Some teachers actually care and some teachers don't. There's, like, these teachers that will help in school and tell you, 'Don't drop out, stay in school.' ...There's these teachers that are really dedicated to being a teacher and really want you to get through high school and go to college. And they'll tell you."* Some supportive teachers demonstrated it by keeping track

of students and providing practical and emotional support when students were struggling. One student related the details, “*Some teachers, like Ms. X will say, ‘If you get an F, I’ll call your house.’ She really cares. ... Ms. X will come to you and say, ‘You need help—stay in school. I’ll be here after school—I’m here until 4:30, 5:30...’ They’ll tell you what time they leave.*” Another student reiterated this sentiment, “*They give their time to us, like instead of just teaching, which is just what they have to do. They actually take time and effort to like help us.*” See Table 14 for students’ reports of academic support from teachers, counselors, and coaches.

Table 14. Academic Support from Teachers, Counselors, and Coaches (Percentage Participants Endorsing)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable
This person has helped me do well in school	4	15	35	37	10
This person has motivated me to stay in school.	3	13	25	48	11
This person has been important in helping me to make my educational plans.	2	17	26	43	12
This person has encouraged me to continue my education beyond high school.	5	9	24	51	11
This person is able to give me good advice about my education.	4	8	29	51	8
This person cares about my education.	5	7	23	55	10

Some teachers provided support by believing in students when students’ own confidence faltered and challenging them academically. “*They don’t let you give up, you know... they push you, they actually push you.*” Many students responded to this support positively, as one student said, “*I like the teachers that challenge me because... I like to be pushed over the limit to get better grades and everything. And I like that.*” The effects of receiving support from teachers were profound. One student reported, “*When you have somebody that’s actually gonna be there for you and really support you in all your school educational needs and stuff then it’s really—it boosts you up, you feel better about yourself and your education.*”

Supportive teachers were also able to present materials in a way that reached their students. “*... most of these teachers, they help, you know, and they’ll do it in a fun kind of way—they’ll joke a around... but it makes you learn better.*” The students described supportive teachers as “*easy going*” and “*not boring,*” and said that they know how to explain things well. At the smaller schools, students tended to praise the interactions they had with teachers, saying that “*...the classes are small and like, you have, like, one-on-one with the teacher.*” It provided students with individual attention and made them feel like the teacher could track their progress, and help them more when they needed it. Some students attribute their teachers’ support to other things; “*Well, there’s some teachers that are young like us and they can understand us—they think like us.*”

Negative student-teacher interactions. Many of these same students reported struggling in their relationships with some teachers. “*Some of the teachers...they treat you like you’re a screw-up; they treat you like you’re not important. So they’re setting up these kids to feel that way almost*

all the time, so they [the students] end up dropping out. So that's why they end up dropping out: because they feel like they can't do anything—because of being treated badly by teachers.” Students repeatedly told stories indicating their sense that teachers did not care about them. For example, one recounted his experience, saying “...some teachers will be like, ‘You’re getting an F. Who cares? If that’s your only choice—go ahead, drop out.’ And some teachers will tell you straight in your face. Some of them, you go right after school [for help] and they tell you, ‘Oh no, I have to leave.’ They don’t give you support.” When the students were struggling academically and wanted additional help, they reported that they often got the opposite response from their teachers. “Once you get into trouble, they [the teachers] give up; they’re just [saying] ‘This kid’s not going to learn.’” Students reported the devastating effects of realizing that teachers have given up: “It really means a lot when a teacher tells you that you’re not gonna do well. It doesn’t make you feel good because then you just feel like, ‘Well then, if my teacher tells me that I’m gonna flunk then I just don’t wanna come.’”

Other students, across schools, suggested that some of their teachers were only there for the paycheck, that, “They do it [teaching] for the money.” Moreover, they, “...don’t even want to take the time, or they’re just here just to teach and get out of here, because I know... some teachers, they’re like, don’t really like kids.” Students expressed disillusion with their teachers’ lack of capacity to provide the support they need, saying, “They’re supposed to be your guide to high school and everything.” They are supposed to be doing “...anything to help us—as long as they listen to us, at least. They don’t even do that.” Instead, “They say [imitating teachers], ‘We’ve got too many students here.’ It’s not about that...I’m not here to have you tell me how many kids you have or how you’re busy. It’s about when we ask you for help, you’re supposed to give it to us.” Some students were optimistic about their teachers’ availability to provide support when pressed, as one who said, “And, even if it seems like your teacher isn’t listening to you, or isn’t going to help you, the chances are that if you actually came in and asked them, they probably would.”

When relationships with teachers were difficult, students often felt powerless to negotiate. Several experienced their teachers as hostile, and reported times when teachers confronted them aggressively in class. For example, one student explained, “Because you can just feel that they hate you right away. You come in the class and they’re just saying stuff like, ‘There goes berserk.’ So you really don’t want to be in that class no more.” However, school rules prohibited the students from replying in kind. Those who had—students who believed they had simply stood up for themselves against teachers who did not like them—were suspended or reprimanded harshly. One admitted how short their fuses were with teachers; “...like when they scream at us and we try to say something back—right away we yell.” Another student described the likely scenario; “Like they think they have the right to scream at us and when we try to scream back at them, we get into trouble even worse.” Their only means of registering protest then was by refusing to comply with teacher requests, like homework. One student reasoned about the interaction and its effect; “Some people just don’t care. I have a friend and I’ve talked to him about doing his work and he told me he wasn’t going to do his homework because he didn’t like the teacher, and that didn’t really make sense to me because how is that showing the teacher you don’t like them by not doing their work? It sorta makes their life easier because they don’t have to grade it...” In several cases, the students reported feeling such enmity for their teachers that any effort made in the class was experienced as compromising their self-worth and self-respect.

Support from coaches. For the students who joined athletic teams, coaches were a great source of emotional and academic support. One student summed it up, *“The coaches and the clubs are like basically very supportive. They do help you.”* And, while they encouraged students to work hard in classes, coaches had different relationships with students. In contrast to teachers, *“They’re fun, the coach is fun. It won’t be like the teacher saying, ‘You just do this, and don’t talk to me!’”* Students’ relationships with coaches were different and appeared to provide more mentoring than their relationships with teachers. One athlete explained, *“Actually, our football coach, I socialize with him a lot. We talk a lot. He actually motivates me to do better in school...Like knowing that if I don’t get the grades that I won’t play. And, he always tells me, ‘cause last semester I was playing football and I didn’t get the grades, and I didn’t get to play the last two games. And he tells me—every day that I see him—to get the good grades, get the good grades...And, he kind of motivates me to get the grades, because he wants me to get the grades... he’s like a friend to me... I don’t want to disappoint him.”*

Support from school counselors. Students didn’t seem to experience much support from the counselors at school. Whether it was their limited numbers—reputedly about one counselor per 500 students at some schools—or their busy schedules and the special permission needed to go see them, counselors were not seen as a source of academic or emotional support. One student explained, *“It’s rare when—we rarely see our counselors... Once in a good while...They’re either at meetings or say you have to have a note or something.”*

School Climate and Safety

In spite of many rules implemented in the name of security, most of the students talked about serious safety issues in their schools and communities, with fighting and gang-related violence prevalent. *“Some do [drop out] because like all the shootings, and they get scared and they get paranoid, and like most of them get traumatized, and that’s why they don’t want to come [to school].”* As another student pointed out, *“...why would you wanna go to school if you’re gonna be worrying about: ‘Oh, are they gonna jump me?’ or you know ‘Is somebody gonna threaten me?’ or ‘They don’t like me.’ Would you wanna go to school like that?”*

Violence on campus. Many students portrayed a school environment that was hard to navigate for safety. For those who got involved in gang activity, violence was expected. In other cases, getting out of a gang and removing oneself from violence was hard to do when the other gang members were at school. Students spoke of a fellow classmate, recounting, *“He was tired and he tried to drop out of the gang, but they wouldn’t accept that. They still kept calling him. And then his gang turned on him, too. So he said, ‘I’m going to drop out.’ So he dropped out and... goes to continuation school.”*

Fights were numerous, and even those who were not involved could easily and inadvertently get caught in the cross-fire. One student explained, *“There’s a lot of gangs—like if you wear a certain color, they’ll be like, ‘Oh yeah, she’s a scrap!’ or ‘She’s a chap!’ you know, and they’ll go after you, even your not part of it.”* Students reported cultivating a determined stance of minding their own business, so as to avoid being singled out for aggression. Students worried

about the violence to varying degrees, and undoubtedly were involved and affected by it differently, but most did not think that their school could protect them from it.

Security on campus. All schools tried to protect their students through a variety of measures, including strict policies forbidding fights and the presence of weapons on campus. Several of the big schools had security guards, although students were dubious of their effectiveness. For example, students reported that “...*they [the security guards] only stay in one area. So, it's like they don't go around campus, looking at other people and...*” “—*Yeah it's true. Especially where the kids hang out...They come over this side sometimes, and the cops are always by the [square], talking to other teachers and...*” “—*discussing their problems...*” “—*Yeah, while someone's getting beaten up behind a building and they don't know...*”

As noted above regarding strict rules, many found the security measures lacking in their ability to protect students *and* antagonistic, contributing to ill will between students and teachers. The efforts to prevent violence on campus included rules to track students by requiring identification badges, conducting random searches, and limiting access to bathrooms and non-supervised areas. Students complained about the arguments that ensued when one accidentally forgot to wear an ID badge, or had to go to the bathroom during class. Moreover, students' frustration and mistrust of school authorities were fueled by the random searches for drugs or weapons conducted at some schools. Students told of the humiliation they experienced when they were pulled out of class to be “patted down” in front of classmates.

The Association of Individual, Family, Peer, and School Factors with Risk for Dropping out

The two primary risk factors for school dropout that were examined—frequent absence from school and course failure—constitute a powerful risk for later dropout and have been confirmed in previous research (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Rotermund, 2007; Rumberger & Arellano, 2007). Analyses indicate that at-risk students—controlling for their gender and maternal education levels—have statistically lower educational aspirations and expectations, and perceive lower levels of support from their teachers, counselors, and coaches (Chi-Square = 51.84, $p < .001$). In contrast, their attitudes toward school and the support they perceive from parents and friends do not differentiate them from their more resilient peers. As the student voices reveal, many of these associations are likely reciprocal—students get frustrated and disengage, which renders them less support and fewer educational opportunities; simultaneously those who have less opportunity and less support are more likely to get frustrated and disengage (Oakes, 2006).

Conclusions

Timing of Interventions

The most striking conclusion of this study was how engaged in school these ninth graders are and want to be. This reflects the findings—particularly of minority students—from the base year of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (Ingels, Burns, Chen, Cataldi, & Charleston, 2005). They can easily identify the threats to completing high school, and provide personal stories of how these challenges confront them daily; yet, they remain overwhelmingly optimistic and involved in school, eager to participate and have more positive experiences that facilitate their academic achievement. While earlier intervention may be most fruitful, given that many of the risk factors for dropping out can be easily detected in ninth grade, it is *not* too late to keep these students in school.

Fewer Students per Teacher

In spite of reports of negative interactions with teachers, students wanted more time with teachers in smaller groups—and suggested it might improve the quality of their interactions, and encourage more students to stay in school. One student proposed, *“I think teachers just need to be more understanding... open their minds to what you have to say, instead of just saying, you know [imitating the teacher], ‘This is how you do this. You do it, you do it, and if you don’t get it—I showed you how to do it—weren’t you paying attention?’ You know...I think it should be less kids to a classroom because when there’s a lot of kids in a classroom, the teacher—you know its only human to stress out—and you can’t teach every kid one at a time.”* Even if teachers cannot teach “one kid at a time,” having fewer students per teacher might provide more chances for teachers to incorporate individual students’ needs into the class process (Valenzuela, 1999). Another student reiterated the sentiment that large classes and large schools are not conducive to the kind of supportive student-teacher relationships that help kids stay in school. Specifically, the student reasoned, *“If it was the situation [that kids required support from teachers to stay in school], there’s not a lot the high school could do about it. Because my high school... is huge, and really, the teachers—if you start to fall behind in the class—there’s so many people that the teachers teach every day, they can’t single out one person, and that’s the same at almost all public high schools.”*

The students may be right—when teachers continuously have large groups of students to teach all day, there may be few opportunities for them to have the sort of supportive interactions with students that are conducive to student engagement and learning. If there were fewer students per teacher, teachers might have more opportunities to notice if students are falling behind, and engage in positive interactions with their students, which support student engagement and motivation (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Some charter schools—and the Gates Foundation’s support of small high schools—aim to develop stronger, supportive relationships by reducing the teacher-to-student ratio and integrating structures to increase students’ access to the same teachers throughout their time in high school. The key to this issue, though, lies not in the exact number of students per teacher or class size, but in the types of relationships that may be fostered when there are fewer students per teacher, and classes and schools are smaller (Conchas, 2006; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Recent attempts to reduce class size have not been effective in raising achievement; the student-teacher relationships are key. A teacher who has trouble connecting to challenging students and/or is unable to relate class work

to students' lives and futures—in part because of the required curriculum—is not going to reduce dropout rates.

Supportive Interactions and Constructive Intervention

While many adolescents may feel misunderstood by adults, the gulf that separated students and teachers disenfranchised many students from their futures (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002). Students wanted teachers to understand them—their challenges and their aspirations—and to support them as they negotiated their lives in high school. Students appreciated the teachers who were able to empathize with them. Stories abound of students who could have been helped by relatively small efforts. One student recounted his brother, “...*he said he would have never dropped out if he would of have seen improvements in his grades, but like he would try and try and try, but he just kept getting fails...He would get good grades in his class work but then when it would come up to test, he'd get nervous and would start failing... He said he would have appreciated...a teacher that was a little more supportive that would help him out.*” Many appeared eager for help with test-taking skills or unobtrusively offered tutoring in underlying principles.

Again and again, the students reported feeling misunderstood by teachers and ascribed it to a myriad number of reasons ranging from teachers' not having the time to listen, to simply not caring; from not liking their students, to charges of racism. Similar reports have been found in other, larger studies, particularly for students of color (Ingels, Burns, Chen, Cataldi, & Charleston, 2005). The problems appeared to be those of omission (not caring) as much as commission (being hostile), yet the resulting frustration on both sides led to animosity that was powerful fuel for future negative interactions. Unfortunately, for many students who felt misunderstood by teachers, the leap to feeling misunderstood by school entirely was not a large one. The very structure of high schools seems to create and sustain this disenfranchisement of some groups of students from school (Lee & Burkham, 2003; Oakes, 2006).

Students repeatedly suggested the positive impact of having a caring adult intervene when they were struggling. And, as put forth by Conchas (2006) and Valenzuela (1999), developing a culture of caring within schools, so that teachers have relationships with students and know when they are having trouble, facilitates the type of support that is needed. It is too late to attempt to establish relationships with students once their problems are manifesting in failing grades or frequent absences—the reasons most often cited for leaving school by California dropouts (Rotermund, 2007). The most important aspects of adult involvement include listening and attempting to understand the situation before providing instrumental help within the context of the student's circumstances. As one student said, “*If someone—someone would take the time when they saw them [failing students] losing interest in school and their grades going down—someone could talk to them and see why, and talk about why that's happening—maybe it could help them.*” The lack of availability of caring adults was reiterated across schools. And, as one student pointed out, increasing the number of teachers was a good place to start; “...*maybe having more teachers checking on what's happening on campus, maybe checking on what they [students] are doing. Or have more teachers around.*”

In some cases, the intervention may be less academic than emotional, and the adult students need may be a school counselor. Some students had enormous family responsibilities and very little

support when things went awry. Many students would benefit from having, *“Someone talk to them and tell them that it’s actually worth staying in school. ‘Cause some people think like there’s no other way they can get out of it—like whatever’s going wrong like in their life, or in their school life—like they think that if they drop out of school, like it’s the only answer. But, it isn’t.”* When a teacher knows a student’s strengths and capabilities, that teacher is better able to provide needed confidence and motivation when the student’s beliefs are faltering and extra support is needed.

More School Resources

Students recognized that, in part, their challenges in school were attributable to their schools being short on resources. They acknowledged that better funding for schools could improve their experiences in a multitude of ways, including their interactions with teachers. One student suggested, *“I really think one of the huge things that would help kids want to stay in school more is giving the schools more money, because then the teachers get more money, and then the teachers are happy and nicer.”* Students accredited “nicer”—more supportive—teachers to keeping more students in school. Another suggested having more teachers to broaden the number of electives taught. Similarly, funding for additional counselors might improve their accessibility to students and enhance the academic guidance provided.

Hiring more—and more effective—security personnel would benefit student safety and improve students’ ability to focus on learning in their classes and in-between classes playing sports and doing other activities. With more staff on campus, and more adults addressing student security concerns, hanging out with a group of friends—loitering—at lunch, might not need to be against the school rules. Students could be treated like students instead of, as recounted, being eyed suspiciously as potential threats to school safety.

More funding could also be used for school supplies and facilities that would directly benefit students. Having a campus that students can be proud of—instead of being “kinda ghetto”—is more likely to command their mutual interest and investment. As one student stated, *“...schools do not have enough money, so they have to cut back on the supplies we get. The students are always short-handed...we get like older textbooks and like old computers that are slow that don’t really work that well. So if they would give more money to education, people might be more interested to get better technology and supplies, and we could do more interesting things.”* Up-to-date textbooks supplied to all might help convey to students their importance and the high priority that their learning holds. Good technology and “interesting things” intrigue students—they wanted to access to a more engaging experience than staying at home, as was noted earlier; staying at home was considered “boring,” particularly since schools hold one of the most powerful incentives—friends. Additional resources for adequate textbooks, computers, and supplies may also help to keep students’ friends at school, too.

Different Approaches to Class Work and Exams

Many students wanted to do different types of assignments during classes and have less homework afterwards. They wanted to be more involved in their learning, and have more interactive lessons—particularly for longer classes in “block” scheduling. Related to their charge of classes being “uninteresting,” many admitted they just did not understand how the coursework was relevant to their daily lives or their futures. Students suggested that more effort could be

made to incorporate this aspect of their learning into their assignments, as a way of engaging them.

Career academies may be the ultimate embodiment of this approach to engaging students while maintaining academic vigor (Stern, Raby, & Dayton, 1992). The demanding curriculum—aimed at providing all students, regardless of their academic history, with competitive, viable career options following graduation—makes them a unique alternative. The current effort to ensure all students’ access to college preparatory coursework has left some students without “interesting” or future-relevant classes. Some were relegated to proposing that schools, “*Take out... the classes that we don’t need for the future....*” Offering alternative paths may serve students in several ways. It offers students choices, which can empower them to take a more active role in structuring or focusing their education. Career Academies may also lay the groundwork for students’ job prospects after graduation, or in the future.

The Career Academy provides specific education and training relevant to students’ plans following high school graduation (Stern, Raby, & Dayton, 1992). Even without such a direct benefit, alternative elective courses may provide significant gains to students. Given the reported lack of interest in many classes, students need something—potentially even one class—that interests them, and possibly captivates them. Students said that it sometimes was just one interesting class that motivated them to come to school *every* day.

Courses that interest students also offer them the opportunity to have positive interactions with teachers, and to be mentored in a positive school environment. As students reminded us, it often took just one caring adult who believed in them to shift their motivation to complete high school. This resonates with the findings of Conchas (2006) and Valenzuela (1999), who propose that for many students—particularly Latinos—building on their cultures and values by developing caring relationships of respect and responsibility within which the teachers teach is the most effective means to educate students. This approach uses the caring relationship between the student and teacher as the point of departure, incorporating and building from the context in which the students are living and learning.

The pinnacle of school requirements that seemed least understood and was judged least relevant by students was the exit exam. In fact, it may be related to the seemingly “uninteresting” and “irrelevant” classes, as teachers focus on exam-related materials in the push to get students prepared (Roderick, Jacob, & Bryk, 2002). Short of knowing that they needed to pass it to graduate, most did not understand why the CAHSEE was suddenly required, and how it corresponded to the former graduation requirements based on units taken and grades. Misconceptions and misinformation were abundant, and some students resented what they viewed as another obstacle to graduation implemented with little consideration of its impact on them. The CAHSEE—both its purpose and relevance to their futures—needs to be clarified for students, so they understand how it fits with their coursework, and with their preparation for life after high school.

In respect to students’ family responsibilities, which for some makes completing homework difficult, several ideas were proposed. First, the purpose and relevance of homework could be made more explicit to students. Second, teachers could ensure that homework is thoughtful and

actively advances students' learning. Finally, with fewer students in the class, teachers may be more attuned to unusual family situations or circumstances that require creative problem-solving to support students' continued learning and motivation to graduate (Flores-Gonzales, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999).

In talking with students about their family responsibilities, the role of the family as both a reason to complete high school and a reason to drop out became clear. For some students, family provided equally compelling motivation for each outcome. While schools cannot provide the sort of financial support that some families may require to allow their children to finish high school, school staff would immensely benefit from gaining a deep understanding of the challenges their students face. California high school students cite "getting a job" as one of the most common reasons to leave school (Rotermund, 2007). In part, it appears that some teachers may not be familiar—let alone, trained to work—with the students they are attempting to teach. While students can help to educate receptive teachers, teacher preparation needs to include training about how best to make instruction relevant and meaningful to students' lives (Valenzuela, 1999). In addition, involving parents more directly in their children's school experience may provide an ongoing opportunity for both home and school expectations to be articulated.

More Encouragement about Long-Term Benefits of School

Students were thinking about their futures, contemplating options, and eager to hear the stories of other young people like them. Several suggested that talking with former students from their high schools, who had made different choices—both good and bad—would help students to put the future in perspective. Moreover, it could provide actual role models and tangible information about choices and the possible course of training and/education needed to meet a particular goal.

Discussion of the future is active in students' minds and in school lore; making it explicit could lay the groundwork for candid conversations among students, and between students and teachers, facilitating support and the transfer of social capital that many students need. Repeatedly, they told stories of friends or relatives who had worked hard, graduated, and done well for themselves. Just as frequently mentioned were warning tales of friends or relatives who had made so-called "bad" choices, and ended up regretting their mistakes. One student, in fact, suggested that this discussion ought to include "*an actual inmate*" to provide insight into where gang involvement or drug activity could take you. Incarceration was one of the futures that some students weighed; they needed to understand the costs of that, the value of the alternatives, and gain some skills for navigating between them.

Research indicates that young adolescents are still developing their judgment of the consequences of their behaviors, and the ability to act accordingly (Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996). Students understood this intuitively and suggested that their peers would benefit from hearing more about the long-term pay-offs of staying in school. As one said, students need to hear that "*... if you want anything, you can get it... And pretty much school can help you get a lot of things, so if you just think about everything you want, and you just think that once you graduate—it's not like you can't go to college, 'cause ... there's scholarships and everything. If you really want something, if you want like something nice when you're older—like your future—you just got to stay in school.*"

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Appendix 1: Table 1. Participating School Characteristics⁵

	School 1	School 2 ⁶	School 3	School 4	School 5
Enrollment (2006-2007)	4,320	262	627	2,624	1,677
Geographic Location	Southern California	Northern California	Central Valley	Central Valley	Northern California
Community Characteristics	Suburban	Urban	Rural	Suburban	Urban
Percentage Students on Free or Reduced Price Lunch	82	23	100	54	71
Percentage Mobility ⁷	92	90	96	89	91
Percentage White	2.9	32.4	3.8	8.8	1.7
Percentage African-American	1.5	7.3	0.8	10.6	11.5
Percentage Latino	89.5	50.8	95.2	61.1	73.4
Percentage Asian	2	7.6	0.2	11.1	7.9
Percentage English Learners	36	1	52	15	57
Percentage Emergency Credentialed Teachers	5	0	7	5	5
Percentage Fully Credentialed Teachers	88	71	76	89	86
API Score	602	NA	609	563	385
Percentage Graduates Filling UC/CSU A-G Requirements	53.9	NA	14	0	6.7
Percentage Not Passing CAHSEE English Language Arts in 10 th Grade	36	NA	33	40	45
Percentage Not Passing CAHSEE Math in 10 th Grade	40	NA	28	45	49
Percentage 9 th Grade Dropout	1.1	0	0	4.2	0.5
Percentage 4-Year School Dropout Rate (NCES)	9.1	NA	5.4	18.2	2.6
Percentage 4-Year District Dropout Rate (NCES)	25.5	0	12.9	11.7	10.8
Percentage Students w/Parents Who Did Not Graduate High School	47	22	59	35	49
Percentage Students w/Parents Who Graduated High School (Only)	28	6	27	35	37

Data source: <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

⁵ All statistics are for the 2005-2006 school year, unless otherwise noted.

⁶ This school was new and had limited historical data.

⁷ Mobility refers to the percentage of students enrolled at the beginning of the school year who were present to take the STAR tests in spring for 2005-06.