# High School Disconnection:
## Insights from the Inside

*A research report exploring high school disengagement through the voices of school administrators and staff, intermediary organization leaders, and youth.*

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# Introduction



**The process of school disengagement and disconnection can end in a student's decision to drop out of school and often leads to subsequent complications in life. School disconnection impacts both youth and society in a variety of profound ways.**

High school dropouts earn substantially less annually and over their lifetimes than high school and college graduates. Many jobs depend on employees who exhibit professionalism and are prepared to complete complex assignments and meet current technological demands.[1] Youth who drop out of high school often lack the academic and social skills necessary to become and remain connected to sustainable employment; they are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, to rely on government assistance and health care, and to be victims or perpetrators of crimes.[2]

Youth ages 16 to 24 who are not working nor in school are often referred to as disconnected youth.[3] Because of their potential, they are also considered Opportunity Youth.[4]

Poverty and low educational attainment are risk factors associated with Opportunity Youth; many Opportunity Youth were disengaged in school, dropped out of high school, and are unable to find employment.[5]

High school graduation rates are at an all time high nationally.[6] In the United States, the dropout rate was 7.9 percent in 2013, down from 10.9 percent in 2010 and 14.6 percent in 1970.[7] The number of "dropout factories" (high schools reporting a cohort graduation rate of 60 percent or less) declined from 1,634 in 2009 to 1,550 in 2010, the largest decline since 2008.[8] Yet dropout patterns among the most at-risk populations remain unacceptably low; 32 percent of minority students attend a "dropout factory."[9]

The persistently high rates of dropouts and student disengagement in many urban public high schools suggest the need for research to understand the causes of disconnection and the tactics or strategies employed in schools to prevent disconnection. This paper provides insight into youth disconnection from the perspectives of high school administrators and staff, education intermediary professionals, and, most importantly, young people themselves.

**FAST FACTS**

- In the United States, over 8,000 high school students drop out each day.
- 75 percent of US crimes are committed by high school dropouts.
- One in six high school students attend a "dropout factory." One in three minority students (32 percent) attend a "dropout factory", compared to eight percent of white students.

*Source: Education Week*

## Background

**In the United States, approximately 6.7 million young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are considered Opportunity Youth.**[10] In the New Orleans metro area, approximately 14,000 low income youth are not in school and not employed and are considered Opportunity Youth.[11]

Opportunity Youth typically experience higher poverty rates and unemployment rates as adults than their connected counterparts. The average annual earnings of high school dropouts are $18,900 compared to $25,900 for high school graduates and $45,000 for college graduates. College graduates, on average, earn more than twice the lifetime earnings of a high school dropout, $2.1 million for a college graduate and $1.0 million for a high school dropout.[12]

Additionally, the impact of disconnection extends beyond the youth themselves. Both society and taxpayers suffer when the potential of youth is not realized. In the United States in 2011, Opportunity Youth cost taxpayers approximately $93 billion in lost tax revenues from a lack of productive workers and an increase in social services. In the New Orleans metro area, the costs measured approximately $195 million in 2011.[13]

## Student disconnection in high school

**Poverty and low educational attainment are risk factors associated with Opportunity Youth; many Opportunity Youth were disengaged in school, dropped out of high school, and are unable to find employment.**

A student's decision to drop out of school is not the result of a single life event; often, warning signs begin to manifest as early as elementary school. Disengagement from school is a gradual process that can start as early as kindergarten.[14] Prior research shows that the disengagement process occurs in phases. The withdrawal phase can begin in kindergarten through fourth grade as students begin to feel detached from school and lack a sense of belonging. Withdrawal is followed by disengagement or a lack of participation that intensifies through seventh grade. Disengagement culminates with dropping out by as early as the tenth grade.[15] Although disengagement begins well before high school, the dropout issue is most often associated with high schools.

The National Dropout Prevention Center has identified risk factors associated with dropping out of high school. These include:

- Academic performance
- School behavior
- Early adult responsibilities
- School engagement
- Family background or characteristics
- Family engagement or commitment to education
- Social attitudes, values, and behaviors
- Individual background characteristics

> *Louisiana state law requires students to attend school until age 17 but allows a student who is 16 to withdraw from school before graduation with the written consent of his parent or guardian (La. R.S., Sec. 17-221).*

Themes describing the risk factors or influences impacting students have been identified in prior research on dropouts, truancy, and disconnection.[16] Looking at characteristics by theme helps to identify patterns in the factors most often associated with disconnection. These themes include individual characteristics and risk factors, family, community and contextual factors, and school factors. In this paper, the four themes have been collapsed and are organized in the following three domains:

- **Youth-Centered** (Individual Characteristics and Risk Factors) because the causes are directly linked to the youth themselves.
- **External Influences** (Family and Community/Contextual) because the causes are representative of the external environment and the context of the youth. Trauma and mental health issues, though linked directly to youth, are included in this domain.
- **School-Centered** (School) because the causes are things that schools control, influence or are responsible for providing to youth.

Factors from the domains above interact in various ways and often magnify the impact of each other.

Successful high school student engagement strategies involve a diverse set of stakeholders. High schools can impact student engagement by providing all students with rigorous and relevant educational experiences. By developing an early warning indicator to detect signs of disconnection, high schools can monitor data points, such as attendance, behavior, and academic progress and provide on-time intervention and support to students at risk of disconnection. In addition to formal data analysis, building trusting, supportive relationships between youth and school staff can be an effective means to prevent or mitigate disconnection.

While schools play a major role in preventing student disconnection, partnerships with community-based organizations are essential for addressing the multifaceted needs of youth. Support organizations and social service agencies work with schools or independently to help youth overcome many of the obstacles impeding their success. These organizations provide youth with assistance to deal with many of the social, economic, legal, emotional, and psychological challenges they face. Although these challenges are often interrelated, the support organizations do not often coordinate their efforts. Better systems of coordination, data collection and sharing, and communication could enhance their ability to serve the diverse needs of youth.

Ultimately youth are responsible for their success. Youth want to succeed.[17] With the help of supportive families and friends, effective schools that offer rigorous and challenging curriculum and academic assistance when needed, and effective support organizations that work together to provide comprehensive interventions, youth will reach their full potential.

## The public education landscape in New Orleans

Hurricane Katrina had a lasting impact on the education landscape in New Orleans. The majority of public schools were placed under the governance of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) and overseen by the Recovery School District (RSD). The local Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) retained only a handful of the relatively high performing schools in the state. This complicated, bifurcated governance system remains in place today.

Following the storm, both OPSB and RSD opened schools as charter schools at a rate unprecedented in the United States. Based on October 2013 enrollment data, 91 percent of public school students enrolled in charter schools.

In addition, New Orleans implemented an open enrollment public school policy. School choice allows families to choose from any public school in the city no matter where they live. New Orleans became one of the first cities to adopt a public school system with traditional, direct-run schools and public charters schools, and is known as a portfolio school district.

Charter schools and open enrollment policies have a direct impact on families and students. Using OneApp, a centralized enrollment process launched in 2012, parents and students apply to public schools by ranking up to eight schools in order of preference. Students are assigned to their school using an algorithm that places priority on sibling matches and geographic proximity placements.

Studies of school choice in New Orleans show that the application process continues to present challenges for parents. Many families are still limited in their access to information about the process. The spread of misinformation about OneApp and parental knowledge of the diverse school offerings impedes the system's ability to match students to their "best fit" school.[18]

High school students have many schools from which to choose. In spring 2013, there were 31 public high school programs serving students in New Orleans. Nine of these were governed by OPSB as direct-run or charter schools. The OPSB high schools are relatively large schools, enroll the majority of public high school students, and report higher achievement levels and school performance scores than those under RSD oversight or direct control. Many of the relatively high performing high schools have selective admissions policies in which students are required to meet academic or other skill-based standards in order to enroll.

RSD never intended to directly run schools and, since Katrina, has been in the process of closing its direct-run schools and opening schools as charter schools. The three remaining RSD direct-run high schools that were open in 2012-13 are in the process of phasing out and will be closed in the 2014-15 school year. In spring 2013, RSD provided oversight to 17 charter schools that serve high school students. Many of these schools opened their doors, one grade at a time, following Katrina.

A few charter operators have recently taken over existing, failing high schools, retaining all students and all grades. RSD also oversees alternative or accelerated high schools that specifically serve the most at-risk youth: students who are over-aged for grade level or students who have dropped

out and have returned to the public school system. In addition, in spring 2013, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education provided oversight to two charter high schools located in New Orleans, which serves students from across the state.

Because of the bifurcated governance model, there is no single central office monitoring student mobility or tracking student dropouts. There is anecdotal evidence that some schools push out or counsel out students who are most at-risk.

Push-outs are students who leave school because they are counseled out for a variety of reasons, including poor performance and behavior. Push-outs are also students who are expelled from school and do not return. Research has found that disciplinary action disproportionately targets students of color and poor students in Louisiana.[19] Further research has shown that targeted groups do not engage in higher levels of disruptive behavior. Instead, they are more likely to be punished for subjective offenses, including "disrespect," "excessive noise," and "loitering," while data show that white students tend to be punished for infractions, such as "smoking," "leaving without permission," and "vandalism."[20]

Studies have shown that zero-tolerance discipline environments can reinforce and lead to future misbehavior,[21] and firmly root students along a "school-to-prison pipeline."[22]

Recent efforts within RSD have sought to address inconsistencies among disciplinary practices by centralizing some of this decision making and aligning disciplinary policies among schools. RSD created an expulsion hearing office used by schools under both RSD and OPSB. This mainstream effort is believed to lead to more consistency and equity among schools.

## Public High Schools in New Orleans (2012-13)

### OPSB Direct-run

Eleanor McMain Secondary
McDonogh #35 College Prep
McDonogh #35 Career Academy

### OPSB Charter schools

Ben Franklin High School
Edna Karr High School
Lusher Charter School
Sci High
Warren Easton Senior High

### RSD direct-run

Walter Cohen High School
Sarah T Reed Senior High
L.B. Landry High School
G.W. Carver High School

### RSD Charter Schools

Algiers Technology Academy
Cohen College Prep
Crescent Leadership Academy
Dr. Martin Luther King Charter
GW Carver Collegiate Academy
GW Carver Prep Academy
John McDonogh High School
Joseph Clark Prep High School
KIPP Renaissance
Lake Area New Tech High School
Miller McCoy Academy
O. Perry Walker Senior High School
ReNEW Accelerated High School #1
ReNEW Accelerated High School #2
Sci Academy
Sophie B Wright Learning Academy
The Net Charter High School

### BESE Charter Schools

International High School
New Orleans Military/Maritime Academy

# Research Methodology



This study uses information gathered in interviews with high school administrators and staff, leaders of supporting youth development intermediaries, as well as focus groups with youth, to understand the root causes of youth disconnection and current practices and interventions targeting dropout prevention in New Orleans. Interviews with high school leaders and staff were conducted in July and August 2013, with 12 high schools represented. Leaders of five intermediary organizations were also interviewed during July and August 2013. Three youth focus groups were conducted during August and September 2013. The focus groups included a total of 22 youth at various levels of connection and disconnection. Detailed methodology is located in Appendix I.

## School Leader and Staff Interviews

The Cowen Institute conducted interviews with 12 high school leaders during July and August 2013. The 12 high schools represent the variety of public high schools in New Orleans. Of the 12 schools represented, three are charter schools governed by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) and nine are charter schools under the Recovery School District (RSD). Of the 12 schools, seven are associated with a Charter Management Organization (CMO) or network. Among the schools, there was a range of performance levels represented, as measured by the 2013 School Performance Score (Table 1).

The Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) calculates a School Performance Score (SPS) for each school. For high schools, beginning in 2013, half of the SPS is based on test performance (25 percent on ACT and 25 percent of End-of-Course exams) and half of the SPS is based on graduation (25 percent on the graduation index and 25

| Table 1: Public High Schools by SPS 2013 | | |
|---|---|---|
| Grade | Sample | Orleans Parish |
| A | 1 | 2 |
| B | 1 | 7 |
| C | 2 | 4 |
| D | 3 | 8 |
| F | 2 | 4 |
| T (in Transition) | 1 | 3 |
| No Grade | 2 | 3 |

| Table 2: Sample School Demographics, Student Attendance and Discipline Data | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Free/Reduced Priced Lunch Eligible | 2011-12 Student Attendance | 2011-12 Student Suspensions | 2011-12 Student Expulsions |
| A school | 31% | 97.0% | <5% | 0.0% |
| B school | 72% | 96.0% | 10.7% | 0.0% |
| C1 school | 73% | 91.0% | 31.1% | <1% |
| C2 school | 88% | 91.0% | 33.6% | 2.5% |
| D1 school | 93% | 89.0% | 26.5% | 0.0% |
| D2 school | 86% | 97.0% | <5% | 0.0% |
| D3 school | 98% | 98% | 52.5% | 1.9% |
| F1 alt school | 92% | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| F2 alt school | 93% | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| T school | 92% | 87.0% | 43.2% | 0.0% |
| N/A1 school | 91% | opened 2012-13 | opened 2012-13 | opened 2012-13 |
| N/A2 school | 99% | opened 2012-13 | opened 2012-13 | opened 2012-13 |

*Source: New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools: Spring 2013 Edition*

percent on the four-year cohort graduation rate). In addition, schools can earn extra points when non-proficient students exceed expected gains. The letter grade is based on the SPS.

Letter grades range from A to F, and schools receiving an F are considered failing. Schools that are led by charter operators who took over the governance of failing schools and agreed to maintain all previous grade levels and former students earn a T (transition) for two years. Schools that do not have sufficient data to calculate an SPS do not receive a letter grade and are indicated by N/A.

Of the 12 schools in this study, nine received a letter grade; two of these are alternative schools that specifically serve students with a history of or high propensity for disconnection. One school in the study is a transition school and received a T. Two schools did not have the data necessary to calculate their SPS and received N/A in 2013.

In addition to SPS, it is helpful to understand the population of students each participating school serves. The percentage of students that qualified for free or reduced price lunch can be found in Table 2. Table 2 also includes the 2011-12 student average daily attendance rates, as well as the suspension and expulsion rates for each of the participating schools where available.

Cohort graduation rates and cohort dropout rates are available for only four schools, those that have graduated a cohort class. The A and B schools both reported a 2011 cohort graduation rates of greater than 95 percent and

dropout rates less than 5 percent. The C1 school had a cohort graduation rate of 82.6 percent and dropout rate of 10.5 percent in 2011. The C2 school reported a cohort graduation rate of 87.8 percent and dropout rate of 5.6 percent in 2011.

## Intermediary Interviews

Five community organizations (intermediaries) were selected and included in the analysis. The intermediaries in our sample represented a variety of organizations that serve diverse stakeholder groups. These intermediary organizations were selected based on the close working relationships they have with schools, community-based organizations, and youth. Two organizations were selected because of their supportive relationships with schools and school staff. Three were selected because they interact directly with community based organizations and youth and have unique insights into the complex issues that Opportunity Youth face.

The sample included an organization that recruits and supports teachers through continuous professional development; an organization focused on the development of high quality charter schools; an organization focused on juvenile justice; an organization that builds capacity for programs focused on out-of-school time (OST) for children and youth, as well as disconnected youth; and an organization that focuses on transitional housing for youth. The majority of interviews were conducted with executive directors of the organizations. Support staff were also interviewed in some cases.

## Intermediary Organization

**School-supporting Intermediary A:**

- Focuses on the development of high-quality charter schools

**School-supporting Intermediary B:**

- Recruits and develops teachers.

**Community-supporting Intermediary A:**

- Supports community-based programs that focus on out of school time and the disconnected youth population.

**Community-supporting Intermediary B:**

- Focuses on housing and homelessness for youth.

**Community-supporting Intermediary C:**

- Focuses on juvenile justice issues and policies.

## Youth Focus Groups

Three focus groups with youth were conducted from August through September 2013 and included a total of 22 youth. The host sites included two schools and one youth-serving organization. These were strategically selected to include a group of relatively connected youth, re-connected youth, and currently disconnected youth. The participants in each group were identified by their respective school or organization.

The focus group participants had a wide range of characteristics. The average age of the focus group participants was 19 with ages ranging from 17 to 21 years old. Of the participants, 13 were enrolled in a high school program, two were enrolled in college, and seven reported no connection to school. Of the participants, 16 were African American, five were white, and one was Hispanic. The focus groups were made up of 10 boys and 12 girls. Based on those reporting a residential neighborhood, Gentilly, Mid-City, Uptown, and 3rd, 7th, and 9th Wards were represented.

Although the participating youth are broadly representative of New Orleans' youth population, their experiences may not be descriptive of all youth in New Orleans. Nonetheless, this report offers a rare opportunity to hear the voices of many youth in New Orleans.

The majority of this report consists of actual quotes from high school principals and staff, leaders from intermediaries, and youth. Participants spoke about matters central to high school disconnection, reconnection, and how youth stay connected.

## Focus Group Host Organizations

**Focus Group A: Connected**

- A magnet school before Katrina, reopened as a charter school in 2006-07
- Received a letter grade of A in 2012
- Reported a 100% graduation rate in 2012
- Reported a 100% college acceptance rate in 2012

**Focus Group B: Reconnecting**

- A new charter school, opened in 2011-12
- Received a letter grade of F in 2012
- Targets under-credited, over-aged students

**Focus Group C: Disconnected**

- Youth-serving organization which opened its doors in 1984
- Provides youth with transitional housing, crisis counseling, and support

# Results



## School Leaders' Perspectives

**We spoke with school leaders from 12 public high schools in order to understand their perceptions of the causes of youth disconnection, their personal and school-level philosophies of youth connection, and the strategies and tactics used at their schools to engage or re-engage students.**

The majority of interviews were conducted with principals or assistant principals, however we also spoke with student support staff, such as social workers, to get a more complete and varied understanding.

## School Leaders: Causes of Disconnection

Understanding school leaders' perceptions of the causes of disconnection is critically important and sheds light on their school's approach to addressing youth disconnection. During the interviews, the school leaders talked at length about the situations and circumstances that they believe lead to student disconnection.

Among the varied responses, there were many similarities and yet some striking differences. On average, school leaders cited four general causes of disconnection.

From the many causes cited by school leaders, we categorized each into one of three domains: youth-centered, school-centered, and external influences.

## Youth-centered (Individual characteristics and risk factors)

Causes of disconnection falling within this domain include academic and behavioral traits, such as poor academic performance, low test scores or grades, course completion, truancy or disciplinary issues, and personality characteristics. We refer to these as youth-centered because they are directly linked to the youth themselves. Of the three categories, causes within the youth-centered domain were cited by eleven of the 12 school leaders interviewed. Based on the frequency of responses, youth-centered causes made up more than half of all causes cited by school leaders.

Academic deficits or a history of academic failure was mentioned most often as a cause of disconnection from school. It was cited specifically by ten of the 12 school leaders interviewed; they alluded to poor academics as a contributing factor. School leaders often felt academic deficits were an issue for students before they enrolled in high school. Students entered ninth grade academically ill-prepared for rigorous high school courses. Likewise, school leaders cited students' history of failure and inability to cope when faced with a challenging situation.

*Students get disengaged when they don't have the initial baseline knowledge coming in [...] so for example, we found with our freshmen, they'd come in lacking basic algebra skills, [English language arts] skills, writing skills, so we double up on those.*

*We serve students who are academically behind – two or more years behind grade level. Many have failed the state assessment multiple times and are two or more years over-aged for grade level.*

*Students become disengaged when they are exposed to a rigorous education. They are more comfortable with not trying than with trying and failing.*

*I think that any time they feel that they're not feeling enough success, specifically if they feel they are failing a class or if they get information about credit gaps. I feel like the normal student tendency is to retract when they feel like they might not succeed, because they haven't necessarily learned the problem-solving skills to navigate through that challenge.*



Discipline or behavioral issues were identified as contributing factors leading to student disconnection and were cited specifically by seven of 12 school leaders.

*Students come to us already disconnected [...] from other schools. They bring extreme behavior challenges. They get in trouble and end up here.*

*We have a merit-demerit system. That can be revealing. [...] We look at behavioral data. So I feel you can get a good pulse on that with a kid, that would usually lead you to know who they are.*

*The disengagement started with how students were dressed. And if I can come to school in any way, then I can go to your class in any way, and I can do whatever I want because no one is going to hold me accountable.*

*If they do come to school, they choose to serve in-school suspension. We had students taking off parts of their uniform so they would be out of compliance so they would be sent of out class – intentionally.*

Shock of the transition into the high school environment was cited as a cause of disconnection. Five of the 12 school leaders specifically mentioned the changes in the environment from middle school to a more rigorous and often regulated high school environment. This included the students' adverse reactions to the rules and high expectations of high school, as well as the students' discomfort with adult pressure and attention.

*The high expectations of high school sometimes shock them, especially when they come from a less structured middle school environment.*

*If a student is accustomed to a situation where he's the lead in the house/family and has been at a school that didn't previously connect, he was on his own. So to go from that type of freelance education to an environment where – we do contact your parents, we do expect you to come to school ready to learn [...] that is like CLASH [...] 'why are you doing this? This is not how I've been to school before.'*

Truancy or chronic absenteeism (missing 10 percent or more days of school) was cited as a cause of disconnection. Six of the 12 school leaders specifically identified poor attendance as a key indicator.

*Uh, simply, they don't show up for school. I think that's a very huge piece of it. I generally found the kids we get to school consistently have a much bigger chance of remaining engaged or getting to a cliff and us getting them back.*

*Absenteeism is a huge issue. Sometimes because they choose not to be in school, but sometimes they can't because of their circumstances. Many have babies, jobs, or are homeless. But their absenteeism leads to disengagement.*

Lack of coping skills or other soft skills was cited as a cause of disconnection by four of the 12 school leaders. Many students come to high school lacking the ability to interact effectively with their classmates and the adults in the building. They have not developed adequate coping mechanisms. Additionally, students' inabilities to deal with stress and frustrations can lead to disengagement from school.

*'I'm probably not going to pass, probably not going to graduate, probably not going to live,' and so it becomes a matter of [...] 'do I come to school?'*

*Every kid wakes up and says, 'I want to succeed.' No one wakes up and says, 'I'm going to screw up in school.' So if a student decides to make a poor choice at school, it's directly related to how successful they feel. It's their defense mechanism for failure.*

*So many of my high school students are still kids [...] emotionally, cognitively they're still 10, 11, and 12 years old but we think of them as 17 – chronologically only.*

*So when you come to school and don't have soft skills, that means you don't know how to talk to people, don't know how to apologize, don't know how to take feedback. After a while, all you get are consequences for not having those skills [...] it's like [...] 'Why show up? I can't do the work, people fuss at me all the time, why do I keep coming?'*

## External Influences
## (Family and community/contextual)

In our analysis, we combined external influences related to family and community into one domain. These causes are representative of the context of the youth environment, are indirectly associated with the youth, and have a critical impact on student engagement. Causes of disconnection that were cited by school leaders and fall within this domain include family poverty, family conflict, and parental attitude toward and involvement in education. Employment or other opportunities in the community, neighborhood characteristics, the availability of social supports within the community, community norms, peer group influence, and community violence are also included under this domain. We also included trauma and mental health issues in this domain; although linked to youth, trauma and mental health issues are not directly controlled by or under the influence of youth.

Trauma and mental health issues were cited as causes of disconnection by five of the 12 school leaders. School leaders recognized the trauma caused by Katrina-related incidents, as well as violence in the home or neighborhood, and the impact these events have on students. Of school leaders who mentioned trauma or mental health, each had examples of students that had multiple traumatic experiences.

*I had a student two days ago call me, and he was pretty devastated. He said his goal for the year is not to die. He's not the first. So when I have teachers saying that we need to get their goals up, to go to college, I say, 'I've got kids whose goal is not to die.' If school doesn't help them think, 'I am going to live,' then there's really no value in them coming.*

*[Referencing the emotional impact of Hurricane Katrina] When it rains, our kids don't come to school [...] it's like re-traumatizing them again. I know it was seven years ago, but we're treating Vietnam vets for PTSD decades later.*

*We're looking at the at-risk demographics. So, for example, we know a student has lost a parent, a student has special needs.*

*I think another part of disengaged students is just their reality at home. They raise their families or are working a lot of jobs. It's just unbelievable to me how many of our students have very close relatives that have been murdered in front of them and how much that wears on their own life expectancy [...] They don't think they need to plan that far in advance. That is reality.*

*Mental health issues keep kids out of school. They must deal with the trauma they face first, in order to be engaged in school. We need a psychiatrist on staff. Without that, we do our best to understand and show kids we care.*

Five of the 12 school leaders gave specific situations that influence student engagement. These ranged from family issues, neighborhood gang influences, and outside responsibilities such as work or childrearing.

*I believe we have 20 to 30 students that are dealing with anger issues, other challenges that are going on at home that are manifesting in ways that would make you concerned as a teacher [...] Has nothing to do with school, some other things that are going on outside or parents are having a situation or a parent was seriously injured.*

*Kids have other aspects of their life that are engaging outside of school. I think kids are pretty transparent and have the neighborhood situations, gang situations. You see that play out.*

*Kids come to us in the ninth grade, they are already in the system, in the process of incarcerations, on probation. The level of violence they're exposed to or engaged in...*

Lack of parental support was also cited as a cause of student disconnection. Four of the 12 school leaders interviewed gave specific examples of ways that the lack of parental involvement and parental attitudes toward education influence students.

> *It starts in the home, and it's social pressure. You have to re-craft a learning environment where learning is valued.*

> *I think [parental] engagement looks different [...] Pick up your phone when we call and call us back. Just communicate.*

> *Parent engagement? Many of our students don't live 'at home' and have no parents with which to engage.*

## School-centered

Causes of disconnection that fall under the school-centered domain are issues that the school controls, influences, or feels responsible for providing. These include school culture, school environment, curriculum, the quality of instruction, relationships with teachers and other adults in the school, school discipline policies, and school structure.

Many of the school leaders recognized that a lack of relevancy in the curriculum and school culture impacts student engagement. Almost half specifically recognized that their classes often lack relevancy or connection to the students' lives.

> *They ask the classic rhetorical question: 'Why do I have to take this class? What does this have to do with life?' I don't think we do a very good job of making the connection for them in a way that's meaningful.*

> *Students disengage or retract [...] if they feel like this isn't important or don't see how this connects to the big picture [...] It's the high school's responsibility to provide that relevancy and create that bigger picture of why this fits and matters.*

School leaders recognized that high quality instruction is critical to preventing disconnection, especially for students with a history of disengagement. They defined high quality instruction as instruction that is relevant and meets the needs of all students.

> *How I taught in the 90's and late 80's is not applicable to students now. The adult standing in the front of the classroom with a chalk or a dry erase marker with outdated power points is so outdated. .*

Prior research has shown the importance of relationships in student engagement.[23] Lack of authentic relationships or connections to adults were also cited as causes of student disconnection.

> *You need to have an adult making personal connections with students to teach them and, if you don't have that, then you can't really teach the child.*

> *One of my teachers told me so-and-so is not passing his class; he's homeless but he needs to go to summer school. I asked him, 'Did you hear that? He's homeless and he has to go to summer school. He doesn't have anywhere to go so where is he supposed to get $500 to go to summer school?' No understanding.*

School culture was cited by school leaders as a possible cause of student disconnection. They recognized that some schools have developed a culture or climate that draws kids in, while others inadvertently turn many kids away, causing disconnection. School leaders emphasized the role of culture in student engagement.

> *I think they're in the school but they don't understand the history of why this school was established, that buy–in, what we're doing here, why this school was established, what's the meaning behind the colors, the entire knowledge of all that.*

> *If we go back to our original roots of being the high school that creates worldwide, well-known musicians [...] We need to use that to our advantage [...] Finding things about the school's legacy that connects to kids. So many of our kids come here because their grandparents came. Doing a better job connecting with parents and families.*

> *I think one of the things we miss is that we treat kids as a homogeneous group. And these kids are adolescents and want to be seen as individuals. They want to be recognized as unique and different, but we don't allow that.*

> *... Not having clear rules and practices in place for the student. Of course, you need to start with discipline expectations and consequences. If the rules are not clear to the students, there will be a tug of war on what they do.*

Inappropriate school structure was mentioned by school leaders as a cause of disconnection. School structure refers to the structure of the day, scheduling, course sequence, and the availability of remediation or developmental services. School structure also applies to the physical organization of the school. For example, one school leader explained how the physical locations of student support staff hindered accessibility and described changes she made to the locations of staff's offices to ease the flow of students toward the adults they need.

> *A lot of systems are great in theory and on paper, but if I'm a disconnected student who's feeling a huge sense of failure [...] not doing well in Algebra 1 and English 1 and you want me to stay after school to do this too?*

> *Many schools do a bad job with kids because the militant structure disenfranchises kids. These kids either quit, are suspended or expelled, or get pushed out.*

> *Traditional schools work for rich, white kids. Individualization for them happens at home. We must adapt our structure to provide for the needs of the kids we serve, to give them the individualization.*

> *We walk kids to the damn bathrooms. And then we expect them to go to college and fend for themselves in a dorm. [...]  How does that even logically make sense? [...] You don't trust them to go to the bathroom without an escort but you want them to trust you to get them ready for college?*
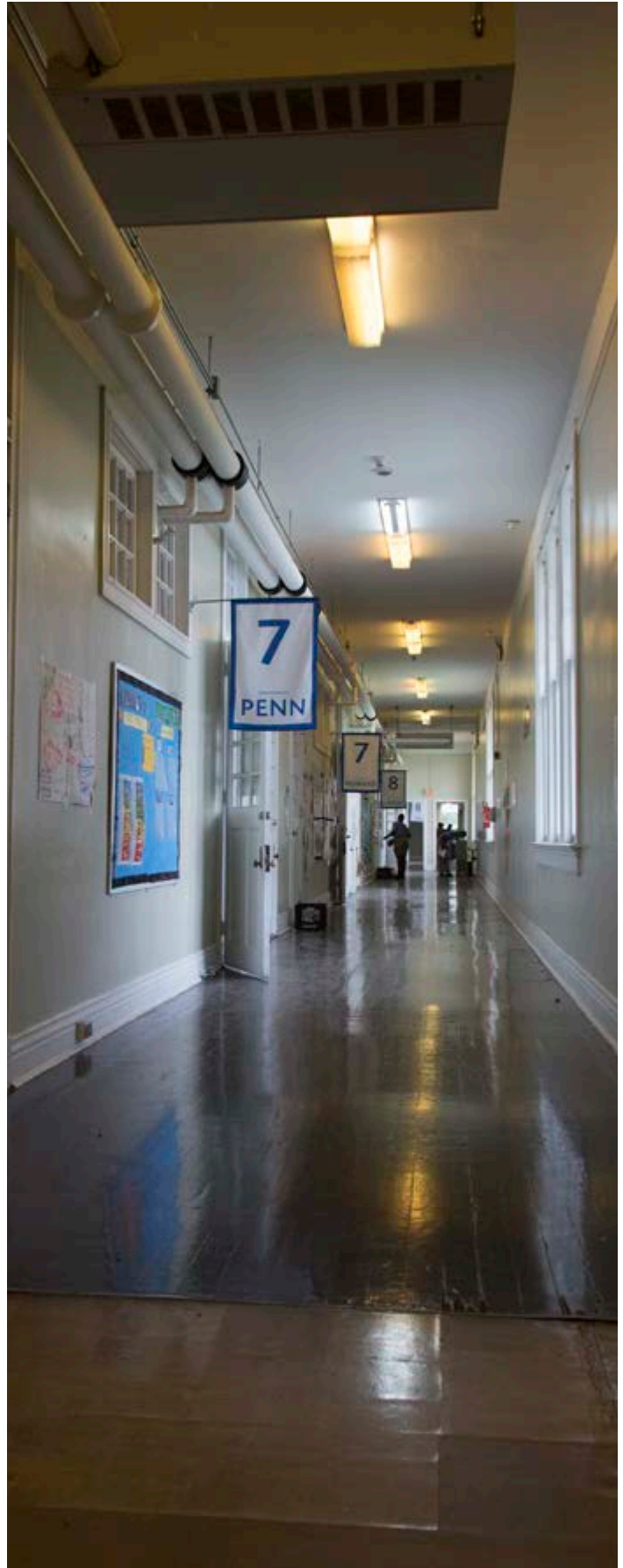
# School Leaders:
# Causes Response Analysis

**From the school leaders' interviews, the causes of disconnection most cited fell under the domain of youth-centered. All but one of the school leaders cited at least one student-centered cause during the interview.**

Causes that fall under the external influences domain were often cited by nine school leaders; all but three gave examples of external influences of disconnection. Five of the 12 school leaders cited causes that fall under the school-centered domain. School-centered causes were cited least often. Table 3 provides frequencies of causes by domain for each school.

Frequencies of responses alone are difficult to interpret. To better understand the differences among schools, we created a measure of "emphasis" by adding the total number of causes cited during each interview and calculating a percentage for each domain (see Appendix C for details). For example, the D1 school cited a total of four causes: two under student-centered, one under external influences, and one under school-centered. This means 50 percent of all causes cited fell under student-centered, 25 percent fell under external influences, and 25 percent fell under school-centered. This shows the extent to which the school leaders cited or emphasized causes within each domain. Table 4 provides the percentages (emphasis) school leaders placed on causes within each domain.

Based on the response analysis, we identified and highlighted percentages where the school leaders' emphasis was greater than the total schools percentages (see Table 4).

In the student-centered domain, disconnection is associated with factors that are directly linked to youth: academic performance, attendance, behavior and discipline, and the ability to cope and adjust to high school.

Causes within the student-centered domain were emphasized by schools that serve a diverse population of students with varied needs. School leaders from the B and C1 schools, as well as the new T and N/A1 schools and both F1 and F2 alternative schools cited school-centered causes more than the average of the group. The school leaders from the B, C1, and N/A1 schools exclusively placed emphasis on student-centered causes; these schools have a strong student-centered view of the causes of disconnection.

## Domains and Reponses

**Youth-Centered:**
- Academic deficits
- Discipline/behavioral issues
- Absenteeism
- Lack of coping skills
- Culture shock

**External Influences:**
- Lack of parental involvement
- External circumstances
- Trauma and mental health issues

**School-Centered:**
- Lack of relevancy
- No adult connection
- Inappropriate structure

### Table 3: School Leader Causes: Frequencies by Schools

|  | Student-centered | External influences | School-centered |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Graded Schools** | | | |
| A school | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| B school | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| C1 school | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| C2 school | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| D1 school | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| D2 school | 2 | 4 | 0 |
| D3 school | 3 | 2 | 0 |
| **New Schools** | | | |
| T school | 5 | 0 | 2 |
| N/A1 school | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| N/A2 school | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| **Alternative** | | | |
| F1 alt school | 5 | 1 | 1 |
| F2 alt school | 3 | 0 | 1 |

## Emphasis

*Emphasis* is defined by the percentage of responses cited during an interview. For example, a school cited a total of four causes of which two were considered to be in the school-centered domain. The school leader placed 50% *emphasis* on school-centered causes. (2 of the 4 causes cited).

| Table 4: School Leaders Causes - Emphasis | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Student-centered | External influence | School-centered |
| **Graded Schools** | | | |
| A school | 67% | 33% | 0% |
| B school | 100% | 0% | 0% |
| C1 school | 100% | 0% | 0% |
| C2 school | 0% | 0% | 100% |
| D1 school | 50% | 25% | 25% |
| D2 school | 33% | 67% | 0% |
| D3 school | 60% | 40% | 0% |
| **New Schools** | | | |
| T school | 71% | 0% | 29% |
| N/A1 school | 100% | 0% | 0% |
| N/A2 school | 67% | 33% | 0% |
| **Alternative** | | | |
| F1 alt school | 71% | 14% | 14% |
| F2 alt school | 75% | 0% | 25% |
| **All Schools** | **69%** | **15%** | **17%** |

*Shaded Emphasis indicates that the interviewee cited causes within the domain relatively more often than the average

** Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

## Indicators of Student Disconnection

In 2005, the Consortium on Chicago School Reform released research identifying critical indicators of student success. These "on-track" indicators are used to predict high school graduation.*

The school leaders in our interview sample acknowledged the use of data to identify students who could be on the verge of disconnection. These early warning indicators, often referred to as the ABCs, include:

**A**ttendance: All school leaders in our interview sample track attendance, either daily or weekly. School staff is required to follow-up with students who are absent.

**B**ehavior/discipline referrals: All school leaders described a system for reviewing patterns in behavior or discipline referrals. In some cases, referrals are classified and tracked by offender, the time of day, and the class or teacher to identify patterns.

**C**ourse completion/GPA: All school leaders interviewed recognized the importance of course completion in dropout prevention efforts. Staff review student progress, usually during advisory periods. Schools offer students several options for remediation and credit recovery.

In addition to the ABCs, school leaders also mentioned developmental indicators and extracurricular participation as signs that students are engaged.

*Elaine Allensworth and John Easton, "The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation," University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, June 2005.

In the external influences domain, disconnection is associated with factors that are often circumstantial or linked to students' out-of-school environment. Trauma and mental health issues are also included in external influences. Causes within the external influences domain were given relatively more emphasis in the interviews of school leaders from the A, D1, D2, and D3 schools, as well as the N/A2 and the F1 alternative schools.

The school leaders from the A, D2, D3, and N/A2 schools exclusively placed relatively greater emphasis on external influences.

School-centered causes of disconnection include those over which the school has control or influence, such as school climate, culture, and teacher quality. Causes within the school-centered domain were given relatively more emphasis in the interviews of school leaders from the C2, D1, T, and F2 alternative schools. Of the causes of student disconnection cited by the C2 school, 100 percent fell under the school-centered domain; therefore, the C2 school leader has a strong school-centered view of disconnection.

## School Leaders: Philosophy of Engagement

In exploring the philosophy of engagement, school leaders often redefined the problem, explained their personal beliefs and the concepts they used to frame student engagement, and expressed how they perceived their students' and staff's attitudes. In describing their own personal or their school's philosophy of student engagement, all school leaders referenced the role of the teacher, the school, and the student. Therefore, we have categorized responses in three areas of focus: adult-centered, school-centered, and youth-centered.

### Adult-centered: teacher/advocate

School leaders articulated the role of teachers in maintaining high levels of student engagement. School leaders explained that it was the teachers' responsibility to keep students engaged. The ways in which leaders felt that teachers influenced engagement included making class relevant, helping students feel successful, developing a personal connection or relationship, and showing students that they care. Further, school leaders often relied on teachers to identify the warning signs or early indicators of disengagement.

> *I have terrific people and they have wonderful relationships with kids. That's what I look for in teachers. Not only do they deliver [instruction], but do they make that connection? Are they willing to sit down with kids and create an environment that's cooperative and supportive? If you can't, you're not helping, so I'm not helping you. Let's do the right thing and move on.*

School leaders often recognized that student engagement spans beyond the responsibilities of teachers; all adults in the building must be student advocates. Many school leaders explained the role of the student advisor specifically as being responsible for student engagement and for building and maintaining the relationship. However, building relationships and understanding students' needs were not exclusive to advisors; school leaders often articulated that every adult shares the responsibility of connecting to students.

> *We act as a family and have a very open, connected atmosphere. Teachers give out their cell phone numbers and have an open-door policy. We provide a direct line to adults who will keep them in school. Anyone and everyone is accessible.*

> *It's whoever the kids gravitate towards, even the principal. There are some kids that just gravitate towards some people. When I was a kid, I never wanted to see the principal. But now, they come in and sit down on my couch [...] If a kid knows you're concerned, you can reach them more readily.*

> *Structurally there is no system in place. I think there are individual advisors who do have personal relationships and watch out for their kids and try to do connection things like calling home. But again, it's really individually based on that advisor and his relationship with the students.*

> *[Name of employee] is a para-professional. He's the one to go to in the barbershop and tell everything to. He cuts hair for students who can't afford to go to the barber. Like for prom, he was here until almost 10:30 that night. I was here getting my hair cut too because I want the kids to see that a principal can get a haircut with the same clippers they get their hair cut with. So for him, he knows every dynamic of students.*

> *There was an incident with two boys who didn't connect with their advisor. These boys had issues with drugs, cell phone theft, fights, you know? We were able to match these young men with two other adults and they're OK now.*

> *It's all about relationships. Building relationships and trust keeps kids engaged. We must ask, 'who and how and what do they need to trust me? What is the puzzle of this child and what do we need to solve it?'*

## School-centered: culture/structure

Several school leaders cited the importance of school culture. There was variety in the various cultures of schools as described by school leaders, although students being acclimated to the culture or "buying in" was important to almost all leaders interviewed. Two school leaders mentioned OneApp and its impact on recruiting or attracting students who specifically buy into the mission. Two school leaders compared their schools to a temple or church, inspirational and demanding reverence and respect.

*We're a [charter management operator] feeder school [...] our goal is to get as close as 100% from our [SCHOOL NAME] middle school. Being able to culturally norm 20% is much easier than 50%. So this summer, we are very strategically planning our process to norm students [...] so that we can get them acclimated as fast as possible.*

*You have to recraft a learning environment where learning is valued, where kids have some sense of being stakeholders, and where they're connected to school.*

*I mean, it's definitely the high school's responsibility to provide the relevancy and create that bigger picture of why this fits and matters.*

*Here we try to promote the idea that it's cool to be smart. And so the kids are smart. Then we have honor ceremonies and that's a big deal.*

*You need good instruction, solid culture – kids to feel like they're invested in something that's worthwhile. It needs to feel inspirational. Maybe the best analogy is: it needs to provide the same inspiration, clarity as a religious institution [...] a community of people who know when I show up or when I don't show up, and they seem to be invested in that.*

*We see our school as a temple, something to be treated with respect and made up of spiritual integrity.*

In addition to the culture, some school leaders cited structural changes associated with improved student engagement. Some school leaders believed that schools must vary schedules to meet students' needs. One school leader changed the physical structure of the office area to be more accessible to students and facilitate staff cooperation.

*We've lengthened the year and are in session 11 months. And we operate a trimester schedule to allow students to catch up and graduate.*

*So I've started over the past month to reorganize this school to deal with some of the children when they come in, so there is better flow to the office, to organize our physical space and the work of our team so we work more functionally.*

## Student-centered

School leaders also recognized the students' role in engagement. Many believe students are responsible for their own success. In some cases, school leaders thought schools should teach and facilitate self-advocacy, while two school leaders felt high school students should come with the maturity that leads to a certain level of responsibility.

*Students must be self-advocates. High school students must ask for it; they don't get babied like they did in elementary school.*

*There are standards. You need to meet the standards. You, as a student, have a responsibility. Yes, we also have responsibilities, which are absolute and profound; and there are many of them. But, let's not take the responsibility away from the students and parents.*

*This is your responsibility to get through here. It's not our responsibility to get you through. We open doors; you gotta walk through them. That's the best I can do.*

*It's not just the teacher. It's not just the administrator or the coach. There's an active role that the students need to play.*

*I tell people this in orientation visits, 'If you follow directions, work hard, and show up for school, you're going to be successful.' That's it. It's really that simple.*

*... especially in the classroom, I would say kids need to be proactive. Whether it's about their grades, about learning, about raising their hand, about what's happening in school the next day, or about the college trip.*

## School Leaders: Philosophy Response Analysis

The domains identified from the school leaders' philosophies of student engagement were categorized as adult-centered: teacher/advocate, school-centered, and student-centered.

In describing their philosophy, school leaders most often included the role of the adults in their buildings. When the adult-centered responses were divided into two sub-domains, teacher and advocate, the adult role of advocate was referred to more often than the teacher role with respect to student engagement.

Every school leader expressed a philosophy of student engagement that referred to the importance of adults as advocates. Additionally every school leader included a school-centered response when describing his or her philosophy of engagement. Eight of the 12 school leaders spoke of a philosophy that was student-centered. Six school leaders mentioned the adult role of teacher specifically. Table 5 provides frequencies by school.

To illustrate any differences in philosophy that might exist between school leaders, we used a measure of emphasis (see Appendix C for definition of emphasis). Table 6 provides response emphasis.

School leaders at A, B, C1, D1, D3 and N/A2 schools described a philosophy of engagement where the adult's role was focused on being an advocate for youth. The school leaders at the relatively high performing schools did not emphasize the role of the adult as a teacher in their philosophy of student engagement, whereas the school leaders at the T school and the alternative schools clearly articulated the responsibility of teachers in student engagement.

School culture was emphasized in the philosophy of school leaders, although no school leader described a philosophy focused on school culture alone. Similarly, school leaders described a philosophy of student engagement that was student focused, although no school leader emphasized only a student-centered philosophy. Student focused philosophies of engagement recognize the role of students in their own engagement.

## Domains and Responses

### Adult-centered: teacher
- Teachers take responsibility for student engagement
- Effective teaching leads to student engagement
- Teachers provide opportunities for student success to maintain student engagement

### Adult-centered: advocate
- Caring adults/advisors facilitates student engagement
- Adults making connections with students or creating a sense of belonging leads to student engagement
- Adult communication leads to student engagement
- Adults' abilities to recognize student needs, especially relating to trauma and mental health, lead to student engagement

### School-centered
- Intentional structures and rules lead to student engagement
- High expectations lead to student engagement
- The ability to culturally norm students leads to student engagement

### Student-centered
- Proactive students are more engaged
- Students who connect with the mission/vision of their schools or have a sense of purpose are more engaged
- Students are responsible for engagement

| Table 5: School Leader Philosophy: Frequencies by School | Adult-centered: Teacher | Adult-centered: Advocate | School-centered | Student-centered |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Graded Schools** | | | | |
| A school | 0 | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| B school | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| C1 school | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| C2 school | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| D1 school | 0 | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| D2 school | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| D3 school | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| **New Schools** | | | | |
| T school | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 |
| N/A1 school | 2 | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| N/A2 school | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| **Alternative** | | | | |
| F1 alt school | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| F2 alt school | 4 | 2 | 2 | 0 |

| Table 6: School Leader Philosophy: Emphasis | Adult-centered: Teacher | Adult-centered: Advocate | School-centered: Culture | Student-centered |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Graded Schools** | | | | |
| A school | 0% | 50% | 38% | 13% |
| B school | 0% | 50% | 50% | 0% |
| C1 school | 0% | 67% | 0% | 33% |
| C2 school | 50% | 17% | 17% | 17% |
| D1 school | 0% | 33% | 50% | 17% |
| D2 school | 20% | 40% | 20% | 20% |
| D3 school | 0% | 67% | 33% | 0% |
| **New Schools** | | | | |
| T school | 25% | 50% | 13% | 13% |
| N/A1 school | 33% | 50% | 17% | 0% |
| N/A2 school | 0% | 33% | 33% | 33% |
| **Alternative** | | | | |
| F1 alt school | 29% | 14% | 29% | 29% |
| F2 alt school | 50% | 25% | 25% | 0% |
| **All Schools**\*\* | **20%** | **39%** | **27%** | **14%** |

\*Shaded Emphasis indicates that the interviewee cited causes within the domain relatively more often than the average

\*\* Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.



## The impact of an open enrollment/school choice system

In an open enrollment/school choice system, students can apply to any school in the city regardless of where they live. Students seek the school that offers the best fit to their needs and are able and often encouraged to transfer to a more suitable school where appropriate or as needed. This, however, leads to accusations that schools counsel out those students who are not performing at high standards. This practice is referred to as "pushing students out." During our interviews, a few school leaders indicated that to "push out" a student is a strategy of last resort.

> *There are situations where you're very consistent but you sometimes grab a kid and say 'It's in your best interest to leave.'*

> *I'll be very honest with you. In some cases I've actually helped students leave because [we] have figured out with their family that this is just not a good fit for you. I would rather them go to an environment that is best suited for their needs than to stay and fail.*

> *We refer students to a GED program as a last resort. In order to enroll, you must drop out [of your high school], which is not ideal for the school or for anyone.*

## School Leaders: Strategies for Engagement

School leaders talked about the strategies or tactics they use in their schools to maintain youth engagement or address disengagement. There were similarities in the responses, and a variety of approaches were mentioned. On average, school leaders mentioned seven strategies that were employed to increase student engagement.

Although many school leaders mentioned partnerships with nonprofits, school leaders did not refer to any formal, research-based dropout prevention programs that were implemented in their schools.

Based on the various strategies and tactics described by school leaders, we categorized each strategy into one of three domains. These domains mirror the causes identified by school leaders. These include youth-centered: activities designed to address the specific needs of students; external influences: supports that address the external factors associated with student disconnection; and school-centered: strategies that sustain the academic responsibilities of school.

## Exemplary dropout prevention programs

### 50 programs were identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center.*

- 66 percent target risk factors in the social attitudes, values, and behavior categories (42 specifically target school behavior)
- 16 percent target individual background characteristics
- 12 percent target family background characteristics

*Cathy Hammond, Dan Linton, Jay Smink, and Sam Drew, "Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report," National Dropout Prevention Center and Communities in Schools, May 2007.*

## Youth-centered

Strategies or interventions used by schools to address student engagement within this domain include those that directly impact the risk factors often associated with student disconnection. These include the use of data by school staff to monitor student progress, an advisory or homeroom period during the school day, home visits or phone calls, academic remediation or credit recovery, and social norming, which refers to the practice of establishing expected patterns of behavior.

All school leaders referenced the use of data as a strategy to prevent student disengagement. School leaders described the process in which teachers and support staff routinely analyzed student level data to identify early warning signs of disengagement. Data that were regularly monitored include student attendance, behavior, and academic progress or course completion. Some school leaders revealed that indicators of socio-emotional learning were also tracked.

> *We use a database that includes academic and attendance, as well as a narrative [of] behavior entry. Staff can communicate through this database. Every night the dean and I go through the list to identify kids that might be having issues.*

> *I meet with [teachers] twice a month with data analysis of [behavior] incidences so I'm looking at groups of behaviors that are repetitive and showing up for kids. So one of the infractions might be disrespect to the teacher so I might pull data on how many kids have gotten pulled out of class for disrespecting teachers and I'll go over a fout to six week period of time. And I'll look for repeat offenders and if it's the same class, same teachers. If it's the same class, then I say 'Let's observe if the teacher needs support or if there are individual students that need support in that class only.'*

> *Everyone has a graduation plan and adults keep track of students' progress. Teachers keep detailed notes in a database and everyone on staff has access to that.*

> *Another piece we are looking to add this year is to get the students to own their own data a bit more.*

In addition to data use, most school leaders take advantage of an advisory or homeroom period as a check-in to monitor student progress. Nine of the 12 school leaders interviewed felt an advisory period allowed adults the designated time to assess student engagement, to develop relationships with students, and to identify areas where students needed supports. One school leader decided to forgo a formal advisory period but assigned students to an advisor who was required to meet with students outside the class period.

Advisories varied in structure, although most school leaders described a small student-to-teacher ratio. Some advisories met daily and some two to three times per week. In many cases, the students and advisor acted as a cohort and stayed together for the four years the students were in high school. In a few cases, advisories had a set curriculum, were credit bearing, and students earned a letter grade. At least two school leaders believed the advisory time was under-utilized and proposed changes for the upcoming year.

> *We have a very structured advisory program. And so we try to use our advisory program for advisors to own their students for specifically that: track student success [...] Some kids are on AP track, some kids are on honor track, and some kids are on Core 4 track. And so their advisor or college counselor knows exactly where they stand.*

> *We try to make our male advisories to be run by male advisors. We only had one that was run by a female; we kinda thought she could handle it.*

> *Culture stuff changes. What they've always done is go into homeroom your freshman year and your homeroom teacher is your homeroom teacher for four years. Well, I've always raised the question: why don't we train those homeroom teachers in some kind of counseling and advising where they not only are taking attendance but they're looking at the kids. I mean that's kind of stupid.*

> *Each student has an advisor – not advisory – an adult who is responsible for connecting with 12 students, checks attendance, calls home, has a one-on-one before each school year to develop an Individual Learning Plan and monitors the student's progress throughout the school year.*

Nearly all school leaders, 10 of the 12, mentioned that teachers and social workers regularly attempt to connect with students' families through home visits or phone calls. Some teachers made calls to home when students were absent or failing classes or made calls to home simply as an indication that they cared.

> We try to connect with families. Each student has a home visit. Since attendance at school events varies – between 30 and 70 percent – we connect with families by going to their homes.

School leaders shared that one of the main causes of student disengagement was a lack of academic preparedness. Eight of the 12 school leaders mentioned that their schools offer academic supports to struggling students, either remediation or credit recovery opportunities.

> We have a tutorial structure that begins at 7:00 in the morning; school begins at 8:00. And after school, school gets out at 3:00 we have 31tutorials.

> Another thing we're doing this year that I'm really excited about is our incoming freshmen, we're looking at their LEAP scores [...] and basing that on whether they need math remediation or reading remediation.

> Freshmen are where we put the most energy last year because they had the most catching up and widest gap [...] so we spent a lot of time cleaning up – credit recovery and stuff like that. So by the end of the summer we had close to 95 percent of our students with all gaps filled.

> We found that with our freshmen, they'd come in lacking basic algebra skills, ELA skills, writing skills, so we double up on those. So we have an applied algebra course to reinforce algebra skills. With ELA, we have ELA-English I course and a reading course for freshmen. So they take a math and English every day.

Many school leaders discussed the importance of social norming as a strategy to prevent student disconnection. Social norming refers to the practice of establishing expected patterns of behavior. These can be formal, such as those outlined in the school's code of conduct, or informal, such as the idea that all students will go to college. Informal norms are understood to be in effect but no mechanism has been put into place to enforce compliance.

Social norming was viewed as a mechanism to ease the transition into high school and to help students assimilate to the new environment. School leaders also considered it a tool to keep students engaged and on-track to graduate.

> My goal is to build such a [rigorous] academic environment here that when one comes in you have to assimilate. Otherwise you'll be the odd one out.

> We talk a lot about the why and conveying rules and why this is the rule. The more students buy into the rationale of the rule, the more likely they will be to follow it.

> Well, when you have that, that clash if you will. They came in at different grade levels, so you may have ninth grade and 10th grade and on up [...] You have incoming grades coming in from an alternative school; and they might be going from one school to another. And so that's the need for the whole reorientation to what is the mission of this school, what is the vision of this school.
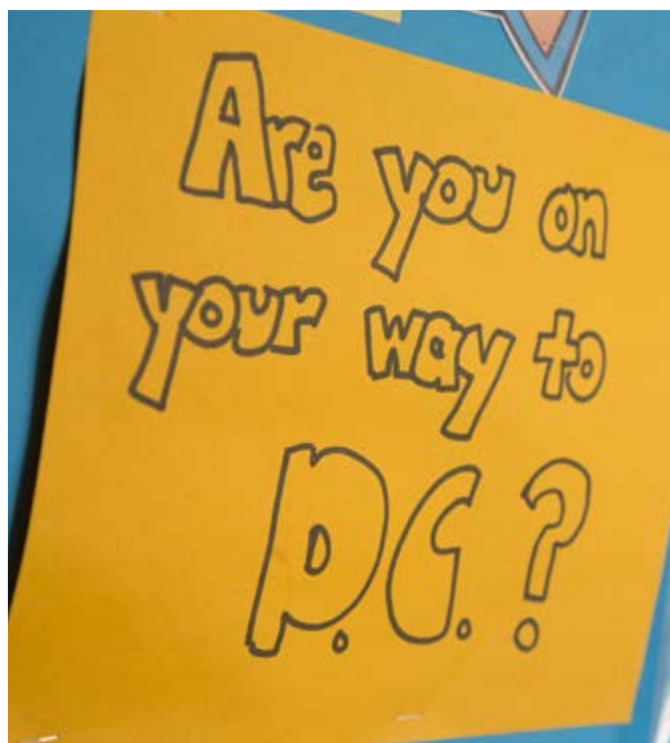
## External influences

Strategies that fall under the domain of external influences are those that address issues external to school, issues that result from family or community context. These include mental health issues and the impact of trauma. Six of the 12 school leaders specifically mentioned providing students with mental health services, support, or strategies that deal directly with trauma.

> *Our social worker is pretty incredible [...] she has groups with kids all the time. And kids love their groups. All I ever hear is 'I have group today' and 'I'm excited about group.' We would welcome more mental health services.*

> *I still have an issue with teen pregnancy. Yeah, it's gonna happen. You gotta plan for it. We got to stop being like 'No, it's not gonna happen.' Because it is and you gotta plan for it.*

> *The student that was raped? Or the students who says 'I have nowhere to go. [The shelter] is kicking me out because I've been there so long.' For me, it's like, oh my God, I have to find a place outside of school for them to go to. Because they come to school saying, 'I haven't eaten this whole weekend.' Or 'I had breakfast, but I'm still hungry.' And if I have someone who can work with those students, I can concentrate on my role which is academic.*

> *Our health and wellness team is made up of the general education teacher that teaches that student, a special educator, our social worker, an administrator, our regional director of special education services, and the school has its own psychiatrist.*

> *Our social worker develops a treatment plan for high level kids [...] for those with mental health issues or those who are going through a crisis [...] provides crisis management skills, you know, or helps connect them to resources such as food stamps. She also hosts group and individual counseling sessions.*

## School-centered

Strategies that fall under the school-centered domain are intentional strategies targeting student engagement that are initiated by the school or operated through the school. These include extracurricular activities, changes in the school culture or structure, teaching style, and options for rigorous courses.

Of the school leaders interviewed, eight cited the use of extracurricular activities to maintain engagement. Many added that the types of activities offered should be based on the needs and interests of the students; students were often surveyed on the types of activities they were interested in having at the school. Most extracurricular activities are led by teachers and offered after school.

*We have after-school for kids who don't want to go home to an empty house. So we keep the kids here and we have [activities].*

*You see kids who are actively involved in the education process. We are an academic institution and that is our first and absolute primary [mission]. However, we like to see kids involved in organizations. We have over 55 clubs. And the kids craft their own clubs.*

*[Administrators] want to run after-school programs like running a school. [But students] want to stay after school and have school. You've got to let it be youth-run, youth-led, youth-assessed, and youth-planned.*

*Better to provide no extracurriculars than to provide low quality ones. If these are not high quality, they can actually do more harm than good.*

*I love educators. But moving from being a teacher to being a youth development facilitator is a tough skill, incredibly tough skill. Giving up that power and control [...] and letting [young people] do it. Because, you know what, they aren't going to do it in a way that looks right for you but that's part of learning.*

*The kids have been asking to do things. We don't have a school newsletter. They've been asking for things like culinary arts classes – which means they want to cook and eat. But then again, that's math and science. But who's going to do those things? Our school day next year won't end until 4:30 so it's going to be tough to get the kids to stay 'til 6. That's a long day for teachers.*

*We also have a club based on doing community service. And they go to elementary schools to read to small children. They go to nursing homes. They volunteer at SPCAs. They do multiple things across the city. They feed the hungry. They do gifting at Christmas season. All that club does is community service. And all our kids are required to do, by the time they graduate, 90 hours of community service.*

Five school leaders mentioned structure as a way to prevent student disengagement. This included reorganizing the structure within the building by making the office arrangement more student-friendly. Structure also included structured process and rules. Having clarity in the rules, expectations, and consequences was important. School leaders also talked about ways they altered the structure of the school day to meet the needs of their students.

*We have an attendance monitor who tracks attendance. When a student hits three tardies or absences, we bring him in. 'Why did you miss three days?' and there's a conference, with the student initially. And if it continues, then next move is with the parent. For the sixth, the parent comes in. Then the next move is the social worker.*

*We're doing a seven-period all year classes which allows students to have more remediation and make-up.*

*What we're trying to figure out is how to use the minutes within the day to create any kind of remediation plans to have kids throughout the eight hours they come to school – feeling successful. And so, whether that's creating electives that make them more excited so that they say 'I know I'm going to my challenging math class, but then I get to go to art.' Trying to create the holistic approach, the balance between academics and extracurriculars, but creating that within the time.*

*We've found that most of our disengaged students aren't wanting to be in those clubs after school. They're kind of, not their kind of thing, so when they can go home, they want to go home. So it's made it hard to have after-school academic support when 'it's requiring me to stay at school longer and why do I have to stay after school longer if I already feel unsuccessful during the school day?'*

Academic culture was mentioned by five school leaders. Many felt like placing an emphasis on academics was key to student engagement. High expectations and no excuses are typically signs of an academic culture. Academic rigor was cited as a strategy for student engagement, and schools offered Advanced Placement (AP) courses and dual enrollment opportunities as a means to keep students engaged in school. College was stressed as the ultimate goal.

*We do have systems in place for academic improvement plans. So if you hit below a certain GPA, you have mandatory after-school office hours with your classroom teacher. For freshmen it's 2.5. If their GPA is below 2.5 in like math or science, they prioritize math and science office hours. And they're tracked for how many hours they go.*

*Senior college scholars class [...] I have the whole class focused on first, how to apply to college. And they actually do applications, write personal statements and those things in class. And then they shift the focus once college acceptances start floating in, they shift the focus to 'Now I'm on this college campus, how do I navigate through it?' Like, 'Where do I go if there's a question about my funding? Where do I go if there's a question about a class I need to take?' [...] and so this class prepares them to do that. So I'm really excited for them to have that class, it's like 'what I'm doing matters.'*

Most school leaders felt quality teachers and staff were key to student engagement. All staff were expected to develop relationships with students. Teachers were often cited as the go-to person, the one who had deep knowledge of a student's interests and circumstances and were expected to tailor learning opportunities to the individual.

*So you hire good counselors and good people. I have terrific people and they have wonderful relationships with kids.*

A handful of school leaders mentioned formal mentorship or internship programs that they use to prevent student disengagement. School-wide mentoring allowed for students to connect with any adult in the building. Some schools relied on outside agencies to provide mentors for their students. In order to provide relevancy, many schools offered internships. By creating opportunities for students to work in an area or field of interest, school leaders believed students would become motivated to stay in school.

*I can think of one kid right now that turned his year around – I would like to think bigger – turned his life around – because of football. He wanted to do football practice every day. His coach, his head coach was actually his advisor, so it was a double whammy. That's it. He was truant, not showing up. Coach said that if you want to do football, you have to be here on time every day. And sure enough, he's here every day.*

*We provide internship opportunities to students in all grades. These are paid internships. The school pays 100 percent, we match, or the business pays 100 percent. About 70 percent of our students participate, one-third only part-time. Some don't participate because of transportation, childcare issues, or jobs.*

## COST OF ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

We asked school leaders to estimate the percentage of their school budget spent on strategies to maintain or increase student engagement. Their responses varied, although no one said they specifically included student engagement as a budget line item.

One school leader noted the cost of their internship program, a key engagement tactic in her view, where the school seeks partnerships with businesses to share the costs of paying student wages. However, the school leader added that the school has a separate foundation which funds internships and that internships are not funded through the school's general operating budget.

Many school leaders mentioned stipends that teachers receive to sponsor extracurricular activities and clubs or to coach sports teams.

Many schools partner with nonprofit organizations that provide services and support activities to students free of charge.

When pushed, many school leaders acknowledged that, since they are ultimately responsible for student engagement, 100 percent of their budget goes towards engagement tactics to some extent.

> *One hundred percent because all our teachers, all our staff members – cafeteria and custodians included – are responsible for student engagement.*

# School Leaders: Strategies Response Analysis

The domains identified from the school leaders' strategies mirror the themes of the causes of disconnection. These areas represent youth-centered, external, and school-centered influences.

The youth-centered domain includes the use of data to monitor student progress and identify emerging issues, an advisory period or advisor, contact with the family through phone calls or home visits, remediation or credit recovery opportunities, and efforts to encourage behavior adaptation (social norming).

Strategies that fall under the external influences domain include mental health and trauma support services and counseling, as well as family and situational support services.

The school-centered domain includes extracurricular activities, a well-defined structure, and a culture that emphasizes academic acheivement.

On average, school leaders mentioned seven strategies or tactics that have been implemented in their schools to prevent student disconnection. Table 7 shows the frequencies of strategies by domain.

Every school leader cited a strategy within the youth-centered domain, and all school leaders mentioned the use of data to monitor student progress and identify students who may need additional support. The types of data mentioned varied and included attendance, behavior and discipline referrals, and course progress (GPA). In addition, other data collected include participation rates in extracurricular activities, community service hours or volunteer hours reported, and evidence of positive behaviors.

Every school leader cited at least one strategy within the school-centered domain. The only school leaders to mention a strategy within the external influences domain were those at schools that serve a high at-risk population.

To better understand the differences among schools, we used a measure of emphasis (see Appendix C for more detail).

## Domains and Responses

### Youth-Centered
- Use of data
- Advisors and advisories
- Home visits or calls
- Remediation or credit recovery
- Social norming

### External Influences
- Mental health and trauma services
- Family and situational services

### School-Centered
- Extracurricular activities
- Structure
- Academic culture
- Mentoring or internships

| Table 7: School Leaders Strategies: Frequencies | Youth-centered | External influence | School-centered |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Graded Schools** | | | |
| A school | 4 | 0 | 3 |
| B school | 4 | 0 | 2 |
| C1 school | 4 | 0 | 1 |
| C2 school | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| D1 school | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| D2 school | 2 | 0 | 3 |
| D3 school | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| **New Schools** | | | |
| T school | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| N/A1 school | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| N/A2 school | 4 | 1 | 3 |
| **Alternative** | | | |
| F1 alt school | 4 | 1 | 3 |
| F2 alt school | 5 | 1 | 3 |

All school leaders referred to strategies under the youth-centered and school-centered domains (see Table 8).

None of the school leaders from the relatively higher performing schools mentioned strategies under the external influences. These strategies include support services to youth suffering from trauma or with mental health issues, as well as family supports. The school leaders that emphasized strategies under the external influences domain are those whose schools disproportionately serve the most at-risk youth.

School leaders who placed above average emphasis on strategies under the school-centered domain are those with relatively more institutionalized practices.

## School Leaders: Conclusion

The school leaders we interviewed represented a wide variety of schools serving diverse groups of students. The sample in the study included one of the highest performing high schools in the state of Louisiana, one of the lowest performing high schools, and everything in between. It included RSD and OPSB charter schools. Yet no matter the distinct differences among schools, all school leaders recognized that their school serves students at risk of disconnection.

Because of the differences in the student populations served, the differences in the needs of students at each school, and the differences in students' individual circumstances, school leaders recognized a variety of causes of youth disconnection. And based on the students they teach, school leaders varied in the extent of emphasis placed on those causes.

Nearly all school leaders recognized causes under the student-centered and external influences domains. They clearly articulated the issues associated with and the difficulties students deal with when they enter high school academically, socially, and mentally unprepared.

Academic deficits in ninth grade students lead to patterns of absenteeism and discipline issues. Poor school attendance and behavior problems were viewed as symptoms of poor academic preparation but also viewed as causes of further disconnection. As a result, schools offered opportunities for remediation, as well as altered schedules that allow more time for focused learning in math and English language arts. High schools spend time during class, before

| Table 8: School Leaders Strategies: Emphasis | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Student-centered | External influence | School-centered |
| **Graded Schools** | | | |
| A school | 57% | 0% | 43% |
| B school | 67% | 0% | 33% |
| C1 school | 80% | 0% | 20% |
| C2 school | 50% | 0% | 50% |
| D1 school | 50% | 0% | 50% |
| D2 school | 40% | 0% | 60% |
| D3 school | 60% | 20% | 20% |
| **New Schools** | | | |
| T school | 60% | 20% | 20% |
| N/A1 school | 57% | 14% | 29% |
| N/A2 school | 50% | 13% | 38% |
| **Alternative** | | | |
| F1 alt school | 50% | 13% | 38% |
| F2 alt school | 56% | 11% | 33% |
| **All Schools** | **55%** | **7%** | **38%** |

*Shaded Emphasis indicates that the interviewee cited causes within the domain relatively more often than the average

** Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

and after class, and in the summer preparing students for the rigors of high school. According to many of the school leaders interviewed, adequate academic preparation often does not occur in middle schools. They indicated that disconnection due to academic deficits can begin well before high school.

In addition to academic deficits, school leaders spoke at length about how students entering their school for the first time as ninth graders or as transfer students can become disengaged because they are not accustomed to the rigorous culture or expectations of high school. Because of the transition, schools dedicate time, especially in the beginning of the school year, to teaching school history and culture and to developing what they perceive as healthy, mandatory learning habits.

High school students, according to school leaders, are also influenced by factors beyond their control that may eventually lead to disengagement. All school leaders referenced Hurricane Katrina and the trauma many students suffered as a result. In addition, school leaders recognized the impact that daily struggles associated with violence and poverty have on their students.

Consequently nearly all school leaders, especially those serving the most at-risk populations, said they were ill-prepared to offer students the mental and psychological services they required. Even school leaders who partnered with organizations to supply services admitted that these were nowhere near sufficient.

Aware that the students they serve are different from those of decades prior, school leaders recognized that schools must also change and adapt to the needs of their students. This included making school more relevant and connected to the lives of their students. Some school leaders have implemented strategies that strive to make the high school experience relevant by weaving career counseling, internships, and work experience into their curricula.

The role of the teacher, according to many school leaders, includes more than the task of teaching. Teachers in many of the schools in the sample are asked to make personal connections with their students, call parents, and make home visits. School leaders interviewed recognized the importance of building relationships with students and helping students feel valued. This was cited as an important strategy to prevent disengagement.

On the other hand, some school leaders were critical of zero-tolerance and no-excuses tactics used in many schools today. Harsh or rigid discipline, they argued, can do more harm than good and push students away from school. Others argued that these structures were necessary to maintain order, develop an academic environment, and promote scholarly behavior. School leaders addressed discipline in a variety of ways based on their philosophy and the circumstances they face in their schools.

Nevertheless, all school leaders recognized that more can be done to prevent student disconnection. They are trying new and innovative programs, seeking out new partners, and engaging the students themselves to develop a school culture and environment that will support student success.

## Intermediary Leaders' Perspectives

We spoke with leaders from five community organizations that are closely affiliated with schools or youth development organizations in order to understand their perceptions of the causes of youth disconnection, their personal and professional philosophies of how young people stay connected or become reconnected, and their visions of youth success. The intermediaries in our sample represented a variety of organizations that serve diverse stakeholder groups which fell into one of two categories: those that provide support and capacity building to community-based youth development organizations and those that provide capacity building supports to schools. The participating organizations are also connected to existing collaborative structures and systems in New Orleans designed to help prevent youth from falling through the cracks.

Of the five, two organizations work closely with charter schools that serve at-risk student populations. Three of the organizations interact regularly with disconnected youth and other community organizations that serve them. The majority of interviews were conducted with executive directors of the organizations. Support staff was also interviewed in some cases.



## Intermediary Leaders: Causes of Disconnection

Understanding intermediary leaders' perceptions of the causes of disconnection is critically important and sheds light on how they approach intervening in disconnection. The interviews also provide insight into their visions for prevention-based methods that they feel could be implemented at earlier stages in young people's lives. Based on their extensive work with schools and community-based youth development organizations, these intermediary leaders identified several factors that they feel lead to disconnection from school.

Among the responses, several common themes, as well as striking differences, arose. On average, the intermediaries interviewed cited seven causes of student disconnection.

### Youth-centered (Individual Characteristics and Risk Factors)

Causes of disconnection falling within this domain include academic and behavioral traits, such as poor academic performance, low test scores or grades, course completion, chronic absenteeism, or behavioral issues. Although some of these causes may be symptoms of other root causes and external forces, they are factored into the youth-centered domain because of their close association with high school-aged youth themselves. We refer to these factors as youth-centered because they are directly linked to the youth themselves.

Academic deficits or a history of academic failure were cited as causes of disconnection in three of five interviews with intermediary leaders. While intermediaries stressed the importance of high school persistence, they empathized with young people facing the stigma of feeling too behind to catch up.

*As kids get older and they can't do it, they'll just say, 'Screw it. I'm not doing it.' If they're not feeling successful [...] or feeling stupid. I wouldn't want to be part of that either.*

*High stakes testing occurs in the same grades that critical social-emotional learning take place. This is a lot of pressure to be putting on kids.*

Previous disconnection was cited as a cause of disconnection in three of five interviews with intermediary leaders. Interviewees explained that instances of disconnection often indicate the presence of a weak safety net, which increases the likelihood of future disconnection. Interviewees also noted that often there are few people who want to work with the hardest-to-serve youth for fear that these young people may prevent programs from meeting organizational outcomes and state accountability goals, potentially hindering the programs' abilities to fundraise.

> *Nobody wants our kids. There's a lot of conversation about our kids, youth violence. We know who they're talking about. It's very hard to find service providers who will really embrace our kids because everyone needs to demonstrate results, like the schools [...] Disconnection is compounded. The harder you are to work with, the less everyone wants to work with you. It's a stage where the mentor won't take you because they're afraid to go to your street, the school doesn't want you, except for the very worst of the schools, and so on down the line. Then how do you connect?*

Discipline and behavioral issues were cited as causes by two of five interviewees. As the interviewees explained, infractions are related to school both directly and indirectly. The intermediary leaders interviewed criticized such school behavioral policies as dress codes and walking in straight lines for placing an unnecessary emphasis on things they argue do not directly impact learning. Additionally, interviewees explained how transitions from juvenile detention centers back into school and the community can result in further disconnection due to fragmentation between youth-supporting infrastructure and lack of available space at the student's original school, among other factors.

> *The causes and consequences of arrest and prosecution for young people are very frequently education- and school-related. Too many of our clients come to us out of the school system directly. In other words, they were arrested for something that happened at school. And another large subset of our clients [...] come to us because things are going wrong at the school [...] For instance, a client may be truant from a school that's not really interested in educating him. While he's truant, he might get arrested for an auto burglary. So that's not a school-based arrest in a traditional sense, but it's still an arrest that has to do a lot with educational attainment and school connection. So those things are linked and the consequences of the arrest are linked with educational connection.*

> *So one of the biggest issues is to transition from secure custody to community. It's a point where the school system or someone needs to do a lot better at making connections. The [youth detention center] last year got 400 admissions and about 150 commitments to secure custody [juvenile prison]. It's one of the state-run facilities outside of New Orleans [...] So what that means is that 250 kids, at least, left the [youth detention center] and went back into the community. The question that's troubling is: Who's making those connections for them? So we try to fill that gap, but in all honesty, we can't do that well. We can't provide intensive case management for all 250 of those kids. And so who is? [youth detention center] is run by Orleans Parish School Board. So you're unenrolled in an RSD school because you're in an OPSB school. Now you're kicked out, not in school, and no one is responsible for you and that's very difficult for us.*

> *There's a belief among the high performing charter [schools] that the only way to be able to serve these very difficult children in New Orleans is in a micro-[managed], super structured way. That includes if your shirt is not tucked in, you're wearing the wrong shoes today, that's going to be an issue. And that drives me crazy because it's the things that our kids least need to worry about and it starts a lot of problems [...] that someone is hassling them every day about their shoes, their belt [...] 'you can't come in today.' It's things that don't matter.*

## External Influences (Family and Community/Contextual)

External influences are representative of the context of the youth's environment, are indirectly associated with the youth, and have a critical impact on student engagement. External influences include those related to family and community. Causes of disconnection that were cited by intermediary leaders and that fall within this domain include family poverty, family conflict, and family illness among others. Employment or other opportunities in the community, neighborhood characteristics, availability of social supports within the community, community norms, and community violence are also included under this domain. Although linked to youth, trauma and mental health issues are not directly controlled by youth and are therefore included in this domain. Intermediary leaders also cited the lack of a connected system of supports for youth as a factor that often allows youth to slip through the cracks.

A lack of a comprehensive, cohesive support system for children, youth, and adults was cited in four of five interviews. Examples included a lack of shared goals, a shared data system, and accountability between youth serving organizations. Two interviewees explicitly referenced New Orleans' severely underfunded mental health system, which existed even before Hurricane Katrina.

> *There are lots of schools that have caring teachers, counselors, career tech [programs], but in the end, unless they're connected and someone is making sure that's followed up on consistently, then the most fragile kids get left behind.*

> *A skill of a school leader who is mature and well-seasoned and has a clear vision is to know how to leverage community partnerships so that teachers aren't doing it all on their own or school leaders aren't doing it all on their own. So that it feels like the vision is more achievable through a more comprehensive and collective effort. That being said, we lack a lot of external services in New Orleans that I relied on as a teacher in [an urban school district in the Northeast]. I can't believe the number of times that I had strong mental health structures that I could rely on when kids were in true crisis. There were scads of unique schools in the city that offered particular programs that I could rely on if we couldn't provide them ourselves. Very little of that exists here.*

Factors outside of school, such as home, community, and neighborhood conditions, were cited in three of five interviews. Examples included "clique-related violence" and competing priorities, such as family illness and caretaking responsibilities. One interviewee explained how, when compounded, all of these issues result in a lack of stability that impacts performance in school and other places.

> *The things that make kids disconnected are not things that start at school. If you are up until three o'clock every morning because your pothead uncle is watching porn on the couch and you can't sleep very well, you won't be doing very well at school the next day. If it takes three buses to get there. If you have a cousin that says, 'let's not go today,' etc. These are support system issues. A school can't fix all of these things and we don't expect them to but what if they are the only institute that can [reach the students]? We need a model that responds to a [young person's] holistic needs. [Special education] supports, as great as they are, if they don't expand outside of the class, they're not cutting it.*

> *Another thing we've been noticing lately is [young people] who are fearful of going to school because of things that are going on in different neighborhoods, in cliques, in groups and gangs, and they fear for their lives to go there.*

> *I will tell you [...] very few of our students go to the same school year after year.*

Exposure to violence and trauma negatively impacts students' schoolwork, as it often is associated with lower IQs, reading abilities, and GPAs.[24] Trauma and exposure to violence also have behavioral impacts, leading to higher rates of absenteeism and increased discipline issues. [25] Trauma is a factor in the lives of many at-risk youth. Hurricane Katrina, violence, and other isolated or chronic traumatic events have led and continue to lead New Orleans youth to disconnect from school, work, and other supportive networks.

Trauma and mental health issues were explicitly mentioned as causes of disconnection from school by two of five interviewees. These interviewees stressed the fact that current 16-24 year olds were between the ages of eight and 16 during Hurricane Katrina, which are critical developmental years.

> *70% of the [young adults] whom I work with have experienced physical or sexual abuse. The majority of the young adults that I work with have experienced four or more traumatic events in their lifetimes... homelessness, Katrina, domestic violence, abuse, drug use...*

## School-centered

Causes of disconnection that fall under the school-centered domain are issues that the school controls, influences, or is responsible for providing. These include school culture, school structures, curriculum for academics and socio-emotional learning (SEL), quality of instruction, relationships with teachers and other adults in the school, school discipline policies, and supportive services that the school provides or lacks.

Research suggests that the effects of trauma can be dealt with and the impairments can be compensated for through a range of holistic supports, including trauma-informed care. A lack of trauma-informed care and positive youth development practices in the schools was cited in all five intermediary interviews. Interviewees felt like this issue especially impeded school staffs' abilities to prevent and intervene in crises.

> *Staff has to be trained in truly effective crisis intervention, and not just teachers—administrators, too. Also on trauma-informed care. Too many people don't know that you can't put your hands on [these] kids, even if you do it in the nicest ways. They're just going to click out; it just conjures up too many associations for too many kids. And people aren't really thinking about that.*

Lack of adult connections was mentioned by three of five interviewees. Typically, interviewees were referring to connections with caring adults in school, but mentors and other adults outside of school were also cited as important. A social worker at a juvenile justice organization stated that she has worked with charter high schools that have case management staff to student ratios of one to 500.

> *It's the chicken and egg. It's usually a combination of skill on the teachers' part to take kids who are significantly behind to build a relationship and build their skills at the same time [...] if you mess up on one, the other doesn't really help that much. I'll probably err on the side of building good relationships with kids because at least you can keep them in school until you figure out what to do.*

A lack of understanding among school staff about students' backgrounds was mentioned by three of five interviewees. Some interviewees explained this disconnect as a lack of cultural competency and understanding on the part of school staff, who often come from drastically different socio-economic and geographic backgrounds from their students.

> *We must recognize the contextual factors of our youth. Teachers must be culturally responsive to their students. They should know who their students are. Teachers must understand the barriers kids face [...] and identify resources available to [help] kids.*

On a related note, two interviewees explained that such cultural disconnects can hinder a school's ability to seem relevant to students' lives and aspirations. These interviewees felt that classes and curricula often lack relevancy or connection to students' current realities and hopes for the future. Both interviewees who noted this represented education reform organizations.

> *There's no compelling 'why?' [...] There's not a compelling picture of what school is preparing you for. 'Why am I getting up in the morning, completing assignments and coming to school when there are six other things [...] dragging me down?' If schools do their part in helping develop a clear vision for the future [that] seems realistic, [young people] can understand that path that we take to get there.*

> *Great teachers think of their students as vessels and add to what they already are, recognizing who they are and making things relevant to them personally.*

A lack of appropriate and timely response to warning signs, such as absenteeism, was cited specifically by two of five interviewees. One interviewee emphasized that these patterns typically begin early, particularly during transitions, and that early warning data systems should be implemented and parents should be engaged. Intermediary leaders interviewed also expressed the notion that previous disconnection is a sign of future disconnection.

> *We don't intervene soon enough. When we talk about youth disconnection, we tend to look too far down the pipeline. A lot of disconnection begins in middle school or earlier because kids check out before they disconnect.*

Two of five interviewees stated that the school environment closely resembles that of a prison to many youth whom they work with, and cited cases where young people had made specific statements indicating the similarities.

> *Another thing that makes me mad is the walking in lines. [Many no excuses charter schools] love that stuff and think it brings order. You don't know how many kids come into social workers office and say that it was like this in jail and I don't like it. I don't think they had that in mind when they planned it, but...*

> *One of my clients who is now at [name of a state penitentiary] told me this story: 'I was walking towards the football field and from the corner of my eye, I saw three of my friends sitting on the porch and I thought it was the projects, and for the first time, I noticed that my [prison] dorm was painted the same color as the projects. Same color scheme.'*

## Intermediaries: Causes Response Analysis

From all interviews with intermediaries, school-centered causes of disconnection were most often cited, representing 46% of all responses. Youth-centered causes and external factors were equally weighted, both representing 27% of responses. Intermediary leaders cited an average of seven general causes of disconnection.

Interviewees represented two types of organizations—those that work primarily with school staff and teachers to improve conditions within schools directly ("school-supporting intermediaries") and those that work with youth development systems, such as juvenile justice, housing, and homelessness ("community-supporting intermediaries"). Table 9 distinguishes trends between these two major types of intermediary organization interviewed.

Together, all intermediaries cited a total of 37 causes—10 youth-centered, 10 external, and 17 school-centered. To determine how domains emphasized by individual intermediaries compared to those emphasized by others, the percentage that an individual intermediary cited a domain was compared to the percentage that all intermediaries combined cited the respective domain (see Appendix C for details). In the case of SSI-A, this interviewee's responses (14 percent youth-centered, 29 percent external conditions, and 57 percent school-centered) were compared to the total for all intermediaries, in which 27 percent of responses fell under youth-centered, 27 percent fell under external conditions, and 46 percent fell under school-centered. SSI-A placed greater relative emphasis on external conditions (29 percent compared to the total intermediaries' 27 percent) and school-centered factors (57 percent compared to the total intermediaries' 4 percent). Table 10 represents emphasis.

Causes within the youth-centered domain were emphasized by Community-supporting Intermediary A (CSI-A), a youth development organization, and CSI-C, a juvenile justice organization. Leaders from these organizations emphasized youth-centered causes relatively more often than causes in other domains, and gave more emphasis to this domain than the average of all CSIs. According to these interviewees, disconnection is more associated with factors that are directly linked to youth or that youth have relative control over, including academic performance, attendance, behavior and discipline, and the recurrence of disconnection.

## Intermediary Leaders: Causes of Disconnection Domains

### Youth-Centered
- Academic deficits
- Discipline and behavioral issues
- Absenteeism
- Previous disconnection

### External Influences
- Trauma and mental health issues
- Lack of comprehensive support system
- External circumstances (e.g., family illness, violence)

### School-Centered
- Lack of relevancy
- No adult connection
- Lack of trauma-informed care
- Lack of interventions to early warning signs
- School does not understand where students are coming from
- School environment is too restrictive

| Table 9: Intermediaries' Causes: Frequencies | Youth-centered | External influences | School-centered | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **School-based** | | | | |
| SBI-A | 1 | 2 | 4 | 7 |
| SBI-B | 1 | 2 | 3 | 6 |
| SBIs Total | 2 | 4 | 7 | 13 |
| **Community-based** | | | | |
| CBI-A | 3 | 0 | 2 | 5 |
| CBI-B | 1 | 3 | 3 | 7 |
| CBI-C | 4 | 3 | 5 | 12 |
| CBIs Total | 8 | 6 | 10 | 24 |
| **All intermediaries** | **10** | **10** | **17** | **37** |

| Table 10: Intermediaries' Causes: Emphasis | Student-centered | External influences | School-centered |
|---|---|---|---|
| **School-based** | | | |
| SBI-A | 14% | 29% | 57% |
| SBI-B | 17% | 33% | 50% |
| SBIs total | 15% | 31% | 54% |
| **Community-based** | | | |
| CBI-A | 60% | 0% | 40% |
| CBI-B | 14% | 43% | 43% |
| CBI-C | 33% | 25% | 42% |
| SBIs total | 33% | 25% | 42% |
| **All Intermediaries** | **27%** | **27%** | **46%** |

*Shaded Emphasis indicates that the interviewee cited causes within the domain relatively more often than the average

** Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Causes within the external conditions domain were emphasized relatively more often in interviews with leaders from SSI-A, an intermediary that focuses on human capital development for the teacher and leader professions; SSI-B, an intermediary that focuses on education reform in New Orleans; and CSI-B, a youth housing and homelessness organization. They felt that disconnection is associated with factors that are often circumstantial or linked to students' out-of-school environments. Trauma and mental health issues are included in this domain. Also frequently cited was a lack of a comprehensive support system to meet the holistic needs of young people and strengthen the existing offerings of youth developing organizations.

Causes within the school-centered domain were given relatively greater emphasis by leaders from SSI-A and SSI-B. School-centered causes of disconnection include those over which the school has control or influence, such as school environment, supportive adults, and curriculum.

With respect to school-supporting and community-supporting intermediaries' responses by group, emphases among SSIs and CSIs differed. School-supporting intermediaries placed relatively greater emphasis on external influences and school-centered causes of disconnection than all intermediaries combined, with CSIs placing relatively greater emphasis on youth-centered causes of disconnection. School-supporting intermediaries may have cited school-centered causes relatively more frequently than community-supporting intermediaries because they work

directly with schools to improve and therefore regularly analyze about what schools themselves could do to increase indicators of success, such as graduation rates, academic performance, and culture—all of which play a role in disconnection.

Similarly, community-supporting intermediaries work with community-based organizations that regularly engage young people in order to exercise their agency to reconnect or overcome obstacles that may lead to disconnection, such as improving attendance, changing behavioral patterns, and remediating academic deficits.

## Intermediary Leaders: Philosophies of Engagement

There were clear ties between the causes and philosophies that the interviewees cited. Every philosophy could in some way be attributed to addressing a root cause that was cited. However, intermediaries did not cite philosophies of engagement oriented around youth action. Their responses highlighted the strategies and approaches that adults, organizations, and systems could adopt to address disconnection and keep young people engaged in school. Most of these responses focused on school-centered approaches. One plausible factor behind this trend could be that as intermediaries, their stakeholder groups typically consist of leaders of schools, community based organizations, and other youth supporting systems, rather than youth themselves. Therefore, we have categorized responses into four areas of focus: school-centered: adults; school-centered: culture; school-centered: academics; and external influences. On average, intermediaries in our sample cited five philosophies about the conditions under which engagement and reconnection usually occur.

## External Influences (Family and Community/Contextual)

Creating multiple supportive pathways from cradle to career was cited as critical to engaging youth across New Orleans on a broad scale by four of five intermediary leaders interviewed. These four interviewees stressed the importance of aligning developmental pathways (both in-school and out-of-school) and supports with individual interest and skill sets. Access to a high-quality education was mentioned as an important aspect of these pathways, but was not sufficient on its own.

> We need more choice and variety within the system; youth need flexibility to be able to change course as they continuously identify their interests and passions. We need to think of youth as processes, not problems.

> The ideal vision is hard to articulate but it looks like a pathway from cradle to vocational opportunity in the long run […] empowered and facilitated by educational opportunity.

> Who says every kid has to graduate in four years? [When] you graduate […] if you don't actually know anything or have any recognizable skills, then what? Think about long-term aspirations. Like a poor black child says 'I graduated.' What's the plan?

Four of five intermediaries directly stated that in order to address the comprehensive needs of young people at-risk of disconnection, the currently disparate support systems in place must work together more intentionally and cohesively. Interviewees explicitly pointed out that a comprehensive system of youth supports includes schools as a key factor, but also extends far beyond them to include community, family, and other infrastructure. Interviewees emphasized the importance of a network of transparent systems that works towards the common goal of supporting the holistic needs of every young person. One interviewee noted that even great programs and supports could not prevent youth from slipping through the cracks when working independently. Another interviewee specifically mentioned how important it is that New Orleans' youth development programs, including community-based programs and schools, adopt shared and aligned data systems.

> Most of [the young people we work with] have an Axis I[†] diagnosis—we estimate 73%. Most have an exceptionality, which qualifies them for special education services. Most don't have a strong male role model. They live their [lives] in stress from extreme poverty. On top of that, add all the other many stresses they're dealing with. We don't think every charter school should be able to meet all those needs the first day the child walks through the door. We think the system as a whole needs to [function at] a high [level] to respond to those things.

> State systems should be aligned and centralized [to foster] better communication and shared records and data.

> We could build a database for school social workers that compiles caseworker notes. This would yield greater accountability, standards, a community of practice, and data sharing with out-of-school practitioners—to help build context and a better reconnection plan if youth drop out.

[†] Axis I are clinical disorders, many of which are diagnosed at an early age, like autism or ADHD. Axis I disorders also include mental disorders, substance-related disorders, mood and anxiety disorders, and psychiatric disorders.

Trauma-informed care and positive youth development supports were cited by four of five interviewees. One interviewee felt that anybody working in education and youth development should undergo continuous professional development. This individual also asserted that schools and youth-supporting organizations should be held accountable for offering this level of support.

> *Adults in the [school] building need to be supported too. If adults aren't supported, the kids will still learn, but what are they learning? Adults need to know what youth and adolescent development looks like and how to support the process. Adults have their own issues and pressures, too.*

> *I think part of it is trying to educate people in schools about how damaging to a child [...] these types of trauma and types of mental health issues [are]. Even trying to  get them to understand the abject poverty that our youth are in.*

## School-centered

The importance of relationships between young people and caring adults was directly cited as a building block for engagement by three of five interviewees.

> *Teachers should believe in their kids, know their hopes and dreams, and make them real to kids.*

> *Great teachers add to their students. They don't take away from them.*

> *Another thing about [the young people we work with] is that they're really awesome kids. These are not psychopath children; they're kids that made a mistake, didn't make the right choice, were in the wrong place at the wrong time or maybe they don't have a strong adult in their life that has guided them. Having more positive adult relationships can help.*

Creating a safe, nurturing school environment was cited by three of five interviewees. One interviewee stated that learning environments should feel like sanctuaries. Other interviewees stated that if school is a place that children and youth are required to attend, the space should feel supportive.

> *School should be a safe place, a nurturing place. Schools need social workers, doctors, and nurses. The staff needs structure to deal with issues [that come up].*

### YouthShift: A Collective Impact Model for New Orleans Youth

Recognizing a shared desire to improve outcomes for youth in New Orleans, youth service leaders and community partners have embarked on a collective effort to better coordinate services and cultivate supportive relationships for citywide success. Young people who grow up with the requisite skills and social attributes for success in school, work, and life form the backbone of communities that strive for an educated, high-wage workforce, a vibrant local economy, safe and stable neighborhoods, and strong, healthy families.

YouthShift offers an opportunity to affirm a shared vision for the future, an assessment of current resources and needs, and a roadmap for moving forward in a way that ensures accountability and sustainability for effective youth serving systems. Ultimately, the impact of YouthShift is improved academic, social, and behavioral outcomes for young people through an improved alignment of youth serving systems with ongoing accountability and communication.

Creating a rich and engaging curriculum and helping students understand that persistence through school is relevant to their lives in tangible ways was a strategy suggested by three interviewees. Two of the interviewees that focused on curriculum represented education reform organizations.

> *Every young person [should have] a rigorous academic experience, so they really have been challenged to think critically, to engage in complex tasks, to understand themselves and the world around them so that, not only will they get into college, but they'll be able to make it in college and after college [...] The material that they are learning and exploring is interesting. Gets them up in the morning and makes them better, smarter people.*

> *Students should receive a rigorous education that leads to choices after graduation.*

> *In a larger, transformational sense, we are well aware that educational attainment is one of the largest buffers against delinquency that there is. We're aware of statistics that suggest that having [at least] an eighth grade reading level is one of the best guarantors that you won't fall [into] the cycle of repeated delinquency, and then later criminal arrests.*

Responding to early warning signs of disconnection that manifest themselves at school was cited as critical to keeping young people in school by two of five intermediaries. These interviewees explained that indicators of future disconnection, such as chronic absenteeism, can occur as early as the first grade, and that proper interventions can help steer such youth back onto the path of engagement.

Two of five leaders of intermediary organizations recognized the value of equipping school staff with more opportunities to better understand and intervene in the root causes of disconnection, as well as the knowledge of the consequences of severe disciplinary actions. These interviewees explained that in instances of non-threatening infractions, there are more appropriate, alternative methods of conflict resolution than suspension, expulsion, and involving the police, which often set youth down a path of further disengagement. Interviewees felt that if school staff and administrators understood the real consequences of these punishments on young people's lives, they may be more inclined to seek alternative methods.

> *[Describing her experiences in the past as a school social worker:] When a kid [didn't] come to school, first you [made] a referral to FINS [Families In Need of Service]. Part of the issue is that [with] things like FINS, people don't understand what the consequences might be. The whole FINS system needs revamping. It shuffles kids into a delinquency system and that's not the intent. There are many well-meaning social workers out there that have referred children to FINS. I was shocked when I found out that a child that I had referred in my old job [at the school] was being held in a juvenile detention center because of a FINS adjudication. I didn't know that [was] what [was] going to happen. We were told [FINS was] what [was] going to help the child out [...] that might very well be what [administrators] think but that's not helping them. I think realigning the framework of what we're supposed to do for our kids and what is going to help them [is important]. I'm even thinking about something like a school review process, like an accreditation process. An ongoing thing with troubleshooting in it. Taking the kids' perspective. There should be a place where kids can go and [write a] review, just like a restaurant, because kids have some really valid things to say.*

> *For the most part, the charges that come out of schools are nonviolent and they are more about a teacher being like, 'I'm going to show them, they can't talk back to me' and not realizing that [...] did you know his grandma died last night? It's not an excuse for bad behavior but certainly an explanation for it. If people's eyes were a bit more open to what the kids are going through. It's not an easy job, I completely get that, but there are always other things that can be done besides calling the police and getting the kid arrested.*

# Intermediaries: Philosophy Response Analysis

The domains identified from the school leaders' philosophies of student engagement can be categorized as school-centered: adults; school-centered: culture; school-centered: academics; and external influences. On average, intermediaries citied five philosophies about the conditions that typically foster engagement.

Intermediaries most often cited philosophies of engagement that centered on the role of adults within a school building. This philosophy represented 48 percent of all responses. The role of school culture was the second-most-often cited philosophy, representing 30 percent of all responses. External conditions represented 13 percent of all responses and academics were least often cited, representing the remaining nine percent of responses.

Every intermediary leader expressed a philosophy of youth engagement that referred to the important role that adults play in the school building. Additionally, every intermediary expressed a philosophy that referred to school culture. While both SSIs emphasized the importance of engaging coursework and academics in keeping students connected to school, no interviewees from CSIs mentioned this philosophy.

## Intermediary Leaders: Philosophies of Engagement Domains

### School-Centered: Adults
- Trauma-informed care
- Relationship with caring adult
- Intervene in warning signs
- Staff understands the consequences of disciplinary action

### School-Centered Culture
- Multiple, individualized pathways
- School as sanctuary

### External Influences
- Integrated system of supports

### School-Centered: Academics
- Rich, engaging curriculum

| Table 11: Intermediaries' Philosophies: Frequencies | School: Adults | School: Culture | System | School: Academics | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **School-supporting** | | | | | |
| SSI-A | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| SSI-B | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 5 |
| SSIs Total | 5 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 11 |
| **Community-supporting** | | | | | |
| CSI-A | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| CSI-B | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| CSI-C | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 6 |
| CSIs Total | 6 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 12 |
| **All intermediaries** | **11** | **7** | **3** | **2** | **23** |

| Table 12: Intermediaries' Philosophies: Emphasis | School: Adults | School: Culture | System | School: Academics |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **School-supporting** | | | | |
| SSI-A | 50% | 17% | 17% | 17% |
| SSI-B | 40% | 40% | 0% | 20% |
| SSIs Total | 45% | 27% | 9% | 18% |
| **Community-supporting** | | | | |
| CSI-A | 67% | 33% | 0% | 0% |
| CSI-B | 33% | 33% | 33% | 0% |
| CSI-C | 50% | 33% | 17% | 0% |
| SCIs Total | 50% | 33% | 17% | 0% |
| **All Schools\*\*** | **48%** | **30%** | **13%** | **9%** |

*Shaded Emphasis indicates that the interviewee cited causes within the domain relatively more often than the average

\*\* Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

## Intermediaries: Vision for Youth Success

### Youth-centered

When asked about their visions for youth success, three of five intermediary leaders explained the notion that "our vision is the kid's vision." The interviewees who cited this component led CSIs. These interviewees stated that "college for all" is explicitly not their vision of youth success.

> *Our vision is our kid's vision. We are not a direct service provider in the sense that other direct service providers operate. For example, if a kid comes and tells us he doesn't want to go to school, 'I want to go directly to my uncle's shop.' it's our job to [...] do all the necessary research to present all the opinions, to look at [costs and] benefits of going to the shop versus going to the 11th grade, to sit down with the kid and talk about all the options and give some perspective... 'Here is what your prospects are.' Ultimately if the kid says, 'you know what, I don't want to be there, I want to go to the shop.' [...] we're the ones who say [...] 'Alright, we're going to help that happen. If we need to get a waiver, we'll get a waiver.' So it's not that we can say it's our program goal that every kid finishes high school. It's our goal that all the kids that want to finish high school finish high school and the kids who want to work do that [...] With that being said, in general, our kids want to finish school.*

### External Influences (Family and Community/Contextual)

Character-building and social-emotional development was cited by three of five interviewees. The language used to describe this development differed between the interviewees. Two stakeholders who cited character building worked for education reform organizations, and described these skills by using words such as "character," "self-advocacy," and "civic engagement."

> *[My vision for young people's success is] that they've been developed intellectually with their rigorous academic experiences, but that they also develop their character, in terms of who they are as a person and that they've also considered, through experience ideally, and through academic reflection, what it means to be an active, engaged member of society and how to contribute. Really understand themselves and the world around them for college access and life success.*

> *[My vision is that] Kids are able—mentally and psycho-socially available—and have the opportunity to engage in pro-social activities.*

### School-centered

Success in rigorous academic programs was directly cited as an important element of a young person's overall success by two of five interviewees. Both interviewees represented education reform intermediaries, and at the heart of their responses, they communicated the importance of quality instruction to a young person's success. Additionally, both interviewees did not treat academic rigor as the end game, but instead saw it as an important foundation leading to greater opportunity after high school.

> *My vision for youth success is that teachers get kids to where they need to be academically. All students read at grade level. Students receive a rigorous education that leads to choices after graduation.*

There was no overlap between the domains that all SSIs and CSIs emphasized. Based on the analysis, leaders from SSI-A, CSI-A, and CSI-C emphasized a philosophy of engagement that focused on the role of supportive school staff in keeping youth connected to school more heavily than the average. These leaders described a philosophy where school staff members recognize their role in engaging and supporting all students, which includes preventing student disconnection among youth who are at-risk of disconnecting by intervening in early signs of disconnection, practicing trauma-informed care, and also truly understanding the severe consequences of taking disciplinary measures.

Intermediary leaders from SSI-B and all CSIs emphasized the role that the school culture and environment plays in keeping youth connected to school to a greater extent than the average. Responses specifically addressed the importance of designing individualized pathways according to each youth's interests and needs. The other response that fell into this domain focused on creating a positive, safe, and peaceful learning environment.

Leaders from SSI-A, CSI-B, and CSI-C emphasized external conditions as essential strategies for keeping young people engaged in school. Specifically, the response that fell into this domain was about creating a connected, transparent system of supports that meets the holistic needs of young people.

Leaders from both SBIs emphasized the role that a rich, engaging curriculum plays in keeping young people engaged in school. No CBI leaders mentioned this philosophy.

## Intermediaries: Conclusion

The intermediaries in our sample represented a variety of organizations that serve diverse stakeholder groups. The sample included an organization that recruits and supports teachers through continuous professional development, an organization focused on juvenile justice, and an organization that builds capacity for programs focused on out-of-school time (OST) for children and youth, among others. We categorized the intermediaries based on their primary stakeholders, referring to those that serve community based organizations as "community supporting intermediaries" (CSIs) and those that serve schools, as school supporting intermediaries (SSIs). There was considerable overlap among these leaders' responses, yet there were also some interesting distinctions. Overall, interviewees were eager to share their insights about the causes of student disconnec-

tion from school, and offered strategies for preventing and intervening in student disconnection.

Largely based on their stakeholders' needs and missions that those stakeholders have, the intermediary leaders in our sample identified and cited different causes and strategies. These stakeholder populations also influenced the level of emphasis each interviewee placed on particular domains. Similarities also existed between intermediaries' responses. Nearly all intermediaries acknowledged causes and philosophies under youth-centered, school-centered, and external domains.

External factors were emphasized by school- and community-supporting intermediaries alike. Trauma is a factor in the lives of many at-risk youth, and several intermediaries interviewed cited trauma and exposure to violence as a key factor in youth disconnection. Interviewees also attributed student disconnection to systemic factors, citing the lack of a connected system of comprehensive supports for young people in New Orleans. Leaders of SSI's in our sample explained how the lack of such a system can handicap school leaders and force them to perform many functions that they are not well equipped to do. Other interviewees explained that without articulated connections between youth-serving organizations, youth are falling through the cracks.

Students are also influenced by factors related to the school according to intermediary leaders. Responses generally focused on curriculum, policies, and school staff's ability to connect with and appropriately support students. With respect to curriculum, some intermediary leaders stated that from their perspectives, school lessons are not relevant to the individualized goals and learning needs of young people. Some interviewees labeled this as a lack of cultural competency.

Interviewees stressed the importance of authentic connections between students and caring and observant adults within the school building. Intermediaries also explained that interventions in schools to trauma and to early warning signs of disconnection are not sufficiently practiced. Research has shown that the effects of trauma can be mitigated and the impairments can be compensated for through a range of holistic supports and the development of protective factors. Trauma-informed care recognizes and addresses the presence of trauma symptoms in individuals' lives. All five interviewees cited a lack of trauma-informed care in the schools to be a cause of student disconnection. They explained that few schools have invested resources in

professional development to train their teachers in trauma-informed practices. Some interviewees also acknowledged that, in their experience, staff at some community-based organizations also lack these skills, and should be properly trained.

Interviewees had diverse opinions about the policies, cultures, and learning environments that many high schools have implemented. "no excuses" models were labeled by some as "prison-like." Furthermore, some intermediaries contended that certain restrictive policies within the "No excuses" model are superficial and do not positively correlate with learning. They also asserted that these policies do not take into account the realities of students, as some students and their families may not be able to afford schools' demands due to financial or other structural realities.

There were clear ties between the causes and philosophies that the interviewees cited. Every philosophy of connection could in some way be attributed to addressing a root cause of disconnection that was cited. However, intermediaries did not cite philosophies of engagement oriented around youth action. Their responses highlighted the strategies and approaches that adults, organizations, and systems could adopt to address disconnection and keep young people engaged in school. One plausible factor behind this trend could be that as intermediaries, their stakeholder groups typically consist of school, CBO, and systems level leaders rather than youth themselves. This is one reason why interviewing and learning from the youth themselves was integral to our research.

The factors most commonly cited in the causes and philosophies sections were the lack of and need for trauma-informed care practices in schools, and the lack of and need for a citywide system of holistic supports for young people. By emphasizing these conditions, interviewees underscored the need for a more collaborative relationship between the school and its community. Interviewees asserted that school personnel must take into account what happens outside of the school, particularly the conditions leading to trauma, and must therefore invest in and adopt trauma-informed care practices. However, interviewees also insisted that schools cannot tackle the complex issue of youth disconnection alone.

The impact of youth disconnection from school extends far beyond the youth and the schools they attend. This community-wide issue deserves the attention of many stakeholders. Intermediaries described their vision for an integrated, comprehensive system of supportive infrastructure from multiple sectors that transcends the practices of individual organizations and fosters young people's connections to pathways that nurture individual needs.

## Youth Perspectives

**Three youth focus groups were conducted and included a total of 22 youth. The host sites, two schools and one youth-serving organization, were selected to include a group of relatively connected youth, previously disconnected youth who were reconnected to school, and currently disconnected youth. The participants in each group were identified by the respective school or organization.**

### Youth: Causes of disconnection

Understanding young people's perceptions of the causes of disconnection is critically important and highlights the existing gaps in our current youth-supporting infrastructure. Their insights also have implications on the preventive mechanisms that could be put into place to support young people and keep them engaged and on track to graduate from high school, matriculate into and persist through postsecondary programs, and succeed in life. Based on their own experiences and their observations of their peers, these young people identified several factors that they felt lead to disconnection from school.

Among the varied responses, several common themes, as well as striking differences, arose. The causes are organized by domain below, in order of occurrence.

### Youth-centered (individual characteristics and risk factors)

Youth-centered factors were cited as the leading cause of disconnection by focus group participants. Overall, participants offered 58 total causes of disconnection, 24 of which were youth-centered (41%). Factors included difficulty focusing (9), an inability to engage academically (6), absenteeism (5), and behavior and discipline issues (3).

Nine young people detailed how an inability to consistently focus caused them to disengage from school. Several of these young people described how a key component of their difficulty focusing was peer pressure and distractions generated by peer groups. Most participants who discussed their struggles with focusing felt like as they grew older, they were better able to focus, as this was a natural part of maturing.

> *I dropped out in 10th grade because I was never focused in school. But next week, I'm starting to work on my GED.*

> *As a freshman, I wasn't serious about classes. Junior and senior year, I realized the importance of focusing. Freshman and sophomore years are about finding yourself. Junior and senior year, you're more focused on priorities. This is just a part of life and growing. Programs couldn't have helped me stay more connected.*

> *I didn't realize how serious I needed to be.*

> *I gave up easily when things were hard.*

> *Girls played a huge part in getting me off track. I missed a couple of essays because of them.*

> *I was distracted by girls and just wanted to party and have fun. I didn't want to be stuck in school all the time. My biggest problem was that I was the class clown. I liked to make everybody laugh and that's why the teachers thought I was distracting kids and stuff.*

> *I got involved with the wrong people.*

An inability to engage academically was cited as a cause of disconnection among seven of 22 young people interviewed. While four focus group participants stated that school was too difficult for them to make smooth, timely transitions into successive grades, two stated that school was too easy. In each case, a lack of academic connection left these students feeling bored and disengaged, and eventually led to interruptions in their academic careers.

> [My old school] gave me everything. Extracurriculars, other activities, but the work was too hard, so they couldn't pass me.

> School was too hard. I didn't get it, so I was bored and didn't go.

> My school gave me activities, but I was bored and not challenged. The school gave me nothing to expand my mind, so my attendance was bad.

> I have a 3.8. School has always been really easy to me, no problem. But the ACT is the hardest. It is so hard. I've never learned any of this. I was like, 'what is this?' It's the hardest test I've ever taken in my life.

> I got through high school, no problem. Got my diploma [...] High school wasn't much to me because [...] half of the stuff I know because I like to study a lot anyway outside of school. So it was a learning experience, but at the same time it was a joke to me. It didn't really challenge me enough. I wasn't in AP classes. I had dual credit, which didn't challenge me. From my sophomore to my senior year, I didn't do a page of homework. I was going to hang out with my friends, not stress out.

Poor attendance was also cited as a cause of disconnection. Five focus group participants described how, for a variety of reasons, some of which had little to do with school at all, they missed large amounts of school and could not catch up. While attendance is not necessarily a root cause of disconnection in all cases, research explains that it is a telling symptom. Focus group participants' sentiments echo the idea that attendance has grave implications on a student's ability to remain connected to school.

> I didn't go to class from December to the end of the year.

> I loved my old school, but they had no choice but to take away my credits because of my poor attendance.

> I didn't go to school and then my grades dropped. I found school boring.

> I missed 21 days my senior year.

Three focus group participants described how disciplinary issues had implications that caused interruptions in their academic tracks. Focus group participants also described how disciplinary issues that arose in school were related to factors outside of school.

> I didn't really have a lot of problems with school. I got locked up and couldn't finish school. I planned on finishing school, but it never really happened. I did go back and get my GED though.

> Honestly, I was in custody. I was in and out of different states, different homes, fighting, going to jail, going to [the juvenile detention center], jacking people up, getting jacked up. Different stuff. I fought a couple teachers. I fought principals. I was a bad kid. I used to love fighting. But the simple fact is that I can say that I was going through stuff in my household.

## External influences
## (family and community/contextual)

External factors were cited as causes of disconnection in 20 (34%) of the 58 responses. External causes included issues at home (13), health issues (6), and financial needs (2).

Difficulties at home, or what one young person described simply as "life," were the leading causes of disconnection cited overall. Thirteen of 22 young people explicitly brought up home issues. For some, such difficulties translated into resentment for school, as they could not dedicate time to school and therefore could not succeed there.

> I was always focused on the outside. Had a lot of family problems so I had to drop out freshman year.

> High school, I hated it. I was taking care of my cousins and my nephews in California. When I was in Washington, in my 11th year, I dropped out and came here and got my GED [...] I personally hated high school. I never got to enjoy it. I was on football, track, but as far as the classes went, I was never there. If you looked at my grades, you would think I was illiterate. I was never there because I was taking care of the kids.

*My sister went and had a baby. My father got sick. My mother had just passed. So everything in the house was not really magic. My older brother and sister stayed in different places so me and my sister had to stay so I let her graduate and I just stayed home.*

*I had a lot of problems at home. My mama was being abused, which is why I'm abusive unfortunately. My mama was being abused and I had to watch that so I went to school and because I of course couldn't fight a man, I fought other people, fought other girls at school. I just took my frustrations out on other people and sometimes I still do that, but I'm a human.*

*I was going through stuff in my household. I was sexually and mentally abused. My mom was getting beat [...] My father beat my mom and then they'd pop out kids [...] There were a lot of kids. At the same time, she couldn't fend for herself. I had to be the mother, the sister, the social worker, everything. I had to go out there and get it. It wasn't easy at all. Many times, I'd cry, but I had to be there for my brothers and sisters. They thank me [now], but I'm a different person because of it. I got so tired of beatings, I started fighting for her and then she'd come up and say 'Why you putting your hand on my husband?' It was so much stuff going on. I would say to my mom, 'You're so stupid, so dumb. I would never be like you [...]' You know what makes me mad? When I'm asleep and she come and say, 'He going to kill us. I'm bleeding, please come on downstairs. He gonna kill us.'*

*What caused me to get off track was the death of my mother [...] then my son got sick so that's why I went on leave of absence [from college] til next year. My son, his sickness, and me trying to monitor his health.*

*My mom passed away when I was young. My dad was going through his second divorce when I was in high school. My grandma, she was also going through a divorce, so I had a lot of issues at home. I don't think I got off track in high school, but I still feel like I could have applied myself more.*

*I went through domestic violence with my mom and my step daddy. With my second baby daddy, I went through it [...] When domestic violence went from my mama to me, I just was like, 'What did I do to get this? I don't deserve this.'*

Health issues were explicitly cited as a factor that caused six focus group participants to get off track in school. Responses included accounts of behavioral and physical health issues.

*With my anxiety and insulin stuff, I had to be treated in the hospital and different stuff like that. Then I had my daughter so [...] I will have my next child soon, and then I'll probably go back to school.*

*My main problem in high school was substance abuse. I was bad. I was snorting about two grams of heroin in a day. I pretty much started out school as a joke. It would just get on my nerves because I have really bad ADHD and I had to sit there, twitching and twiddling, and I didn't like it. I didn't get along with a lot of my teachers, not going to lie. We clashed heads. I would go in their class and find five ways to make them mad. It was pretty easy. Plus, with me, my anxiety, my heart is pounding.*

*I've always had problems. I could never focus, never concentrate, had anxiety, really bad memory problems. A lot of things I was learning in school, I would forget when it came down to taking the test. Everything I learned, I wouldn't remember it even if I studied and studied. I always had a lot of psychological problems that took over school.*

*I had lost my best friend so I had a lot of depression. Just a lot of things.*

*I want to go back to school, but I have to get stuff straight with my kids first. I was going to go to [college] for my medical assistant degree, but my son wound up getting sick so once I get that straight, I'm going back to school.*

Two focus group participants explained how the need to earn money immediately proved a competing priority with high school and ultimately led them to drop out. Although both of these young people realized that school in the long run would likely help them secure jobs, they chose illegal, but immediate ways of earning money instead.

*Another reason was fast money. I was making like a thousand dollars every two days. I just stopped going and didn't go back.*

## School-centered

Overall, school-based factors were least often cited as causes of disconnection. Fourteen of the 58 total responses (24 percent) were school-centered issues. Of those that were cited, school-centered causes included the idea that school cultures were not responsive to young people's needs (8), the rocky transition from middle school to high school (4), and structural issues related to schools, such as inexperienced teachers and school shutdowns and takeovers (2).

Eight of 22 young people described a clash that they felt existed between the policies and cultures at school and their own developmental needs. Some explained that they had trouble reconciling their school schedules with outside obligations, such as jobs and family care. Others described how they felt that the real-world connections between the content that they were learning and their goals for the future were lacking. Others yet discussed how the design and enforcement of strict disciplinary policies around certain aspects of school life such as uniforms did not necessarily take into account where the students were actually coming from.

*So I dropped out because I felt like everything they were teaching us--even though I was excelling--was unnecessary to the world.*

*I didn't try on my grades or pay attention in school. I didn't think it mattered; sometimes, I didn't think the schoolwork was important or relevant.*

*Too many rules that aren't about learning, like uniform violation. Many schools pay attention to all the wrong things. Don't worry about uniforms. Worry about education.*

*[Referring to an instance in which he wore the wrong color of shoes, one youth focus group participant responded,] 'You should be happy I left the projects to come here lookin' like a pack of Skittles.'*

*I am very outgoing and hate getting told what to do and in school, you have to sit there in class and write out stuff and do all this work. I couldn't stand sitting there in one little spot and [being told], 'Just do your work.' I know, but I just want to dance!*

*Here [alternative school], they treat you like adults. My old school didn't do this.*

Four of 22 participants described the transition from middle school to high school, which was, in their minds, rough, and caused them to initially lose their focus.

*Everybody started off wild freshmen year.*

*In middle school, you're more protected by teachers, but in high school it feels like you fail on your own.*

Two participants explicitly cited structural issues specific to the education reform movement as being causes of their disengagement.

*School was always easy for me, but I dropped out in 10th grade because I didn't have time for them to catch up with another school. Another school was interrupting [referring to charter takeover].*

*Some teachers are inexperienced and teach subjects outside their expertise.*

# Youth: Causes Response Analysis

**From all interviews with youth, school-centered causes of disconnection were most often cited, representing 46% of all responses. Youth-centered causes and external factors were equally weighted, both representing 27% of responses. On average, youth focus group participants cited seven general causes of disconnection. Table 13 displays the total responses each focus group cited by domain.**

Focus group participants represented three major stages along the spectrum from connection to disconnection. One focus group was held with high school seniors who were on track to graduate and matriculate into college; another group consisted of young people enrolled in an alternative high school who reconnected after a period of disconnection; another group yet consisted of young people who were disconnected from school and work.

To better understand the differences among youth, the total number of domains cited by youth were aggregated, and a percentage for each domain was calculated. This shows the extent to which the youth in focus groups cited each area within the domain.

## Youth: Causes of Disconnection Domains

### Youth-Centered
- Too distracted to focus on school
- Inability to engage academically (bored or too challenged)
- Absenteeism
- Discipline/behavioral issues

### External Influences
- External circumstances (e.g., family caretaker responsibility)
- Health issues
- Financial issues

### School-Centered
- School not responsive to youth's learning needs
- Rough transition from middle to high school
- Structures within the school (e.g., inexperienced teachers)

### Table 13: Youth Causes: Frequencies

|  | Youth-centered | External influences | School-centered | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Focus Group A: Connected | 6 | 2 | 6 | 14 |
| Focus Group B: Reconnecting | 8 | 0 | 5 | 13 |
| Focus Group C: Disconnected | 10 | 18 | 3 | 31 |
| **All Youth** | **24** | **20** | **14** | **58** |

### Table 14: Youth Causes: Emphasis

|  | Student-centered | External influences | School-centered |
|---|---|---|---|
| **School-based** | | | |
| Focus Group A: Connected | 43% | 14% | 43% |
| Focus Group B: Reconnecting | 62% | 0% | 38% |
| Focus Group C: Disconnected | 32% | 58% | 10% |
| **All Youth** | **41%** | **41%** | **24%** |

*Shaded Emphasis indicates that the interviewee cited causes within the domain relatively more often than the average

** Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Together, all young people cited a total of 58 causes – 24 youth-centered, 20 external, and 14 school-centered. To determine which focus group types emphasized which domains relative to all youth, the percentage that an individual focus group cited a domain was compared to the percentage that all youth combined cited the respective domain (see Appendix C for details). Focus Group A placed greater relative emphasis on youth-centered (43 percent compared to the total youth's 41 percent) and school-centered factors (43 percent compared to the total youth's 24 percent). Table 14 represents emphasis.

Participants of Focus Group A, a group of connected seniors in high school, and Focus Group B, a group of students enrolled into an alternative high school after a period of disconnection, were more likely to associate youth-centered causes with disconnection than Focus Group C participants, a group of disconnected youth. Focus Group A participants emphasized youth-centered causes relatively more often than causes in other domains, and gave more emphasis to this domain than the average of all youth. According to these interviewees, disconnection is strongly associated with factors that are directly linked to youth or that youth have relative control over, including an inability to focus academically, attendance, and behavior and discipline issues.

Participants of Focus Group C were more likely to associate disconnection with external factors. These young people felt that disconnection is associated with factors that are often circumstantial or linked to students' out-of-school environments. Financial and health issues pertaining to young people themselves as well as to family members or friends are included in this domain.

Focus Group A and Focus Group B participants were also more likely to associate disconnection with school-centered factors. School-centered causes of disconnection include those over which the school has control or influence, such as rough transitions between middle and high school and teachers and other staff whom the youth perceived as inexperienced. Both focus groups cited school-centered factors relatively more frequently than than FG-C participants.

# The Definition of engagement

Participants in youth focus groups were asked to define what engagement looks like to them. In total, participants offered 19 responses to this question, which fit the following themes: the ability to focus and prioritize (12), engagement in extracurricular activities (4), and engagement in the classroom (3).

The ability to focus on goals was cited as the leading characteristic of engagement. Young people described how making school a priority was a key to being engaged. These young people also articulated that being engaged in school meant setting their sights on large goals, such as graduating high school, persisting through college, and establishing good careers.

> *Extracurriculars are important, though if teachers give you hands-on work, you can be involved without extra-curriculars. It's important that we're not sitting at our desks and just being lectured and watching movies.*

> *[Doing] whatever I have to do to get up out of here. Keep my priorities straight, but also make the best of it.*

> *Hearing some people's stories about getting through school and all the hard work they put into it [...] that kind of motivates me. Just hearing about success stories makes me want to do it.*

> *[After] I dropped out, I realized how much I needed my GED, needed to get my diploma. Got my GED and now I'm in college.*

> *It's always good to have a motivation towards your goal. Otherwise you'd be miserable studying.*

> *I never understood the stress until I got to college [...] Then I understood. But I wanted to learn. I wasn't interested in learning anything in middle school and high school but in college, I wanted to learn because in the end, I knew I could better myself [...] College is like a variety of people, different ages, you know, so you can't really be like on the childish level all the time. You can have fun, but not all the time. You have to be serious at some point, especially if you want to succeed. You have to take school seriously.*

Participation in extracurricular activities was an important factor in engagement according to four young people. This included involvement in school town hall, being a student ambassador, and participating in sports, band, and clubs. For some young people who struggled, these activities were the only aspect of school that engaged them.

> *Personally, I hated school. The only thing I liked was PE and football. And pep rallies. I'm very outgoing and hate getting told what to do and in school, you have to sit there in class and write out stuff and do all this work. [During pep rallies and PE], everyone gets to act all crazy and cheerful [...] [I got to] be who I am.*

We asked the youth in our focus groups how they would rate their own engagement levels to school, work, and life, with a score of 1 representing the lowest level of engagement and a score of 10 representing the highest possible level of engagement.

| Table 15: Youth Perceptions of Their Own Engagement | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Focus Group A: Connected | Focus Group B: Reconnecting | Focus Group C: Disconnected |
| | 8.5 | 10 | 9.5 |
| | 9 | 10 | 1 |
| | 6 | 10 | 8 |
| | 6.5 | 10 | 1 |
| | 8.5 | | 2.75 |
| | 6.5 | | 9 |
| | | | 7 |
| | | | 8 |
| | | | 5 |
| | | | 7 |
| | | | 7.5 |
| | | | 3 |
| **Average** | **7.5** | **10** | **5.73** |

## Youth: Strategies for Engagement

**Youth were asked about how they defined engagement in school, how they would rate their own levels of engagement, and what strategies they would employ to keep more young people connected to school if they were able. Their insights were based on their own experiences and observations, and therefore highlight the supports that are most relevant to them. In many cases, the strategies mentioned are closely related to the perceived causes.**

Focus group participants suggested strategies for keeping young people engaged. In total, 56 responses were shared. Responses were then organized by domain. School-centered tactics were suggested most frequently, in 37 of 56 responses (66%), youth-centered tactics characterized 17 of 56 responses (30%), and tactics involving external factors represented the remaining 2 of 56 responses (4%).

### School-centered

School-centered strategies were cited most frequently, representing 37 of 56 responses. These strategies fit into the following themes: relationships with caring adults (10), a school environment that is responsive to students' individual needs (9), involvement in extracurricular activities (5), a supportive environment that allows students to make up for academic deficits (4), an environment that does not let students fail (4), and an engaging curriculum (3).

Establishing genuine relationships with supportive adults and young people was suggested as a critical aspect of youth development by 10 of 22 youth participating in focus groups. While some young people felt that they could have done a better job accepting help from adults and professionals during times of struggle, others felt like the adults offering support didn't really try to get to know them, which prevented them from establishing trust and accepting the help offered.

> *If you have a good relationship with teachers, which is the responsibility of both the student and the teachers, they will meet you after school [and even] on weekends.*

> *Teachers and guidance counselors help kids from falling off track by advising them on what they need to graduate and go to college.*

> *When my mama died, I had three counselors, a shrink, and five different medications. It was crazy. It's hard to sit there and face people at school and think about things that are going on in your mind. Like, my mother just passed and you're really about to sit here and be like, 'Oh, you're my friend.' You weren't there at the funeral, at the burial. Get out of my face [...] Teachers tried, the counselors tried.*

> *There's a lot of support here [transitional housing facility for youth] and that's one of the reasons I keep coming back here [...] I've been coming here since I was 17. I'm 21 now.*

> *My mother should have been a mother and my father should have been a father. I feel like they made me be an adult from an early age. I didn't have a chance to be a child. I had to grow up at an early age, so I had to change diapers and you know, do mother duties [...] I never got what I wanted, always had to give away or get hand-me-downs. When I got older, no one asked me what I want.*

Providing a school environment that is responsive to the individualized needs of young people was suggested by nine of 22 focus group participants. This included understanding the personal challenges that young people are dealing with inside and outside of school and supporting them to accomplish their personal goals.

> *[This alternative school] allows you to work at your own pace; gets you the courses you need.*

> *Here, there are opportunities to pursue your interests and build relevant skills outside of the classroom, like certificates for hospitality. That's kept me engaged.*

> *I pretty much started out school as a joke [...] I got through high school, no problem. Got my diploma. I promised myself it wouldn't be the same once I got to college. Like I would take it more seriously because now I'm focusing on my career and the rest of my life [...] I know it'll be different once I get into college because I'll get my business degree and maybe [a degree in] music.*

> *I went to a really big high school so I was just another kid. If they tried to sit down and actually work with me, like one on one, I think that would have helped me a lot. But I never really got that.*

*Most of my problems were domestic problems [...] I guess the best thing they could have done was have some empathy and be a little understanding, give support [...] Some support would have made it better.*

Five focus group participants stressed the importance of an engaging curriculum and engaging teachers.

*I always felt like if I had a teacher that was really cool and down to earth, I would actually do the work in his class 'cause I thought he was cool [...] I had this [math] teacher... I hated math but he was the coolest teacher ever so I always loved his class because he made it fun[...] [In most cases,] if we were learning about something I wanted to learn about, I'd do it like that. But if it was something boring [...] I'd just blank out and stare at the walls the whole time.*

For some young people in focus groups, participating in extracurricular activities represented a primary hook that got them to attend school each day. Others felt like connection to such outlets was not necessary for everyone, but could prevent disengagement for some students. Involvement in extracurricular activities was a key strategy of engaging young people according to five of 22 focus group participants.

*This year [senior year], I joined a business club and a community service club. I liked them, but it was mainly to make myself more competitive in the college application process.*

*They're not necessary to engagement, but they could keep someone who's thinking of dropping out engaged.*

Four of 22 participants stressed the importance of a school environment that does not allow young people to fail. Some felt that teachers should be held more accountable for young people's success or failure.

*They don't let any seniors fail here. This is true of most grades, but senior year, it's not an option.*

*Teachers need to take responsibility for each student along [his or her] path. They should be required to offer after-school tutoring.*

*Schools need good teachers that make sure all students are where they should be and prepare them not to fail.*

*Teachers who care—call me, call my parents. Tell me to come to school, get back on track, learn.*

Four of 22 participants also suggested that schools should allow opportunities for students to catch up when they are behind and support students trying to make up for academic deficits. These four young people were from the same school, and lauded their school for providing such opportunities as Saturday classes for making up credits and others.

*Teachers like [calls out specific teacher] identify you if you're slipping to bring up your grades*

*You can retake classes you didn't do well in during the previous semesters.*

Three focus group participants also described what being engaged academically means to them. Project-based, interactive, and experiential learning were cited as important.

*Make learning more fun.*

*Don't just have us work on computers.*

## Youth-centered (Individual Characteristics and Risk Factors)

Overall, participants came up with 56 strategies, 17 of which were youth-centered (32%). These strategies fall into the following themes: steadfast focus on and commitment to goals (14) and having a peer group that is supportive of and not a distraction from reaching these goals (3).

Remaining focused and goal-driven in school and life was the engagement strategy most frequently mentioned by youth focus group participants. Fourteen of 22 young people suggested this strategy, explaining how goals help make learning and schooling relevant and a priority. Some focus group members also discussed how getting closer to accomplishing their goals, such as high school graduation, helped them stay engaged and on track.

*I thought about dropping out at one point, but once I felt like I was closer to my goal [graduating], I got back on track.*

*With school, it's not hard. It's what you put your mind to. If you put your mind to it, you can do it. You got to believe it to achieve it. So do what you got to do, focus on school, pay attention, and make it worth your while.*

*[Referring to the focus and maturity she'd gained over the last few years] What changed between then and now [...] when I was 18, I got a serious health problem [diagnosed with a virus] and I wanted to live my life. I want to do everything that I said I was going to do. I don't have time to sit back and chill when I could be doing something with my life. When I go out, I want people to be like, '[She] did this, [She] did this. She was this type of person, she encouraged me to do this.' That's what I want. I don't need nobody talking bad about me. That's really what changed.*

*Basically what got me back in school was knowing that I couldn't do nothing without school. Fast money don't get you nowhere but jail, dead. You gotta get it some kinda way. So that just made me wanna better myself through education. I changed my way of thinking.*

*The abuse I got from my family—it actually put me back on track and I wanted to show them that I was better than what they were saying.*

On a related note, three of 22 focus group participants stated that having a peer group that is supportive of and not a distraction from reaching these goals was a critical component of engagement. Based on their own experiences, youth in one focus group debated the role that friends played in their abilities to focus or get off track.

*I think it's a lot easier to learn in high school if you have a clear mind. If you have friends and there's not a whole lot of drama going on in your life, it's so much easier to learn in high school. If you stick to yourself and don't make a lot of friends, really nervous all the time, then it's a lot harder to learn in high school.*

*Seriously, the more friends I got, the harder it was. You focus on your friends more. You gotta pry away.*

## External Influences (family and community/contextual)

External influences factored only slightly into students' strategies for reconnection. Two young people participating in focus groups specifically suggested that external factors must be managed for a young person to fully and consistently engage in school. Both people stated that they did not have underlying philosophical issues with school. In fact, one such person stated that he loved school. In both cases, external factors got in the way.

*Whenever I situate myself mentally and figure out a way to concentrate and actually focus better on things, school is great. I love it.*

*Honestly, there's nothing [that anyone could've done to help while I was struggling]. My problem is that I didn't have problems at school. The fights and stuff I had at school, it really started at home.*

# Youth: Strategies Response Analysis

**The domains identified from the young people's strategies for student engagement can be categorized as youth-centered, external influences, and school-centered.**

Youth most often cited strategies for engagement that centered on the role of the school, representing 66 percent of all responses. Youth-centered responses were the second-most-often cited strategy, representing 30 percent of all responses. External influences represented just four percent of all responses.

Instances in which an individual focus group's percentage surpassed that of all youth were considered instances of emphasis for a particular domain (see Table 17).

Overall, connected, reconnected, and disconnected youth overlapped in certain domains that they emphasized. However, there were also noticeable areas of difference. As a whole, there was no overlap between the domains that disconnected youth emphasized relative to their connected and reconnecting counterparts.

Based on the analysis, youth connected (FG-A) or recently reconnected (FG-B) to school emphasized school-centered strategies more than average. Responses included reflections about school personnel, learning environments that facilitate student engagement, and the availability of engaging activities inside and outside the classroom.

Disconnected youth (FG-C) emphasized a strategy for engagement that focused on youth-centered notions more than the average. These young people described strategies in which they recognized their own agency in steering their futures. Examples included remaining focused on goals above all else and using good judgment about which peers to surround themselves with.

Disconnected youth (FG-C) also emphasized the role that external influences have played in keeping them connected to (or disconnected from) school to a greater extent than the average. Specifically, the responses that fell into this domain addressed the importance of keeping external factors in check in order to be able to maintain focus on and consistency within school.

## Youth Voices: Strategies for Engagement Domains

### Youth-centered
- Focus and goal orientation
- Surrounding oneself with a supportive peer group

### External Influences
- Keeping external factors in check.

### School-centered
- Relationships with caring adults at school.
- Personalized, relevant learning environment
- Engaging in extracurricular activities
- Balance of quality academics, supportive teachers, and extracurricular activities
- A school environment that doesn't let students fail
- A school environment that provides students the opportunity to catch up

### Table 16: Youth Strategies: Frequencies

| | Youth-centered | External influences | School-centered | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Focus Group A: Connected | 5 | 0 | 12 | 17 |
| Focus Group B: Reconnecting | 6 | 0 | 14 | 20 |
| Focus Group C: Disconnected | 6 | 2 | 11 | 19 |
| **All Youth** | **17** | **2** | **37** | **56** |

### Table 17: Youth Strategies: Emphasis

| | Student-centered | External influences | School-centered |
|---|---|---|---|
| **School-based** | | | |
| Focus Group A: Connected | 29% | 0% | 71% |
| Focus Group B: Reconnecting | 30% | 0% | 70% |
| Focus Group C: Disconnected | 32% | 11% | 58% |
| **All Youth** | **30%** | **4%** | **66%** |

*Shaded Emphasis indicates that the interviewee cited causes within the domain relatively more often than the average

** Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Disconnected youth provided answers that fell into distinctively different domains from their relatively more connected counterparts. A variety of factors could be responsible for this distinction, including the fact that the vast majority of disconnected youth were undergoing therapeutic interventions and were therefore accustomed to the level of introspection that their youth-centered strategies suggested. With respect to the disconnected youth focus group's relative emphasis on external factors, several of these young people were actively trying to get external conditions in check at the time of the focus group. These conditions included caring for their children, tending to their own chronic illnesses or those of their family members, and severe financial issues, among others.

Another possible explanation for these distinctions may lie in the domains that the respective youth groups felt would be most critical to maintaining their connectedness or reconnecting altogether. Perhaps because the relatively more connected youth were in school at the time of the focus group, they provided responses that focused on their notions of high school as a critical step on the pathway to further educational attainment, careers, and overall success in life.

## Youth Perspectives: Conclusion

The youth participating in focus groups represented varying levels of connection—one focus group consisted of young people connected to a high-performing high school, one group included youth who were reconnected to school after previous periods of disconnection, and one focus group included youth who were disconnected from school and work. Across all focus groups and the various stages of connection and disconnection that the youth within them represented, one thing was clear—youth have spent time reflecting on the issues surrounding engagement and disengagement to school, and have developed ideas for how schools, adults, institutions, and the community can support them in their journeys into adulthood and independence.

Because of the differences in their experiences, needs, and individual circumstances, youth in our focus groups identified a variety of causes of youth disconnection. Both similarities and differences were apparent. While just two individual causes of 11 were mentioned by all three focus groups, several individual causes were cited by participants of at least two different groups.

All young people participating in the focus groups highlighted their perceived disconnection between students' learning needs and the cultures and policies that many schools create. They elaborated by stating that policies aimed at enforcing structures such as walking in lines or strict adherence to a dress code have little to do with actual learning needs and learning goals. Furthermore, focus group participants stated that such policies do not take into consideration the obstacles that several of them overcome in order to show up at school ready to learn each day. Not having the right color shoes, they contended, paled in comparison to arriving on time despite the traumatic events they may have witnessed the night before. Walking in lines, they argued, does not signify readiness to learn. Many students acknowledged the need for structures. However, they felt like the schools they currently attend or had attended previously were not instituting the right structures.

The second cause cited by at least one participant of each focus group was that academics did not meet their needs because they were either too elementary or too challenging. Depending on skill levels, needs, and the rigor of the academic programs offered, participants varied in stating that the schools they attend(ed) were too challenging or too easy for them. Regardless, those who mentioned such a mismatch concluded that the curriculum was not appropriate for and relevant to their individual needs.

With respect to the domains each focus group emphasized, young people varied in the extent of emphasis placed on those causes. When individual causes were categorized by domain and assigned a measure of emphasis, interesting patterns emerged. Connected and reconnecting youth illustrated the same patterns of emphasis in their responses. These patterns did not overlap with that of the disconnected youth in our sample.

The connected and reconnecting youth focus groups in our sample emphasized youth-centered and school-centered causes. The focus group comprised of disconnected youth emphasized external factors. Like all youth participants, the young people who comprised the connected and reconnecting focus groups answered the interview questions based on their own experiences or those of peers who struggled with disconnection. By emphasizing youth- and school-centered causes over external factors, these youth illustrated that from their perspectives, school- and youth-centered factors create the greatest potential barriers to student engagement and persistence through school.

Causes within the external conditions domain were emphasized relatively more often in interviews with young people from Focus Group C, a group of disconnected youth. These young people felt that disconnection is associated with factors that are often circumstantial or linked to students' out-of-school environments. Financial and health issues pertaining to the young person as well as to family members or friends are included in this domain. Unprompted, more than half of the participants in the disconnected youth focus group stated that they had lost their mothers before the age of 18. Every one of them also discussed three or more traumatic experiences that they had endured in their lives, including homelessness, the events of Hurricane Katrina, poverty, loss of a parent, sexual or domestic abuse, incarceration, and violence, among others.

Of the strategies for engagement cited, most were directly tied to causes that focus group participants cited. For example, one cause of disconnection cited was that youth do not apply enough focus and attention to their goals. Relatedly, several youth brought up an engagement strategy about the importance of goal orientation. Others yet mentioned that they strategically surrounded themselves with peers who support and reinforce these goals. The patterns around domains emphasized by youth overlapped and differed in some interesting areas with respect to causes and strategies cited. The cause and strategy patterns for school-centered and external factors emphasized looked similar; disconnected youth emphasized external causes and strategies, while connected and reconnecting youth emphasized school-centered causes and strategies.

Despite variances based on individual experience, all youth passionately shared personal insights into disconnection and their thoughtful strategies for addressing it. Several of them were putting their theories into practice in their own lives by identifying interests and people that keep them engaged, going back to school to get their diploma and continuing on their journey into adulthood, and sorting out external factors in their lives that have proven to be the largest obstacles to their connection in the past. Their stories provide first-hand accounts of the grit and courage that it takes to pursue their goals unwaveringly in spite of the risk factors and weak safety nets constantly presenting obstacles to their success.

# Conclusion



**School disconnection impacts both youth and society in a variety of profound ways. Every young person has unique needs, skills, and goals. Based on their own experiences, school leaders, community-based organization leaders, and young people have unique and personal feelings about the nature of student disconnection. While our research illustrated notable themes and differences between various stakeholder groups interviewed, one point is clear: there is no one-size-fits-all solution to address youth disconnection.**

The school leaders, intermediary leaders, and youth in our sample expressed similar priorities for youth engagement in key areas—academic rigor, quality instruction, relevance of the curriculum, relationships with caring adults in schools, and responsibility for engagement.

School leaders, intermediary leaders, and youth were clear that too many young people begin high school when they are already behind, academically and developmentally. Lack of academic preparation requires schools to offer remedial courses. Students articulated how their middle schools were more forgiving and did not hold them accountable for their actions the way that their high schools did, leading to difficult transitions. Other students explained that their first two years of high school were mostly about learning to focus and take things seriously, that they did not hit the ground running beginning freshman year. All schools used a variety of tools in an attempt to compen-

sate for these deficits, but nobody felt like their school had gotten it right.

Quality instruction was also cited as key to student connection across all stakeholder groups interviewed. Many school leaders considered quality instruction to be their primary engagement strategy. Therefore, when asked about the costs they incur trying to keep students engaged, they answered that 100 percent of their budget is directed towards this goal. Intermediaries and youth also echoed the importance of quality instruction. Some discontented youth cited inexperienced instructors and low-quality lessons as a cause of disconnection, while other young people recalled forming newfound passions for subject material based on a teacher's engaging lessons.

All stakeholders also agreed that students' engagement is dependent on whether they find school relevant to their lives. School leaders stressed the importance of adapting to students' individual learning needs and long-term goals. Specific measures that school leaders listed as essential to individualizing the learning experience included individualized education plans, project-based learning, and internships with local employers. Some intermediary leaders expressed that at times school staffs' lack of cultural competency precludes them from relating to students and helping students understand the relevance of what they are learning. Across the board, youth stressed that having and focusing on their goals helped them stay engaged even during difficult times.

Relationships with teachers and staff at school were also cited as important to connection. School leaders discussed the role of teachers as advocates for their students. The advisory model was frequently cited as a solid relationship building platform. Several school leaders stated that teachers' roles in students' lives did not end at the end of the school day. Often, teachers are expected to hold office hours, be available to answer students' questions through in-person meetings or by phone or email at night or on weekends, check in with parents during and after school hours, and overall, recognize through data and regular interactions when students are slipping.

Strong relationships with teachers were also cited as important to youth, who described at length the teachers and support staff who had taken the time in the past to pay attention to them and who showed that they cared about them. The youth also described in equal amounts of detail teachers and support staff who showed signs of disinvestment in their students' lives.

With respect to the question of who is ultimately responsible for student engagement beyond a caring adult at school, all stakeholders responded that several parties play a role in the equation, and that there is no correct formula. However, there were a few general themes, including the important roles that family members, adults and mentors in the community, peers, and the youth themselves play. Interviewees generally agreed that youth need to demonstrate initiative, but they also need to be surrounded by a safety net to support them and prevent failure.

Youth in our focus groups expressed the strongest feelings about their own efforts and engagement in their futures. Connected and disconnected students alike focused on the importance of having and pursuing goals. Disconnected students, even those who had experienced multiple traumatic events, felt that their own lack of focus had contributed to their disconnection. When we met them, these same young people were dedicating considerable time and effort towards rebuilding their own lives.

School and intermediary leaders alike recognized that there are early signs of disconnection that appear in school. Most school leaders said that they appoint staff members to be responsible for continuously tracking data about attendance, behavior, and academic performance. Some school leaders said that staff members practice communication and self-advocacy tactics with students to teach them to ask for help when needed. Youth also vocalized their need for support to prevent them from slipping through the cracks when they showed signs of disconnection. Few schools have mechanisms or resources to intervene in these signs on an adequate scale.

While school leaders, intermediary leaders, and youth shared many common beliefs about student engagement, they also had differences of opinion about other aspects of engagement. Such factors as school culture and policies, the types of interventions utilized, and the system-wide supports necessary to help students reconnect were all topics that were considered critical issues in student engagement. While there was generally consensus within each group of stakeholders interviewed about the most effective ways to utilize these tools, each stakeholder group's opinion differed from the others.

All stakeholders interviewed acknowledged that youth need and want structure, but they differed in their views of how these structures are implemented and their degrees of effectiveness. Most importantly, all interview groups wanted structure and culture to support a strong learning environment. Several school leaders voiced that discipline policies were intended to preserve the school's standards around academic rigor and strong character. Several intermediary leaders and youth challenged the notion that such disciplinary policies as strict dress codes and walking in straight lines directly connected to or enhanced learning goals. These stakeholders also commented on the schools' lack of sensitivity with respect to strict policies, stating that policies do not take into consideration students' home lives and personal challenges. Lastly, intermediary leaders discussed the school to prison pipeline, describing the experiences and outcomes of past students after disciplinary measures were taken.

Several intermediaries, both school-supporting and community-supporting, cited schools' lack of knowledge about and use of trauma-informed care methods in schools as a missed opportunity to intervene in warning signs of disconnection. Furthermore, intermediary leaders felt that a lack of appropriate, trauma-informed interventions can compromise trust and exacerbate the cycle leading to students' disconnection. Some youth in our sample who had experienced trauma also recalled ineffective attempts at intervention, which felt inauthentic and insensitive considering their situations. School leaders consistently did not mention trauma-informed care methodologies as strategies for intervening in the lives of youth on pathways to disconnection.

In all interviews, school and intermediary leaders cited the lack of a comprehensive, communitywide youth support system as a systemic cause of student disconnection. Several school and intermediary leaders recognized that schools alone could not tackle the issue of student engagement.

School leaders discussed the importance of partnerships, but most of the partnerships they referred to were resource-intensive and based on individual relationships; these relationships had not been formalized or systematized.

Intermediaries in our sample described the need in New Orleans for something more systematized—an independent entity responsible for aligning direct service providers in the delivery of high quality services to young people to support their transitions into adulthood and independence. These intermediaries also described a unique data collection function that such an entity would fulfill by tracking youth outcomes.

# Recommendations

The school and intermediary leaders and especially the youth participating in this study provided candid insight and reflection into the challenges and successes of high school students. Based on their conversations, several important lessons surfaced.

## Youth-Centered

**Youth have goals.** They may not always articulate their goals well nor always have information about the steps to reach their goals; but they come to high school with ideas about what they want to achieve in their lives. Furthermore, youth feel engaged and are less likely to disconnect when they have a clear direction, understand the steps necessary to reach their goals, and take responsibility to those steps.

RECOMMENDATION:
*Begin career counseling as early as freshman year with regular check-ins throughout the year and continue with more focused career counseling leading to and including senior year. Schools can engage community partners to increase students' exposure to college and career pathways.*

**Youth rely on support from their peers.** Youth and adults recognize the influence and pressure that peer groups provide – both positive and negative. It is important to create a high school environment where supportive peer relationships develop.

RECOMMENDATION:
*Provide formal opportunities for peer-to-peer support. Some schools utilize ninth grade summer orientations and ninth grade academies to develop a supportive culture among their incoming students.*

## External Influences

**Youth engagement is threatened by factors external to school and often beyond the control of youth.** Basic needs must be met before a student can be fully and successfully engaged in his or her education. Although schools cannot address every issue a student may face, there are some ways that schools can be prepared to effectively intervene.

RECOMMENDATION:
*Establish early warning indicators of disconnection, monitor and use data to target interventions. On-time analysis of data such as attendance, behavior, and academic progress would enable schools to identify and address issues in a timely manner. In addition, schools can provide extra support and social services to youth in need through partnerships with nonprofit service providers or professional support organizations.*

*Train staff in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) and trauma-informed care, and implement both approaches school-wide. Behavior expectations become as important as any core curriculum subject. Using the train-the-trainer model, schools can train a team that would be responsible for supporting the entire staff as the school implements PBIS and trauma-informed care.*

**Schools alone cannot tackle youth disconnection.** Community members and community based organizations must support schools' efforts and ensure that young people are supported along their pathways into adulthood.

RECOMMENDATION:
*Work to build capacity within New Orleans' existing youth development collective impact effort, YouthShift. By working together to lay the foundation for success, a community change process such as YouthShift can yield lasting benefits not only for young people but also for city government, schools, and the communities they serve.*

## School-centered

**Youth need to know that someone cares and believes in them.** Building a relationship with at least one adult provides a student with support, encouragement, and accountability. School leaders interviewed in this study mentioned a variety of ways, formal and informal, that school staff connects with students.

RECOMMENDATION:
*Establish a school culture where adults feel responsible for developing meaningful relationships with students and each student has a connection with an adult that he or she trusts and respects. Schools can formalize these connections through advisory, mentorship programs, and extracurricular activities.*

**Youth are engaged in learning when it is relevant and personal.** Youth want to learn, especially if they can see how it relates to their lives and future. Schools need to listen to the hopes and dreams of their students. It is important to honor the student's vision.

RECOMMENDATION:
*Provide students with a variety of project-based learning opportunities and internships. Project-based learning allows students to explore real-world problems, inspiring students to obtain deeper knowledge and interest in the subjects. Internships give students exposure to the workplace and help develop a greater sense of responsibility.*

**Youth want to be challenged academically and provided with support to succeed.** Student disconnection often occurs when students are bored. Challenging coursework keeps students engaged.

RECOMMENDATION:
*Expand the opportunity to enroll in college-prep curriculum and rigorous courses to all students. Students should be encouraged to enroll in Advanced Placement courses and take advantage of dual enrollment opportunities. Students should also be informed of rigorous career and technical education options*

**Youth take responsibility for their success or failure.** Youth want to be held accountable for their actions and respected as individuals. Many youth may feel rules and regulations that extend beyond the scope of academics are excessive, demeaning, and too difficult to abide by given the challenges they face. High school students' behavior should be guided by discipline policies that allow them to make choices and take responsibility for their behavior.

RECOMMENDATION:
*Establish school discipline policies that support educational excellence while keeping the needs of youth front and center. Schools should examine their discipline policies and codes of conduct to ensure that all policies enhance learning and are not excessively punitive.*

**Youth should attend a high school that supports their vision.** The "no excuses" model must recognize the unique skills, talents, and aspirations of all students and guide students in the direction that gets them closer to their life goals. Schools do not always understand the ways harsh disciplinary action and legal involvement impact the future of their students. Schools must be held accountable for these efforts and student results.

RECOMMENDATION:
*As one intermediary leader suggested, a 'youth justice seal of approval' should be created. This document could be similar to a school report card, but focus on issues related to social justice.*

**Youth don't want adults to give up on them.** Despite how independent some students may act, all students want and need adult support. Having a constant presence in the lives of youth matters and can go a long way to prevent disconnection.

RECOMMENDATION:
*Give students a chance to make up and catch up. Failure is not an option. There should be effective opportunities within the school day, after school hours, or on weekends for students to make up work or receive remediation in subjects where they have fallen behind.*

# Appendix A: Methodology

Interviews with high school leaders and staff were conducted in July and August 2013, with 12 high schools represented. Leaders of five intermediary organizations were interviewed during July and August 2013. Three youth focus groups were conducted during August and September 2013. The focus groups included a total of 22 youth at various levels of connection and disconnection.

## Principal Interviews

The Cowen Institute contacted all leaders of charter management organizations in June 2013 for approval to interview principals and staff at their schools. High school principals were then contacted by email; the email included information about the project, the purpose of the interview, and options for scheduling the interview. We followed each email with a phone call, providing the principal with an opportunity to ask any questions and schedule a time for the interview. 12 high schools are represented in our sample.

The majority of interviews were conducted with the school principal or assistant principal. In addition to school leaders, we talked with other members of the leadership team and student support staff, such as social workers, to get a varied perspective of the perception of students and the schools' efforts to address student disengagement.

The interviews were conducted in convenient, comfortable locations. At the beginning of each interview, we assured interviewees of their anonymity and asked them to share openly. We asked the same set of questions in each interview and prompted dialogue with probing questions, when necessary. During the interviews, Cowen Institute research staff audio-recorded the dialogue and took extensive notes.

Following interviews, Cowen Institute research staff transcribed, coded, and analyzed the dialogue, organizing responses into the overarching themes, domains, and topics that are presented in this report. Every effort was made to accurately capture the conversations and dialogue that took place during the interviews.

## Intermediary Interviews

Five community organizations (intermediaries) were selected and included in the analysis. These intermediary organizations were selected based on the close working relationships they have with schools or CBOs working with disconnected youth. Two organizations were selected because of their supportive relationships with schools and school staff. Three were selected because they interact directly with CBOs working with disconnected youth and have unique insights into the complex issues that Opportunity Youth face.

The intermediary interviews were conducted with the organization leader at their offices. At the beginning of each interview, we assured interviewees of their anonymity and asked them to share openly. We asked the same set of questions in each interview and prompted dialogue with probing questions, when necessary. The interview guide is located in Appendix B.

During the interviews, Cowen Institute research staff audio-recorded the dialogue and took extensive notes.

Following interviews, Cowen Institute research staff transcribed, coded, and analyzed the dialogue, organizing responses into the overarching themes/domains and topics that are presented in this report. Every effort was made to accurately capture the conversations and dialogue that took place during the interviews.

**Twelve school leaders are included in our sample. Some school leaders and staff were unavailable to participate given the timing of the interviews.

## Youth Focus Groups

Three focus groups with youth were conducted during August through September 2013 and included a total of 22 youth. The host sites, two schools and one youth-serving organization, were strategically selected to include a group of relatively connected youth, youth in the process of reconnecting to school after a period of disconnection, and currently disconnected youth.

The participants in each group were identified by their respective school or organization. The focus group participants had a wide range of characteristics. The average age of the focus group participants was 19 with ages ranging from 17 to 21 years old. Of the participants, 13 were enrolled in a high school or GED program, two were enrolled in college, and seven reported no connection to school. Of the participants, 16 were African American, five were white, and one was Hispanic. The focus groups were made up of nine boys and 13 girls. Based on those reporting a residential neighborhood, Gentilly, Mid-City, Uptown, and 3rd, 7th, and 9th Wards were represented.

The three focus groups varied in size, with individual sessions ranging from four to 12 participants. The two school-based focus groups were held in a quiet room on the school campus during lunch time. Pizza and drinks were provided. The organization-based focus group was held in a quiet conference room during the early evening. Snacks and drinks were provided.

Cowen Institute staff led the focus groups. At the beginning of each session, we assured participants of their anonymity and asked them to share openly. All participants were provided with and signed an IRB-approved consent form and completed a brief informational survey. We used the same set of questions in each session and prompted dialogue with probing questions, when necessary. During the focus groups, Cowen Institute research staff audio-recorded the dialogue and took extensive notes.

Following the focus groups, Cowen Institute research staff transcribed, coded, and analyzed the dialogue, organizing responses into the overarching themes/domains and topics that are presented in this report. Every effort was made to accurately capture the conversations and dialogue that took place during the focus groups.

# Appendix B: Interview Guides

### Interview Guide: School Staff

"We are talking to community-based organizations, schools, and students to learn about the reasons why students become disengaged from school and the resources in place that help them become reconnected. We are interested in talking to you to identify services and resources, and evaluation tools in place. As school leaders and districts contemplate dropout prevention both in New Orleans and across the country, our study findings will inform decisions and design of dropout prevention and student support programs and policies. Are there any questions?"

*Respond to participant questions*

"I want to remind you that this is voluntary and if at any time you feel uncomfortable answering questions, you are not required to do so. We will be recording our conversation so that we can remember what you say, but we will not share what you tell us with anyone else or identify you by name. Do you feel uncomfortable with that? In addition, NAME will be taking notes of the conversation."

"Also, everything you tell us today will be kept completely anonymous. We will summarize the things you tell us and combine it with other interviews we are conducting. One of my jobs today as the interviewer is to make sure we cover all of the issues we planned to discuss. If I ask you questions while you are talking, I'm not being rude; I may ask you to clarify what you are saying so I fully understand your point. I will try to keep the conversation directed to the topic at hand so that we discuss all of the issues."

"Let's begin."

**Background:**

1. How do you think students become disconnected/disengaged while they are enrolled in your school?

2. How do you know when a student is connected? How do you know when a student is on the verge of disconnection?

3. What do you think youth need to stay connected (e.g., coming to class, doing the class work, prepping for tests, taking the exams, participating in other activities, anything else that defines connection) and successful?

**School Services:**

4. Some schools partner to provide services and others provide services independently with regular school staff. Please list all programs (and we go through all follow-up questions for each one).

5. Do these services cost you anything (financially or in-kind, such as staff person or space)? How much? Is there a matching cost? What is the source of this funding? How long has this service/program has been in place?

6. How many students do you serve over the course of a semester or school year? Is the duration of the service one-time or ongoing?

7. How do you identify students for each program? For example, are they referred by a teacher, other school staff member, parent, or someone else? Can they volunteer to participate?

8. Is there a dedicated school staff member to oversee and deliver these services? If so, who is it on the school staff (i.e., what is their title)? Are they full-time or part-time?

9. Does the service happen on- or off-site?

10. Is there a consequence for a student who does not participate for these services? In other words, once a student is identified in whatever way as needing the service, can he/she refuse to participate and what happens if he/she does refuse?

11. For community-based programs: How did you find out about this community group?

**Data:**

12. What data do you collect about disconnected students? How is that data used to identify students for additional services and intervene? How do you use data to measure your success?

**Lagniappe:**

13. Is there another school staff member who has regular interaction with students on the verge of disconnection (e.g., a guidance or resource counselor, a special education teacher, and/or director of finance and operations) whom you'd recommend we speak with for more information about the resources available to such students and the costs of these services?

14. We are recruiting students for focus groups according to the following three designations: very connected to school, on the verge of disconnection from school, and already disconnected from school. Are there any students whom you could recommend for a focus group?

## Interview Guide: Intermediaries

"We are talking to community-based organizations, schools, and students to learn about the reasons why students become disengaged from school and the resources in place that help them become reconnected. We are interested in talking to you to identify services and resources, and evaluation tools in place. As school leaders and districts contemplate dropout prevention both in New Orleans and across the country, our study findings will inform decisions and design of dropout prevention and student support programs and policies. Are there any questions?"

*Respond to participant questions.*

"I want to remind you that this is voluntary and if at any time you feel uncomfortable answering questions, you are not required to do so. We will be recording our conversation so that we can remember what you say, but we will not share what you tell us with anyone else or identify you by name. Do you feel uncomfortable with that? In addition, NAME will be taking notes of the conversation."

"Also, everything you tell us today will be kept completely anonymous. We will summarize the things you tell us and combine it with other interviews we are conducting. One of my jobs today as the interviewer is to make sure we cover all of the issues we planned to discuss. If I ask you questions while you are talking, I'm not being rude; I may ask you to clarify what you are saying so I fully understand your point. I will try to keep the conversation directed to the topic at hand so that we discuss all of the issues."

"Let's begin."

*Background:*

1. Tell us about your organization. We are specifically interested in components that address student engagement and/or that target the high school experience.

    a) What data do you use and collect?
    b) Extent of family/community engagement?
    c) Outcomes?

2. What is your vision of youth success?

3. What do you think youth need to stay connected to school and successfully complete each grade until they graduate? What could schools do better to prevent youth from dropping out?

4. From your perspective, what are causes of or precursors to disconnection?

5. To what extent do you work directly with schools? To what extent do you work with CBOs addressing youth disconnection? What are the pros and cons of working with each?

6. How do you prepare your staff, as well as the teachers/schools you work with to recognize or intervene in the causes of disconnection? Are there particular skills that you stress?

7. Although you may know a great deal about the youth you serve, is there information that you wished you had (e.g., school data, grades, test scores) that would help you serve them better?

8. What would be an ideal school that keeps youth engaged? Do you know of any examples where aspects of this exist? If you won the lottery, what services and resources would you make available to keep youth engaged?

_____

## Youth Focus Group Questionnaire

1. How old are you?

2. Did you attend school last year? If yes, what school did you attend last year?

3. What neighborhood are you from/ do you currently live in?

4. Demographic Information (race, gender, etc.)

* At the beginning of each focus group with youth, we asked participants to fill out a short questionnaire to provide basic background and demographic information.

## Youth Focus Group Facilitator Guide: Connected and Re-Connected Youth

*Interviewer will describe purpose of the study:*

We are talking to schools and students to learn about the reasons why students become disconnected from school (i.e., dropout of school, skip classes, get held back a grade, etc.) or stay connected. We are interested in learning more about your experiences in your school.

Also, everything you tell us today will be kept completely anonymous. That also means anything you hear today from fellow participants is also confidential. Please respect each other's privacy. We will summarize the things you tell us and combine it with other focus groups we are conducting. One of my jobs today as the moderator is to make sure we cover all of the issues we planned to discuss. If I ask you questions while you are talking, I'm not being rude; I may ask you to clarify what you are saying so I fully understand your point. Also from time to time, I may ask the group if anyone else has something he/she would like to add; I'm just making sure everyone has a chance to talk. I will try to keep the conversation directed to the topic at hand so that we discuss all of the issues.

**Questions**

1. How do you define being engaged in or connected to school?

2. On a scale of one to ten, with ten being very engaged in or connected to school and one being not at all connected to school, where would you describe yourself? If very engaged, what makes you feel that way? What are some of the reasons you've stayed or become engaged over time? (For those participants who express signs of disconnection) What prevents you from feeling completely engaged?

3. Are any of you involved in extracurricular school programs? Are you involved in community programs outside of school?

4. Were there times in the past when you didn't feel engaged in your school community? How did you become reengaged?

5. What do you think schools could do to get students who feel disconnected or disengaged back on track?

## Youth Focus Group Facilitator Guide: Disconnected Youth

*Interviewer will describe purpose of the study:*

We are talking to schools and students to learn about the reasons why students become disconnected from school (i.e., dropout of school, skip classes, get held back a grade, etc.) or stay connected. We are interested in learning more about your experiences in your school.

Also, everything you tell us today will be kept completely confidential. That also means anything you hear today from fellow participants is also confidential. Please respect each other's privacy. We will summarize the things you tell us and combine it with other focus groups we are conducting. One of my jobs today as the moderator is to make sure we cover all of the issues we planned to discuss. If I ask you questions while you are talking, I'm not being rude; I may ask you to clarify what you are saying so I fully understand your point. Also from time to time, I may ask the group if anyone else has something he/she would like to add; I'm just making sure everyone has a chance to talk. I will try to keep the conversation directed to the topic at hand so that we discuss all of the issues.

*Focus Group Questions:*

1. Talk a bit about your high school experience, beginning in ninth grade. Where did you go to school? What did you like about the school? What did you dislike about the school?

2. What reasons caused you to get off track?

3. What do you think:

   a) Schools could've done differently to help you stay on track/feel connected?

   b) Teachers could've done differently to help you stay on track/feel connected?

   c) You could've done differently to stay of track/connected?

4. Some schools do things that can help students get back on track or keep them on track through supports like tutoring, activities, counselors, etc. Were you aware of any of these efforts at your school? Did you participate? Why or why not? Do you think they would have made a difference?

   a) (For those who have participated) Tell us about that experience (probe).

5. If you could do it all over again, would you do anything differently? If so, what?

6. If you could provide a message to your last high school, what would it be?

# Appendix C: Focus Group Participant Information and Demographics

Youth focus group participants were recruited by the hosting school or organization. The following tables show the numbers and demographics of the participating youth.

**Table 1: Race/Ethnicity**

| | Focus Group Participants | | Public School Students in New Orleans[1] | | Orleans Parish Population[2] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage |
| Total Reported | 22 | | 42,0230 | 100% | 360,740 | 100% |
| African-American | 16 | 72% | 37,069 | 88% | 216,539 | 60% |
| Asian | 0 | 0% | 806 | 2% | 10,649 | 3% |
| Hispanic | 1 | 5% | 1,199 | 3% | N/A | N/A |
| White | 5 | 22% | 2,524 | 6% | 123,436 | 34% |
| Other | 0 | 0% | 432 | 1% | 10,116 | 3% |

[1]Source: Louisiana Department of Education, Multiple Statistics By Site Code For Total Reported Public School Students - October 2011.
[2]Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, RACE, Table B02001.

**Table 2: Age and Gender**

| Focus Group Participants | Number | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Total Reported | | |
| 17 years old | 2 | 9% |
| 18 years old | 5 | 23% |
| 19 years old | 5 | 23% |
| 20 years old | 8 | 36% |
| 21 years old | 2 | 9% |
| Male | 10 | 45% |
| Female | 12 | 55% |

# Appendix D: Response Analysis

**To analyze response data, we noted whether or not a specific topic was mentioned during the interview of the school leader.** We did not note how many times the interviewee mentioned the cause, however, and each topic was treated as a dichotomous variable, yes or no, for each interview. In addition, we noted the number of causes mentioned during each interview. On average, school leaders cited four general causes of disconnection. we categorized schools by their 2013 letter grade.

In addition, we created a measure of "emphasis" by adding the total number of topics during each interview and calculating a percentage for each domain. For example, an interviewee cited a total of four topics: two under youth-centered, one under external influences, and one under school-centered. This means 50 percent of all topics cited fell under Youth-centered, 25 percent fell under External influences, and 25 percent fell under School-centered. This shows the extent to which the interviewee cited or "emphasized" causes within each domain.

To show differences, we calculated the percentages for each interviewee and a total for all interviews. We identified and highlighted those where the interviewee's responses were greater than the total percentages. Based on the emphasis of each interviewee, we were then able to make comparisons. We identified the interviewees that placed above average emphasis on causes in each of the domains.

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