

I'M GOING BACK

THE RE-ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES OF TUCSON YOUTH

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“ And then when I didn’t graduate school on time, I tried to go back for a full year and I did, but I also worked two jobs at the same time while caring for my sister, ‘cause my mom couldn’t handle it by herself.... after that, it was just very hard for me to go back to school and actually make the time, because everywhere I worked scheduled me from 6:00 am to 10:00 am. ...And they were upset that I had to call in because I was in school starting at 7:00 am to 11:00 am so that I could make the two jobs work. That’s when I realized that school was just interfering with me being able to keep myself afloat, and that’s when I made the decision not to really go back to school.

It was kind of hard. It was. It’s kind of blocked me in some ways because I’ve always wanted to go to school. I planned on double majoring and it’s hard when you want to go back to school and you don’t have all the resources that you can because people frown upon people who can’t finish school. The fact that a lot of people automatically assume that I have two parents at home to go to. People don’t really think that’s a barrier, but it is because, ‘Oh, you can work on this when you get home.’ No, I can’t, because I have to go to work and I work until 11:00 pm tonight and I have to come back to school at 7:00 am, meaning I have to get up at 6:00 am. I don’t have enough time to because I also have to help my sister with her homework. There is no time for me to do this.

Then they’ll tell you, ‘Oh, well, you can go to this alternative high school.’ I don’t want to go to an alternative high school, ‘cause it’s all online. There’s a school right by my old high school, and I remember being frustrated ‘cause I like the classroom setting. I like that I’m able to sit there, ask questions.

.... But when you go to those alternative high schools, you really limit yourself because yeah, you can do it online all you want, but when you have dyslexia, staring at a screen is not something that’s ideal. And especially when you have ADHD. Sitting down, staring at a screen for all of your classes, that’s not something that’s ideal at all.” —Amelia*

Amelia was on track to graduate when she was interviewed and is actively working toward her goal of going to college.

INTRODUCTION

Leaving school without graduating presents a significant challenge for America's young people and for society as a whole.¹ One way communities and school systems are responding to this challenge is with coordinated efforts to re-engage young people in ways that make it more likely for them to earn a diploma. Re-engagement efforts vary across the country but typically involve identifying young people who have, or are at risk of leaving school before graduating, sharing existing re-enrollment options with them, supporting their re-entry into an appropriate educational setting, and providing supports to propel them toward graduation and, ultimately, success in adult life.²

To understand the barriers and supports to re-engagement and subsequent academic success in Tucson, Arizona, the Center for Promise spoke directly with Tucson youth who are re-engaging with their education. The Center sought to understand why the youth disengaged from their education, why some youth re-engaged while others did not, what factors contributed to or deterred this re-engagement, and what factors contributed to their persistence through high school graduation. Insights from these youth illustrate the vast challenges they face as well as the supports that can help put young people back onto positive educational pathways.

BACKGROUND

The State of Graduation Rates

Over the past two decades, national on-time graduation rates have steadily improved, increasing from 71% in 2000-01 to an all-time high of 84.1% in the 2015-16 school year.³ Over the same time period, the number of students leaving school before graduating fell from 10.9% in 2000 to 6.1% in 2016.⁴ While these numbers reveal a positive trend, there are still far too many students who leave school before earning a diploma. Recent estimates indicate that nearly 2.5 million young people between the ages of 16-24 are still not in school and have not received a high school diploma or equivalent degree.⁵

In Arizona, increasing numbers of students are persisting to high school graduation, but progress is slow. Arizona's statewide on-time graduation rate was 79.5% in 2016, up only 1.5 percentage points from 78% in 2011. In Pima County, where Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) is located, the graduation rate is one of the lowest in the state at 77.6%, 6.5% below the national average.⁶

PREVIEW OF THE FINDINGS

The Center for Promise sought to understand the barriers and supports to re-engagement for young people in Tucson, Arizona, by speaking directly with students who are in the process of re-engaging with their education. Their stories provide insights into the vast challenges that students face as well as the supports that can help put young people back onto positive educational pathways. *I'm Going Back: The Re-engagement Experiences of Tucson Youth* presents the following findings:

Factors that Contribute to Disengagement

Individual factors: Individual strengths and challenges played a role in young people's educational trajectory, and influenced their decision to disengage.

Out-of-school factors: A young person's capacity to perform well academically can be overwhelmed by their family life, peers, community, and supports or lack of supports available to them outside of school.

School climate: While all youth entered high school with hopes, strengths, and goals, many describe perceived disrespect and being negatively stereotyped.

School structures: Nearly all young people interviewed describe a mismatch between their needs and existing school structures—such as attendance policies—that operated as barriers to persisting in high school.

Factors that Contribute to Re-engagement

Internal drive and caring adults: Both are critical factors in helping young people understand the educational options and supports available to them, overcome institutional barriers, and also feel that they have confidence and support to seek out these options.

See the full findings section on page 6 for more detail.

The Importance of a High School Diploma

Attaining a high school credential is an important predictor of positive future outcomes. Compared with their peers, students who have attained a high school diploma have dramatically higher lifetime earnings,⁷ are less likely to be incarcerated,⁸ have less reliance on public assistance,⁹ and have better health outcomes.¹⁰ Young people leaving school without graduating places a significant financial burden on them, as well as on society. In fact, a 2018 report estimates that the economic cost to Tucson of the 793 students who did not complete high school in the 2015 cohort at \$414.4 million.¹¹ These costs alone suggest a collective need to understand the reasons young people leave school and the current efforts that are effective in supporting them toward graduation.

Why Young People Leave School

A wide range of factors contribute to a young person’s decision to leave school, as the story from Amelia (p. ii) makes clear. Some of these are contextual factors that push students out of school (e.g., housing instability, parental education, being suspended, etc.), while others are individual factors (e.g., pregnancy, mental health needs, poor academic performance, etc.).¹³ However, the past decade of research has shown that leaving school is rarely an isolated incident or decision but is instead generally the product of a far longer process of gradual disengagement from school.¹⁴ Additionally, and counter to the prevailing narrative of “dropping out” as quitting school, young people who leave school are often facing a great deal of adversity, and their decision to leave school is best understood in the context of their full life experience.¹⁵

Re-Engagement in the Context of Youth Development

Youth development theory offers important insights relevant to educational re-engagement.¹⁶ Theory and research tell us that young people are embedded within a multi-layered ecology filled with people, institutions (e.g., school), cultural norms, and public policies that shape young people’s development—what we call a “youth system.”¹⁷ Within this system, youth are continually influencing and being influenced by their environment.¹⁸ When this system is responsive to and aligned with the strengths and needs of a young person, we consider that system to be a “supportive youth system”—one which promotes positive developmental outcomes for the young person.¹⁹ Alternatively, challenges occur when this system is not reflective of or responsive to the young person’s potential.

ABOUT TUCSON UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

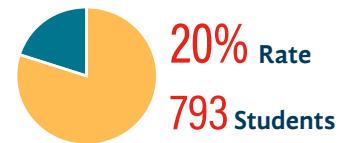
Second largest district in Arizona¹²

86
K-12
SCHOOLS = **45,159**
K-12
STUDENTS

11 Traditional High Schools
SERVING **13,802** Students

3 Alternative High Schools
SERVING **313** Students

NON-COMPLETION IN TUCSON (2015 COHORT*)



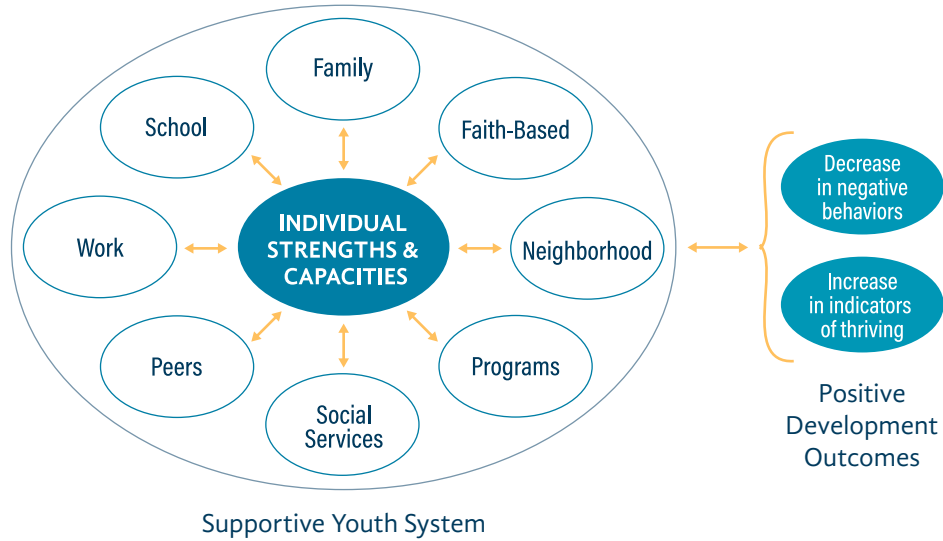
ESTIMATED
Lifetime Economic Loss

\$414.4 Million
\$522,600 Per Student

*This data covers all five school districts in Tucson, Arizona, though TUSD is the largest.

Source: Belfield, C. & Hickox, I. (2018). Arizona Mayors Education Dashboards. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

Figure 1: Youth Systems Framework



Source: Zaff, J.F., Pufall Jones, E., Donlan, A.E., Lin, E.S. and Anderson, S. (2016). *Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Positive Youth Development*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Understanding the decision to leave school from a youth systems framework importantly shifts the focus from a deficit model of young people who have “given up” on school to a model that recognizes the full context of young people’s lived experiences that inform their decision to leave school. The young people participating in this research study described the individual factors that impact their school attendance and persistence as well as highlighted positive and negative experiences at school and in out-of-school settings. While previous research focused on a young person’s experiences in school, recent research considers each facet of a young person’s development, bringing to light the stories from youth that consistently emphasize the adversity they face in their lives, the barriers to on-time school completion, and the importance of tenacious and caring adults to support their success in academic pursuits and in life.²⁰

In this report, we present each of these factors within discrete components of their youth systems, but they are best understood as a whole: individual, out-of-school, school climate, and school structures. Further, while factors contributing to disengagement or re-engagement are presented within the most salient ecological level youth discuss (such as individual), they often manifest across multiple levels of their system. For example, a young person might experience depression, but their mental health may be connected to struggles at home and have implications for their school performance and ability to effectively utilize available supports.

Lessons for Effective Re-Engagement

A youth systems framework also provides direction for optimizing re-engagement efforts. The youth systems framework suggests that for young people to return to school and be successful in school thereafter, schools must be attentive to what young people’s lives are like, helping young people build from their strengths while also addressing their needs, and meeting young people where they are in their lives.²¹

To be effective, re-engagement efforts need to recognize the varied circumstances of young people who have left school. Successful efforts typically involve connecting students to multiple resources and caring relationships in an effort to determine and address those circumstances.²² For example, many re-engagement approaches emphasize coordinated systems of support (e.g., child care, mentorship and advocacy, school-work opportunities, etc.), flexible curriculum and school structures (e.g., night classes, online learning, credit recovery, etc.), and having mechanisms, such as home visits, for both identifying as well as reaching out and connecting with disconnected youth.²³ These supports are part of a longer-term process to ensure the young people remain on more positive pathways.²⁴



EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS IN TUCSON

Like many cities across the country, Tucson has a variety of comprehensive high schools, prevention programs, and efforts to identify and intervene with youth who are struggling to succeed along a traditional education pathway.

EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS AND SUPPORTS WITHIN TUSD

Dropout Prevention Program: The program team consists of a coordinator and 10 Dropout Prevention Specialists placed in schools throughout the district who oversee and coordinate dropout prevention. Students at risk of dropping out are either referred by teachers and school administrators or are identified by the dropout prevention specialists who then perform a wide range of functions in order to prevent school disengagement, and when appropriate, support that young person in successfully re-engaging.

- **Day-to-day efforts:** A Dropout Prevention Specialist is assigned to one or two schools and provides comprehensive support to young people who have disengaged from school, including information regarding various credit recovery and alternative re-engagement options, consistent and persistent emotional support and encouragement, home visits, daily check-ins, and advocacy support for re-engaging.
- **Steps to Success:^A** A collaborative effort between TUSD and the mayor's office, Steps to Success is a bi-annual campaign to conduct home visits, through door knocking, to students who have left school. Volunteers come from all parts of the community and the effort is coordinated through the dropout prevention office with support from the mayor's office. For more information on Steps to Success, see the Appendix.

Alternative High Schools: Tucson Unified School District offers multiple pathways to graduation, including several high school options focused on supporting students who have previously left or struggled to complete school. These alternative high schools typically have flexible schedules, small class sizes, and online curricula that allow students to earn credits, and their diplomas, at their own pace.

^A During the 2018-2019 academic school year, the format of Steps to Success was changed to be a citywide effort during the first quarter of the school year and school-based efforts during the remainder of the year.

Examples include:

- **Project MORE:** Comprehensive alternative high school for grades 10-12 where students can fill their learning gaps and complete their high school education at an accelerated pace through an online curriculum facilitated by teaching staff at the school.
- **AGAVE Middle & High School:** Alternative, credit-granting school utilizing a self-paced online curriculum for students in grades 6-12.
- **Teenage Parent High School (TAP):** Alternative high school providing tailored services to teen parents including options for earning academic credit, child care support, and parenting classes; students can also work toward a certificate in early childhood education.

Charter Options

- **ACE Charter High School:** Public charter high school providing self-paced learning opportunities for youth experiencing circumstances that make graduating from a traditional high school challenging.
- **Compass High School:** Public charter high school that offers individualized, self-paced, “inquiry”-based learning opportunities; allows students to earn college credit for courses taken through the school’s community college partnerships.
- **Edge High School:** Public charter high school offering self-paced, basic skills curriculum that also emphasizes goal setting, 21st Century Skills, and service learning; offers morning and night sessions.

SUPPORTS IN THE TUCSON COMMUNITY

- **Re-Engagement Center (REC):** Opened in July 2016, the REC is operated by United Way Tucson Urban League in collaboration with the Pima Prevention Partnership and sponsored by Youth on the Rise (YOTR). The Center connects youth with “coaches” who serve as mentors and case managers to leverage wraparound services depending on youth needs and interests.
- **Youth On Their Own (YOTO):** Community-based organization focused on preventing school disengagement by supporting homeless and unaccompanied youth through financial assistance, mentoring, advocacy, case management, and assistance with meeting basic human needs.
- **Fred G. Acosta Job Corps:** Federally funded educational and career technical preparation program serving youth ages 16-24; offers a range of specializations (e.g. automotive, healthcare, construction, etc.), a residential option, counseling, and mentorship services to support students in completing their educations ready and able to enter the workforce.

STUDY DESIGN

The Center for Promise studied the re-engagement experiences of young people in Tucson, Arizona. The Tucson Unified School District dropout prevention team identified young people who had interrupted their education and invited them to participate in the research study. For more information about the methods used in this study, please see the Appendix.

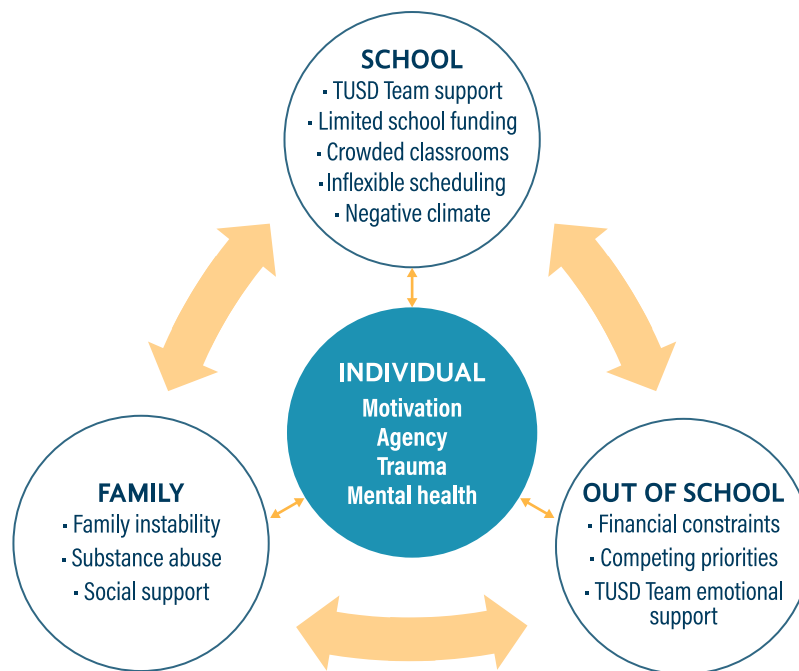
The research team conducted 28 individual interviews with young people to capture the challenges trying to stay in school, barriers to their re-engagement, and supports that help them re-engage.

Interviews were conducted at a location of the young person's choosing for an average of 30 minutes each. Sample questions for the interviews included, "Can you tell me about your story leading up to when you left school? About your relationships with school adults, peers, and out-of-school adults?" "What do you believe was your greatest barrier, if any, to returning to school?" and "What, if anything, helped you return to school?"

FINDINGS

After speaking with 28 young people with unique life stories with different adversities, challenges, interests, and needs, a single common theme in all of the interviews was that the journey of disengaging and re-engaging with schools is not linear or straightforward. Nearly all of the young people we spoke with (22 out of 28) had disengaged from and re-engaged with more than one school type (traditional, charter, or alternative) due to their learning style and other needs (e.g., flexible school schedule to accommodate work hours). Inconsistent support and challenging circumstances played a role in their decisions to disengage. More than half of the youth described re-engaging more than once before graduating or being firmly on a path to graduation.

Figure 2: Factors Influencing School Engagement



The reasons the young people we spoke with left school were many, including facing a variety of challenges, multiple home or school transitions, financial constraints, and lack of sufficient support from adults. Youth returned through their own motivation and that of their families, because of the support of caring adults, and because circumstances changed. The story that emerges across all the interviews is of the many strengths, needs, and aspirations of these young people. Their experiences also make clear the complex and dynamic life circumstances that either facilitate or disrupt each young person's decision to leave or persist through school.

Factors Contributing to Disengagement

Interviews with youth offered insight into the 28 individuals and the unique lived experiences of each as they navigated the path to graduation. Individual strengths and challenges played a role in their educational trajectory and influenced their decisions to disengage. Many youth describe unmet health needs and experiencing negative messaging from adults in schools.

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Starting at the individual level, external stressors and mental health issues weighed heavily on youth. In fact, 19 of the young people shared that they struggle with mental health issues, an important contributor to their decision to disengage. More than half of the young people who reported experiencing mental health issues did not report receiving any support.^B The young people described many individual factors that contributed to their decision to disengage including anxiety, ADHD, pregnancy, and dyslexia; however, the most common individual factor raised by more than half of the young people was depression.

“I did get a little depressed my first two years. First year and a half, actually...it was just this overwhelming weight that I felt that... I was constantly telling myself doing the schoolwork wasn't really worth it, it wasn't that I couldn't comprehend the work and do it, it was just more like I didn't feel like doing it. It was this heavy weight just sinking down on my shoulders, this ... I don't really know how to explain it better than that...I had some teachers that were telling me, 'If you don't get your shit together or whatever, you're not gonna amount to anything in life. You're just gonna be a high school dropout dead weight or whatever.' Just a bunch of negative thoughts...it just made me not wanna do anything even more....” –Aaron

Stories like Aaron's demonstrate how depression can interfere with the ability to complete school work by weighing a person down and making simple tasks seem meaningless and insurmountable. Aaron also describes how a lack of supportive messages from adults can compound the issue. While issues with mental health weren't the sole reason for any young person to leave school, it often left young people feeling unprepared to contend with external challenges. Elijah describes his depression becoming greater after his father was moved to a care facility for dementia:

“So that was hard and that hit me really, really hard. So, depression kicked in and my attendance was going down. I think it might have dropped down to 50 or 60 percent. Eventually I got kicked out ...because of my attendance, but I was really, really close. My motivation was just gone and I know it must have been very frustrating for people around me, they were like, 'Dude, you have half a credit left. What's wrong with you?', but my motivation was just gone. I had been stuck in this kind of place in living on my own, barely making enough money to get by and not having finished high school. It was very frustrating for me and for the people around me. I literally just got out of that, the past couple weeks. Which feels great, but my dad passed away last year.” –Elijah

Elijah went on to say that a series of changing life circumstances enabled him to return and complete school. He moved, his depression lessened, and he was able to complete his final credit. In his words, he thought, **“hey this is a fresh start, let's make things different.”** Intrapersonal factors, such as mental health challenges, often weighed heavily on young people, and made it difficult for them to succeed in school. However, as seen in both Elijah's as well as Aaron's stories, they often were deeply connected to non-academic challenges.

^B Youth were asked if they had anyone to talk to about any mental health issues. The authors cannot confirm if the youth received any professional support, or if any was offered.

OUT-OF-SCHOOL FACTORS

Out-of-school factors—a young person’s home and family life, peers, neighborhood, and supports or lack of supports available to them outside of the school walls—can overwhelm a young person’s capacity to perform academically. The young people we interviewed identified a variety of issues relating to relationships, experiences, and challenges in their lives that draw their focus from school, contributing to their disengagement.

All 28 of the youth we spoke with reported a variety of additional adversities, including familial instability (loss of a parent, separation, divorce, or incarceration), substance misuse in the household, and family members also experiencing mental illness. These adversities contribute to other challenges like home and school transitions. Financial constraints were often the most salient. Camila describes doing well in school but then choosing to leave when financial constraints meant there was no longer childcare for her brother. Her decision-making process is illustrative of more than half the youth interviewed, who left school due to financial constraints (a lack of or insufficient financial support from one or both parents).

“...freshman year was great. I loved [traditional high school]. I thought it was a great school, all my friends went there from middle school. I pretty much got a lot of A’s and B’s. I’d say I was a really good student. I never had problems with any of my classes. Sophomore year was the same in the beginning, but towards, I’d say like towards the fall, my stepmom lost her job, and my dad’s not able to pay the bills by himself, because it’s me and my three brothers at home, and it’s a lot to support. My mom, she’s been in trouble in the past. She’s been in jail before, and she went down that same route. I was just more concerned about my little brother at the time who was two years old. I was scared for who was gonna watch him, and who was gonna be there for him because my parents were just mostly concerned about paying bills, what was gonna happen with the house, and stuff. So my mind just wasn’t at school. It was where what’s gonna go on with my brothers, who’s gonna take care of them? [Then] my mom got arrested, and my dad had told me that he couldn’t pay for daycare. He could only pay for rent and food. The important stuff we need. So I chose to drop out of school and take care of my little brother.” –Camila

When daily challenges go unsupported at home and at school, an additional adversity, such as divorce or death of a parent, can become the breaking point for a young person to leave school. In fact, more than half of the youth discuss familial instability (e.g., divorce, incarceration, or death of an immediate family member) which coincided with a disruption in their education. As Jessica points out, youth often navigate several challenges on a daily basis to attend and engage in school.

“Yeah, well, some of the barriers were not having enough supplies, either for school, or you know—for at home. To do your laundry, or to eat, or just basic things. It was hard, not having people to talk to either, um... ‘cause every day you go through different things. Whether you wanna talk about it or not, it’s just good to like—know you have somebody to run to if you need it. A lot of the, transportation was another one. Can’t rely on a lot of the bus systems, you know—‘cause they’re either running behind, or super ahead of schedules, and you can’t always get there on time, but you try your best, and sometimes your best isn’t good enough. For either the school system, or work system, or whatever.” –Jessica

Additionally, more than half the youth report needing to work to support themselves and their families, to put food on the table and keep a roof overhead, and many feel they do not have an adequate support system to stay in school.

“Because sometimes, the food in your mouth is more important than coming to school, or you need to work a job because your family’s not able to provide whatever it is that you need, or being embarrassed because you are not able to have clean clothes. Because some kids aren’t able to have washer and dryers or laundry detergent. They can’t afford certain stuff like that. I know for a fact that I went to school a lot of the time for food. I know that there was food there, so might as well just go. Sometimes you’ve gotta step up. There’s just a lot of things that kids go through. You’ve got to understand.” –Sophia

Young people describe disengaging as it made sense for their lives in that moment, most often to allow them to maintain financial security or because they were under an untenable amount of cognitive stress. Some youth describe just “giving up” on school because they were simply overwhelmed by the individual and interpersonal challenges, and felt there was no support or outlet through which to combat the buildup of negative emotions.

SCHOOL CLIMATE

All of the youth expressed interest in graduating from high school. In fact, 16 of the young people reported passing or doing well academically, which runs counter to the narrative that young people who leave school are lacking in academic or social and emotional competence.²⁵ However, over half of the youth interviewed describe a school climate that they felt pushed them out or made it too easy for them to leave.

While all youth entered high school hopeful about their future, many describe stories of perceived disrespect and being stereotyped rather than being treated as an individual person with strengths and needs. Juan shared one of the most extreme examples of how a school climate can feel unsupportive and unwelcoming.

“ Yeah it was pretty ridiculous....Nobody cares, why would I go there and try to impress all these people? Do these things for them when they don't care. They honestly don't care about you and it sucks. Especially in the school environment. ...You grow up your entire life thinking so highly of high school. You're going to be popular. You're going to get all these friends. Meet all these friends that you're going to have the rest of your life. Meet your high school sweetheart. All this stuff that you have in your head, then you get there and it's blasted with getting searched by cops and just being treated like a degenerate. It's just bad. It's hurtful and it made me not want to go to school anymore. Just the way that the faculty is. The way that they treat their students.... That's not school.... It was just a lot, it was too much. I just stopped going. It just wasn't for me in a way. Not because of school, I don't have a problem with school. I wish I would've gotten a higher education and like bettered my life like that. But I didn't want to come somewhere where people looked at me like I was garbage.” –Juan

Still other students like Joanna felt there wasn't space or time for discussing other parts of their lives with school staff, thus neglecting important parts of their identity or lived experiences which contributed to their level of engagement with school. Without these opportunities, they felt as if they were not really known or understood. For these students, not being allowed to discuss their out-of-school challenges presented a missed opportunity for gaining support and resources that could have helped them stay in school.

“ Well, some teachers, they tell you 'well that's the stuff that you should leave at home. Stuff like that...like if you're having problems at home, they tell you that's something you should treat as something at home. Don't bring your problems to school... Sometimes they would be sleeping in class and they would tell them 'oh, why didn't you sleep at home? They don't know the situation at home. They shouldn't assume because they don't know what's going on, especially in... they might not even have a place to go or something and they shouldn't like feel like.. I know people, especially teachers, if you're coming into school late, they're like you don't have good hygiene or something like that. They'll judge them no matter what, they'll say things behind your back”

–Joanna

SCHOOL STRUCTURES

Nearly all young people interviewed (20 out of 28) describe a mismatch between their needs and existing school structures that operated as a barrier to persisting in traditional high schools. For many, this manifests in the classroom where large class sizes can translate into a lack of individual support.

“ I felt like I wasn't getting enough attention as a student.... I struggle a lot to learn the material and I felt like whenever I asked for help, I didn't really get the help I needed, because it was a big group.” –Logan

Multiple students who describe a structural mismatch tell stories of explicitly asking for help and not receiving it because of large class sizes, which did not encourage them to stay in school.

The feeling of mismatch between available supports and needs was not unique to traditional public schools. Alternative education in Tucson is predominantly delivered through online instruction, though some instructional models include a classroom with computers and an adult for general instructional support. Alicia shares similar concerns about the lack of connection and support she experiences with the online method of instruction.

“Some classes I really liked where I would go to but in others I didn’t like because I’m more of a hands-on person and so just sitting there I couldn’t, I don’t wanna be there, basically. Doing online now it’s easier because I’m home but at the same time it’s hard because I like to be in class where I have that more one-on-one help.” –Alicia

Amelia shares how alternative options come with a host of other issues for students with learning disabilities.

“But when you go to those alternative high schools, you really limit yourself because yeah, you can do it online all you want, but when you have dyslexia, staring at a screen is not something that’s ideal. And especially when you have ADHD. Sitting down, staring at a screen for all of your classes, that’s not something that’s ideal at all.” –Amelia



Other youth note that specific policies guiding attendance and credit accumulation that are strictly enforced contribute to their decisions to leave school.

Nora describes how arriving late to class, due to what she perceives as inadequate time to pass between classes, leads to repeated tardiness, which snowballs into suspensions.

“If we don’t literally leave the class when the bell rings to get to our next class, we get in trouble with our next class... Then we get tardy and then that becomes a problem with attendance and then we actually will get suspended if we get a certain amount of attendance missed or if you have a certain amount of tardies, you will get detention.” –Nora

The young people describe how policies meant to keep young people in school can inadvertently also serve to push them out. For example, some young people detail an attendance policy where if a student has more than 10 unexcused absences (including suspensions) for a class, they will not earn credit for that semester. Students such as Juan commented that once they had 10 absences, they lost any motivation to complete the semester.

“They suspended me and I couldn’t get any more credits. I missed 10 days of school in each of my classes so I didn’t get any of those credits. It was just like they were literally trying to break me down. It was just wrong, in a way. I wasn’t dumb. I was in pre-calc a year, I took AP Physics. I could have gotten college credit for some of my classes. It wasn’t like I was in there and just struggling.” –Juan

While young people understand that these policies are in place to keep them in school, many of them felt they were doing well academically but had to miss school (due to factors such as teen pregnancy, attending court, caring for siblings) and felt they were not provided any opportunity to explain their situation and reason for their absence. This also signals a lack of recognition of what youth are going through outside of school. When layered on top of out-of-school needs like financial

constraints, or compounded by mental health challenges like depression and anxiety, the lack of support for their classroom learning, and in some cases not being awarded credits due to school policies rather than academic failure, cemented a feeling of ‘why bother?’. Youth disengaged when they felt school wasn’t meeting their needs or helping them get closer to achieving their goals.

Factors Contributing to Re-engagement

Young people highlight two key factors in their journeys to re-engagement: their own internal drive and caring adults who support them throughout the re-engagement process. Both are critical factors in helping young people understand the educational options and supports available to them, while also feeling that they have confidence and support to seek out these options.

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Counter to the predominant narrative of youth who interrupt their education lacking competencies, and consistent with previous research by the Center for Promise, the young people interviewed identify their own social and emotional competencies and strengths as factors in their re-engagement.²⁶ In short, the young people we spoke with, like Jordan, came back to school because they intentionally chose and wanted to be there. These decisions were oftentimes a function of shifting life circumstances and young people’s abilities to access the necessary supports to allow them to focus on themselves and resume their education.

“I’m a very independent person. I go on my own terms, do my own thing my own way. Just make sure it works best for me and the people around me. I just need help getting started. Once I’m started, good... nobody wants to work at McDonald’s all their life. I’ve been there for about two years now and it’s just, it’s not worth it. It really isn’t. I want to be able to build things... and I want to communicate better and it’s just a lot of things that I find in life while I wasn’t going to school that I don’t have the knowledge for and I wanted to learn and build up and so I took the initiative and I came back.” –Jordan

When asked what helped her come back to school, Amelia answered without hesitation: **“My drive.”** She went on to explain that three generations of women in her family had pursued postsecondary education amidst extensive familial responsibilities, hardships, and successes, illustrating the familial resources supporting her school completion.

“My grandmother ... graduated college with a master’s. She did that while being a single mother. She really persevered. My mother, being in an abusive relationship ... she had an education to fall back on...That’s something that he could never take away from her. Nobody can. She has the equivalent of a doctorate in accounting and makes her extremely qualified for a lot of jobs. She really pushed through and that was something that I really want for myself because no matter what happens, I want to be able to say that I have this education behind me..”

–Amelia

Amelia emphasizes what education means to her because of her familial heritage, but also what she wants to represent and pass on.

“[Education] is something that I want for myself as well as my sister to look up to. I had all these barriers, yes. I went through a very rough time and she’s seen that first hand. But I also don’t want her to have those excuses of, ‘Well, okay, well, you don’t do it.’ No, I’m doing it slowly but I’m gonna do it.” –Amelia

Regardless of external adversity, and sometimes *because* of those challenges, the young people describe how their own motivation led to their perseverance in their education after weathering setbacks. In short, it is young people’s internal competencies *combined* with external support for overcoming institutional, structural, and out-of-school barriers to re-engagement, which make re-engagement attempts most successful.

CARING ADULTS

While adversities, an unwelcoming school climate, and other out-of-school factors collectively contribute to youth leaving school, the majority of the young people we spoke with re-engaged, emphasizing the importance of caring adults, and the emotional, informational, and instrumental support they provide. These caring adults are often found within schools and help the young people return to school. For young people who have left school, having an adult that they perceive genuinely cares about them at school adds to their reasons for attending school.



- “ And then in high school, I really had a teacher....and she was the best teacher on the face of the planet. ...So she kind of would... teach me... the way I needed to be [taught]. Even when I went back to school, she told me, “Come a couple hours early, you can stay in my class, so you can definitely work on your work in my class.” She was part of the reason why I went back. Because I knew I had a support system at school and out of school.” –Morgan
- “ Yes...Pretty much all the dropout prevention. They are the most incredible women. I don’t know what it is about them but these three women are like ... I don’t know what the perfect word for them is, like the power goddesses of the school. Seriously, they are the power sources for the school when it comes to saving the kids. When it comes to the kids literally saying they don’t want to be here anymore, [TUSD Dropout Prevention Team Member] looks at them and says, ... You’re not doing that. This isn’t about what’s going on in your life, this about what’s gonna be going on in five years when you get a job. She points out those things that you’re not in the brain set of thinking about. She helps to pretty much force you into graduating. I know that sounds aggressive but she’s definitely that woman. She’s like, if you’re gonna drop out, you’re gonna drop out but come back pretty much and she’ll help you come back and she’ll help you. She’s a great woman. She’s done a lot. She helped me come back, she helped me come back twice. If I were to leave again, she would definitely not leave me alone at this point. She’d be like, all right, I’m tired of this, we’re done. You’re graduating. We’re getting this done. Nora, just shut up and come back.” –Nora

Youth describe adults having the ability to alleviate some of their stress, giving them the boost they needed to return to school, in the absence of major institutional barriers. Camila, who left school to take care of her brother, was ultimately able to return to school when a caring adult in her neighborhood noticed she was not attending school and offered to watch her brother during the day.

Youth also describe how essential it is for schools to provide necessary resources to help them meet the challenges they face in their day-to-day lives.

- “ Yeah, mainly just a solid place to stay, like knowing where I’m gonna take a shower next or have my next meal.... And that’s I kinda love about this school, because when I’d stay for after-school activities, they’d have some dinner, and that’s like another lunch, so I’d get like two or three of those and just eat them. And then not only that, I could come early in the morning. That’s what made me love to run, because one of my ... the coaches down here...he’s a lifeguard teacher, and that’s how I got a job lifeguarding. And he’d let me in the locker room after I’d run, and say, “Yeah, go ahead and take a shower, and maybe shower, change up, get ready for class.” And that was so great, because ... like, almost for a steady schedule once a month or a week, I’d just come run, take a shower, eat, and that was ... It made my day so less stressful, more focused on my education, get that kind of tiredness, that sadness, run out and wash it off.” –Robin

Multiple young people also point to support from caring adults to combat the stigma that comes with interrupting education.

“It was the shame. That everybody can do it in a certain amount of time but I couldn’t.... It was shameful and embarrassing but like I said, my teacher was like, ‘You don’t have to walk the halls. You can just stay in my classroom and then go to your class.’ And I did. That helped a lot because I wouldn’t be scared to go to school because I wouldn’t see anybody.” –Morgan

Though youth describe the importance of emotional support from caring adults, they more often describe how instrumental and informational support from adults were essential for overcoming interpersonal and school-level barriers to returning or staying in school.

More than half of the youth who already graduated at the time of the interview describe how caring adults advocated for them and helped them remove barriers to re-engaging that seemed impossible to overcome. This involved advocating for schedule flexibility, reaching out to other caring adults in the young person’s life to best support the student, providing space (e.g., their offices) where the young person could stay and study outside of classes, and providing basic resources such as food or clothing when needed.

“I even looked into a GED, and I did not like those options. They asked me how many credits I had. I told them I would only need two more. They’re, ‘What the hell are you doing here? Just go back to school!’ I was already 21, so I think I wasn’t even supposed to finish school. There was a teacher here in the other side of [online school]. I met her when I went to [alternative school]. She remembered my name. She remembered my credits. She remembered everything and was, ‘I am so happy you’re back here, because I have been checking on you. I have been looking through lists and lists of graduating people just to try to find you.’ She was, ‘You need to finish it.’ She would call me. She would call my nana even though I was 21 and not even living at home. She’d call my mom, my dad, email me. And not in the way that a lot of teachers used to do it where it was annoying where they would just sit there and be, ‘You’re good at this, this, and that. Why can’t you do that?’ Or the same conversation. It was, ‘I know you can do this. I’m rooting for you. I will talk to people because you’re 21 and you probably can’t. I will talk to people and I’ll stick my neck out for you.’ She did all of that for me. I was, I need to do this for sure now. So I finally did it.” –Leah

Ultimately, youth explained that adults have the ability to alleviate barriers to school persistence and completion when the adults are caring, demonstrate their commitment, and are responsive to the young person’s lived experience.

“I was at work and I come home and my mom’s like, ‘The fire station came by. [Dropout Prevention Team member] came by. Police officers came by. They’re like they want you to come back to school.’ I was like, ‘What?’ I was like, ‘Don’t worry about it.’ I was like, ‘It’s fine.’ I was like, ‘I’m going to finish just I’m not going back to [traditional high school].’ I was still in this mindset where, ‘Oh, hell no. I’m not going back.’ Then I found out [Dropout Prevention Team member] went to my work and my manager, a close manager to me, she told me. She’s like, ‘This guy, [Dropout Prevention Team member], stopped by and he wants you to finish at [traditional high school]. He said he’ll see it where you can go back, you won’t be embarrassed. It’ll be comfortable. You can go back.’ I was like, ‘I don’t know. Really, I feel like I should be out of there. My feeling that I feel being with all those other kids, I don’t belong there anymore.’ She was like, ‘Well, just see. Just go find out and see.’ I was like, ‘Well, okay.’ Then that’s when he called later on that day too and my mom was on the phone with him. I was like, ‘Okay.’ Then he wanted to meet up, so I was like, ‘Fine. I’ll go down to the school and see what’s going on.’ Then that’s when I went down there and just talked to him and ... Yeah, he went out of his way to get special permission from the district where I can only have one class in the morning. I saw the effort he was putting in and I was like, ‘Fine. I don’t see why not.’ I don’t want to be that stubborn like, ‘Oh, you’re going through all this. Nah. I’m still not going to go.’ I was like, ‘Fine. I’ll go with it.’ I did and now I’m going back.” –Ava

When these young people received consistent, caring support that specifically targeted the barriers to them staying in school, they were able to return and stay engaged in their education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The experiences of the young people interviewed converged in several key areas. Every young person has their own story and experiences, and while these recommendations are by no means exhaustive, they represent common themes that emerged across a range of youth experiences. Consistent with previous research from the Center, these stories support the notion that understanding young people and the context in which they live and learn, through positive, consistent, authentic relationships with adults, is essential to helping them to stay engaged in school or re-engage once they have left.²⁷ It is in this spirit that we offer the following recommendations.

UNDERSTAND YOUTH'S CONTEXT WITHIN AND BEYOND SCHOOL

- **Embed structures within schools to facilitate knowing students well.** The majority of the young people we interviewed expressed a desire for teachers, school counselors, and other school professionals to better understand their lives and how external factors influence their educational engagement. In order to better support youth in their academic journey, adults within the school would be most effective if they were more deeply acquainted with students' interests, goals, and challenges beyond the classroom.
- **Address out-of-school challenges so students can attend and engage in school.** Nearly all youth interviewed felt their out-of-school needs were not well understood by school personnel. Structures, such as creating individualized student success plans, can provide the information and tools for adults to connect students with relevant and necessary services (e.g., health, mental health, housing assistance, etc.). These structures are also necessary to facilitate partnerships between schools and community-based organizations to ensure that young people have access to the resources and supports that they need across contexts.

EMBRACE DATA—AND USE IT TO DRIVE DECISION MAKING

- **Offer proactive, data-driven support.** Some young people interviewed felt supports to help them stay in school were implemented too late to be effective. Instead of waiting until grades start slipping or multiple absences occur, school district administrators should be proactive in creating district-wide data systems and protocols that allow for early identification of students who may be struggling. For example, CORE districts in California collect a broad range of indicators such as social and emotional competencies in addition to more traditional indicators such as attendance and grades.²⁸ This data is then leveraged to provide more holistic and targeted supports to students.
- **Provide widespread access to data and transparency to youth.** Many youth we interviewed mentioned that they didn't understand either their educational status or options until an adult in the TUSD Dropout Prevention Team talked them through it, explaining the various alternative programs as well as the difference between a diploma and a GED. Most often, this explanation came after they had already disengaged from school at least once. More collaborative efforts to both share student data across the district as well as educate and train all adults in the school on educational options may aid in school personnel's ability to support youth in better understanding the alternative educational programs available to students and make decisions that could help prevent students from leaving school in the first place.

PROVIDE CONSISTENT, COMPREHENSIVE, AND CARING STUDENT SUPPORT

- **Facilitate Webs of Support.** Young people need multiple relationships with caring adults across their developmental contexts to support their success. While youth consistently name TUSD Dropout Prevention Team members as adults who provided multiple complementary kinds of support, a Web of Support perspective recognizes that a number of supportive relationships interconnected across contexts (as opposed to support from a single adult) are necessary for youth to thrive.²⁹ It also recognizes that all adults have varying roles to play in a young person's life; not all adults need to rise to the level of a formal mentor to be an important caring adult for any young person, but all adults have the potential to

provide at least one type of support to any young person. A Web of Support perspective suggests that all adults consider the role they play in a young person's life as well as the other adults in the webs that can be leveraged to support the young person.

- **Be persistent in offering comprehensive support.** The young people we spoke with were facing multiple, often extreme, levels of adversity and barriers to their success. This finding aligns with previous research on the lived experience of young people who have left school before graduation.³⁰ In order to support these young people, adults and systems need to adopt a consistent “do whatever it takes” attitude where the scope of support for youth is all inclusive and no need is outside the bounds of what is possible. Further, some young people interviewed felt they received inconsistent support which did not help them stay in school. Any support given should extend as long as the young person requires it. This may mean making routine home visits, accompanying young people to appointments, helping them navigate systems, providing tangible resources, and more. The young people we spoke with routinely described the impact that it had on them when adults went above and beyond, expressing unconditional care and support regardless of the complexities of their lives.
- **Provide multiple on-ramps, and “tenacity in pursuit.”** When a young person struggles to successfully re-engage on the first try, it is not time to accept defeat. School systems need to be designed in such a way that youth have multiple routes and “at-bats” in their re-engagement journeys. Often, young people navigating extreme adversity with multiple competing priorities may need several attempts at different points in their lives in order to re-engage and complete their formal education. Some attempts may not “stick,” but educational systems can be designed and staff can be trained to anticipate and support multiple re-engagement attempts.

LISTEN TO YOUTH AND PLACE THEM AT THE CENTER OF SOLUTIONS

- **Ask young people about their lives.** Research suggests that young people's perception of supports is more predictive of academic success than the objective availability of supports.³¹ In order to address systemic issues that either encourage or discourage students from engaging in school, it is important to assess how youth are experiencing the school system and school policies. School and district administrators could provide opportunities for young people to offer feedback by conducting focus groups or administering surveys that capture student experiences throughout Tucson. Some follow up questions may include: What factors have kept young people from leaving school? What school policies may unintentionally push young people out of school? Do youth understand the reasoning behind certain policies such as the 10-day unexcused absence policy or seat hours (i.e., where students must be in a classroom seat for six credits to complete any credits)?
- **Create structures for leveraging student voice and provide opportunities for leadership.** When we listen to what youth say about their re-engagement experiences, we can better design re-engagement programs to meet their needs. Teachers, administrators, policymakers, and philanthropists should provide opportunities for youth to share their stories and provide input into how better to support youth with interrupted education through a multiple pathways approach, offering an array of alternative education options, including online learning. This could range from providing one-on-one academic and social-emotional support integrated with online learning that is appropriate for students with different learning styles and abilities, to caring and supportive teachers encouraging youth to connect educational goals to aspiring careers and technical vocations through individual plans. Re-engagement programs designed with youth input have the potential to provide comprehensive opportunities for youth who are struggling with multiple adversities and challenges to graduate from high school.

CONCLUSION

The Center for Promise research team has surveyed and interviewed thousands of young people across the country to understand why they left school before graduating. While their stories are all unique, the underlying issue remains—young people face too many adversities and challenges with too few supports. However, what has also become clear are the reasons young people return to school—consistent support from caring adults and their own strength. Young people felt they were able to re-engage and stay engaged when they and their circumstances were understood, their goals were taken into account, and they were met with consistent, sometimes comprehensive, support from caring adults. While Tucson Unified School District has dedicated time and energy to helping young people succeed at school through their dropout prevention team and other efforts, getting youth to persist through graduation will take a redoubling of wider efforts to ensure all youth are aware of the supports and resources available to them. More systemic, coordinated efforts across contexts, which recognize the embedded nature of youth development, are needed to effectively support young people towards high school graduation, in Tucson and beyond.

APPENDIX

About the GradNation State Activation Initiative

The research of *I'm Going Back: The Re-Engagement Experiences of Tucson Youth* was conducted for the GradNation State Activation initiative, a collaboration between America's Promise Alliance and Pearson which aims to increase high school graduation rates by encouraging statewide innovation and collaboration, sharing knowledge to accelerate the adoption of proven strategies, and developing successful models all states can replicate. WestEd is one of three grantees in this national effort and has worked closely with the city of Tucson on educational issues. The re-engagement of young people who have left school before graduating is a priority of the Tucson Unified School District and the focus of its Steps to Success program. Thus, the Center for Promise—the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance, housed in the Boston University Wheelock College of Education and Human Development—developed and implemented a research project to examine the issue.

Methods

The Center for Promise studied the re-engagement experiences for young people in Tucson, Arizona. The research team conducted a qualitative study in which they interviewed 28 young people, 14 whom have been involved with the Steps to Success re-engagement program in Tucson and half of whom have been involved in other re-engagement efforts in Tucson (see Table 1). These interviews showcase the challenges for young people trying to stay in school, barriers to their re-engagement, and supports that help them to re-engage.

The Tucson Unified School District Dropout Prevention Team identified young people who had interrupted their education and invited them to participate in the research study. Participants were interviewed individually at a location of their choosing for an average of 30 minutes each. Youth were provided with a \$40 gift card in appreciation of their time.

Table 1. Study Sample

Sample size	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Attended two or more schools	Education Context
28	Female: 17 Male: 11	Range: 17-22 Average: 19	White: 10 Hispanic/Latinx decent: 11 Native American: 3 Multi ethnic: 3	22	Graduated: 12 Currently enrolled & on track for December 2018: 4 Enrolled: 9 Not enrolled: 3

The Center sought to understand why the youth disengaged from their education, why some youth re-engaged while others did not, what factors contributed to or deterred this re-engagement, and what factors contributed to their persistence through high school graduation.

To generate insights about these topics, interview participants were asked to respond to the following questions, among others:

- Can you tell me about your story leading up to when you left school? About your relationships with school adults, peers, and out-of-school adults?
- What do you believe was your greatest barrier, if any, to returning to school?
- What, if anything, helped you return to school?

Interviews were then transcribed and systematically analyzed in NVivo 12 to identify common themes. Themes were identified through axial coding, a process for pulling themes (“codes”) in the transcripts and parsing the relationships between the different themes that emerged, using a youth systems frame.^C

About Steps to Success

Steps to Success is a citywide collaboration between the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) and the office of Tucson Mayor Jonathan Rothschild to reach out to and re-enroll students who have left school. The initiative is embedded within a set of broader district re-engagement efforts and is coordinated by the TUSD Dropout Prevention Program team. Each year, the initiative brings together volunteers including notable local athletes, city officials, local business leaders, and other community members to conduct a citywide “walk” or door-knocking campaign to encourage youth who have left school before graduating to return to school. Its goals are both to send a message of care to young people and their families and to provide information about options for re-engaging in school. According to the office of the mayor, there have been eight “walks” since 2014; 1,173 students have been contacted on the walks, 617 students have re-engaged through Steps to Success, and 96 of those students have graduated.^D Steps to Success has experienced many successes; there is much to learn about the experiences of the young people serviced by the program and how it impacts their educational trajectories.

C Creswell, 2013; Zaff et al., 2015

D Data gathered from the office of the TUSD Dropout Prevention Team.

ENDNOTES

1. Belfield, 2014; Balfanz et al., 2014
2. Rennie-Hill et al, 2014
3. Building a GradNation, 2018
4. NCES, 2016
5. Ibid
6. Map AZ Dashboard
7. Belfield, Levin & Rosen, 2012; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009
8. Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009
9. Belfield, Levin & Rosen, 2012
10. Muennig et al., 2010
11. Belfield, C. & Hickox, I., 2018
12. Tucson Unified School District
13. Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Doll, Eslami & Walters, 2013; Fine; 1986; Lee & Burkam, 2003
14. Neild & Balfanz, 2006; National Research Council, 2011; Center for Promise, 2014b
15. Center for Promise, 2014b
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17. Zaff, Pufall Jones, Donlan, Lin, & Anderson, 2016; Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers & Lewin-Bizan, 2011
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19. Zaff, Pufall Jones, Donlan, Lin, & Anderson, 2016
20. Center for Promise, 2014b; Center for Promise, 2015; Bridgeland, Dilulio Jr., & Morrison, 2006
21. Zaff, Donlan, Jones, & Lin, 2015
22. Bowers Sprott, & Taff, 2012; Nagaoka, Farrington, Ehrlich, & Heath, 2015; Center for Promise, 2015
23. Rennie-Hill et al., 2014; Nakkula & Foster, 2007; Zaff, Kawashima-Ginsberg, Boyd, & Kakli, 2014
24. Center for Promise, 2015
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26. Zaff, Aasland, McDermott, Carvalho, Joseph, & Pufall Jones, 2016
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28. Bartolino Krachman, Arnold, Larocca, 2016
29. Varga & Zaff, 2017
30. Center for Promise, 2014
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The Center for Promise is the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance, housed at the Boston University Wheelock College Education & Human Development and dedicated to understanding what young people need to thrive and how to create the conditions of success for all young people.

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America's Promise Alliance is the nation's largest network dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth. We bring together more than 400 national organizations and thousands of community leaders to focus the nation's attention on young people's lives and voices, lead bold campaigns to expand opportunity, conduct groundbreaking research on what young people need to thrive, and accelerate the adoption of strategies that help young people succeed. GradNation, our signature campaign, mobilizes Americans to increase the nation's high school graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020. In the past 12 years, an additional 2 million young people have graduated from high school.

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