STUDENT VOICES
Why School Works For Alternative High School Students

“Respect me for who I am, require me to do my best, give me the help I need to achieve it.”

Cliff Brush
Bob Jones

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Introduction

Since the 1991-92 school year, the Oregon Department of Education has collected student level data on students who dropout for grades 7-12. Part of that data collection is information on why the students dropped out. Over the years, the Department has learned how to use the data on reasons for leaving to inform school districts how to develop dropout prevention programs that serve the students affected by the reasons listed on the collection form.

Information on why students drop out describes only part of the situation students face. Equally important is information on why students stay in school. If we know what students like about school, we should be able to emphasize those features and do a better job of keeping students engaged in their learning, and thus in school. The Department authorized a series of visits to alternative schools in order to identify from students the positive aspects of their school. The goal is to identify what motivates students to do their best and stay in school.

Two members of the Department’s staff, Cliff Brush and Bob Jones, visited seven alternative high schools to interview students. The schools are described briefly in the addendum. Brush is the Department’s education specialist for Alternative Education. Jones is research analyst who has published the Department’s Dropout Report since its inception.

The purpose of the interview was to ask students who had enrolled in the alternative school after dropping out, or being on the verge of dropping out, what it was about the school they were now attending that kept them in. The students were also asked what it was about their previous high school they would change, if they could, to make it a better place to learn.

At each school, Brush and Jones were introduced to a group of students for a discussion of about one hour in length. Sometimes the students were members of the same classroom, other times the students were selected at random by school administrators. The size of the student groups ranged from seven to sixteen students. Brush, a career educator at the secondary level, led the discussion. After introductions and a brief explanation of the purpose of the discussion, the interview began. The students were also briefed on what the information they provided would be used for, and that the information collected would be confidential.

Student responses were immediate. The students were open, willing to talk, articulate, and sure of their thoughts. The comments they made were repeated at every site. Many comments were so similar, that, standing alone, it would be difficult to know which school they came from. Probably the major finding of the study is that students all want the same thing, regardless of their background or the environment they study in.

“Respect me for who I am, require me to do my best, give me the help I need to achieve it.”

1 Form 3204B, Report on Individual Early Leaver, now a web survey.

2 Morrison Secondary School, Arts & Communication Magnet Academy, Helensview HS, Alpha HS, Teen Parent Program, Downtown Learning Center, and Centennial learning Center.
That this same thing was said in visit after visit lends persuasive force to these student comments.

The comments fall into general categories of Personal Issues, Academic Issues, and School Issues, and key findings in each category. The findings isolate factors that affect success, but in some cases they are different ways of saying the same thing, and in all cases, they are interdependent.

**Personal Issues**

Finding One: Students want respect and acceptance for who they are and what their abilities are.

Students who enroll in alternative schools say they had problems in their traditional school being respected by their classmates. This might have been due to the way they dressed, what their interests were, who their friends were, what they knew, or what they didn’t know. At their new school, students and staff practice respect and acceptance. Differences are not barriers to friendships. Cliques do not exist. A respectful, helping attitude on the part of students for each other is vital for a climate of success to be built. Fellow students are as important to success as are teachers.

**Student comments:**
- It’s about respect. People respect you for who you are.
- There are no cliques here. Everyone respects everyone else. We’re one big clique.
- There are no popularity contests here. Everybody talks to everybody else.
- If I’m reading in class and get stuck on a word or don’t say it right, no one makes fun of me.
- If I’m a senior and I don’t know fractions, no one says Why not? They help me learn fractions.
- It’s OK if we don’t know something and ask for help. They [teachers] don’t make us feel stupid when we ask for help.
- We’re not told you can’t be in this group or that group because we don’t wear this or that. We aren’t judged by our appearance. Look at us. You wouldn’t think that he [wearing black] and I [she] (wearing popular casual) would be friends. But we are.
- People here don’t look at your clothes and decide whether they like you or not.
- No one makes fun of us because we know things or have opinions. That can be intimidating at other schools. It isn’t here. We can say what’s on our minds. We can be ourselves.
- I was different in my old school and that was hard on me. Here, I get respect for that.
- We help each other. It happens all the time. We help each other with schoolwork.
- Sometimes a teacher won’t know about a computer program or something, but another student will.
- We all work well together. I mean, not everybody here is who I would hang with after school, but while we’re here, we all help each other.
- If we don’t get along with someone, we have ways of working it out. We have to deal with it: we can’t fake it. In a bigger school, if you have a class with someone you don’t like, you sit on opposite sides of the room. Here, they make you sit next to that person and work it out.
- Older students know younger ones. We all get along. We all have classes together and have the same teachers. Seniors and freshmen are friends with each other here.
- If you go here for even two months, you’re part of our family. [another student responding]
  - More like one week!
- This is a positive atmosphere. Everybody loves everybody. We don’t pressure each other to do negative things.
Finding Two: High school students have not outgrown the need to be cared for.

High school students are still young. They have adult thoughts, and do adult things, but they need adult guidance. There are still many things they don’t know about nor have experience in their world. Students bring problems to school that affect their ability to perform on any given day. These problems need to be acknowledged and treated before the student is ready to learn.

Student comments
They really watch out for us here. After all, we’re still children. Well, we’re really teenagers, but we still need people to take care of us.
My teachers notice if I’m having a problem. I don’t even have to say anything. They can tell just by looking at me. They know right away.
Sometimes I come in feeling bad. My teachers make me feel better. They make me laugh.
If I have a problem and try to hide it, other students can see it and they ask me if I’m all right. After a while you stop saying, ‘Yes,’ and you talk about your problem.
If you have a personal problem, the teachers will help you with it right then [a comment heard in all schools visited]. They don’t say You have to go to class now and we’ll talk about it later.
I saw a movie on animal rights and mistreatment of animals that really upset me, and the teacher let me stay and talk about it until I was calmed down. I missed the next class, but that was all right with everybody.
If you have a problem, you can talk about it and they [teachers] will help you. You can talk to teachers or other students, no matter what your problem is, and you will get help.
Sometimes you have a real problem at home and the teachers will help you with it instead of just saying you didn’t get your homework done.

Finding Three: Students have a life outside of high school. This must be taken into account.

Students fit schooling into their whole life. For some students that is a difficult fit because of other life issues they have to attend to, such as jobs, childcare, commuting and living arrangements. For many of these students, getting to school every day is a victory. Schools that are flexible around these issues and that provide assistance to their students create a willingness in the student to do their best.

Student comments:
I commute 1 hour 45 minutes - one way - to come here every day.
I commute 1 hour each way every day. I ride the bus, then the train, then the bus again.
We’re learning how to be parents here. We’re learning stuff I never thought about, like how to change a diaper. There are a lot of things I’ve thought of to ask the nurse or midwife.
The school helps us find housing. That’s how I got mine.
There’s daycare. That’s important to moms.
If our teachers find out we need food at our house, they help us get it. They don’t just call [the authorities] down on us.
We don’t have homework. We do all our work in class. In the evening we have to take care of our children or work at our job, so we can’t do homework.
We have day care - it’s right over there! We can see our children between classes and at lunch and take care of them.
I have my own apartment and everything in it I got from scratch. No one is going to give me a car to get to school or work. I work for everything I have.
Finding Four: Students will have a life after they complete high school. They need guidance in figuring out what they want to do, what they can do, and how they can get it done.

The schools we visited recognize that earning a diploma is not enough. Students need to know what they will do with their diploma as soon as they leave high school. Rather than being a place that solely provides education, the schools we visited also help students plan for their future and learn how to make that future a reality.

Student comments:
Teachers don't just help us with academics. They help us find money for college. They don't just send application forms home with us. The sit with us and help us fill them out. I know people who graduated from other schools. They're just partying. I ask them, "When does college start. Aren't you going to go?" They don't know. When asked, "Do you have a better idea of what you want to do after high school than you did before," the vast majority answered, "Yes." A typical response, "I thought of myself as a dropout. I was comfortable with that. Now, I plan to go to college." We have to write a grade 13 plan that says what we are going to do in our first year out of school and how we are going to get it done. The other school just wants you to get your diploma and leave. This school helps you figure out who you are and what you're good at. High school is just doing work. Here, it's getting to know yourself and other people. Even if you get all your credits, you can't leave until your grade 13 plan is OK. It makes you think about what you're going to do with your education. [Staff comment] We're not teaching them how to be high school students. We're teaching them to be successful people. [a student-facilitator exchange] "I don't know what I want to do yet." "Maybe your goal is to find your goal?" "Yeah."

Academic issues

Finding Five: Students learn at different rates and in different ways. They need staff who are patient with their pace of learning and will persevere with the student until learning has occurred.

Not every student catches on to what is taught the first time it is presented. This is true for students in traditional schools as well as for students in alternative schools. The difference the alternative school makes, according to students, is that teachers will stick with them until they understand the material. The students in these schools aren't asking for an easy way to earn a diploma. They are simply asking for help in getting the education they want and believe they deserve.

Student comments:
You get credit here if you do the work – just for doing it. If it's not right, the teachers will help you until it is right, but they respect the fact that you did it. If I don't understand something, the teacher will work with me until I get it, and not get upset with me like in my old school. They don't teach you something and move on whether you learn it or not. They make sure you understand something.
we understand everything.
The teacher helps me until I get it right.
Teachers here will take the time to see that you get it. (Even good students said they were doing better): I could get an A in my old school and still not learn a lot. You can't do that here unless you really have learned something.
The teachers help you and keep at it until you get it. They help you when you ask for help, instead of saying Come back after school, or See me before school. And when they say that they are sitting at their desk not doing anything.
[In my old school] Sometimes they explained it to me several times, and I still didn't get it and I felt like it wasn't OK to keep asking.
Studies aren't easier here than in my old school. It's just that they take the time to make sure we learned it before they move on.

Finding Six: If high expectations are given to students, they will meet them, given necessary and appropriate supports.

Alternative school students are no different from anyone else. They respond to a challenge and are willing to meet that challenge if they know they will be given the help they need. This is the key finding of this study. Achievement gains will occur if students are given the help they need to make those gains.

You can't slack here. If you do, you're out the door.
The teachers don't let us do less than our best. They find out what our best is and then hold us to that.
If I have problems with my essay, the teacher will correct it and have me do it again, correct it again, and I have to keep at it until it's really the best I can do.
Kids in the other school think all we do here is goof off all day, but we work just as hard as they do, maybe harder.
It's hard not to succeed here. Everyone at this school wants us to succeed.
If we screw up, we're out. There's someone else out there who will take our places. There are 100 [students] on the waiting list.
If our grades go down, we're out.
We have to have a minimum 2.0 GPA to be here.
When asked, “Are you doing better academically here than before?” virtually all students answered, Yes. “Why?” Because they find out what you need to know and help you learn it. They don't put you down for not knowing something or say they taught that once and they're not going to teach it again. Teachers here will take the time to see that you get it. (Even good students said they were doing better): I could get an A in my old school and still not learn a lot. You can't do that here unless you really have learned something.
It's not easy here, but it's not stressful.
Our teachers expect us to do our best, to work outside of our boundaries.
Every day we get to study something we really like. I'm taking the coolest classes. I'm taking so many cool classes here that I kind of forgot to include some required classes. I'm taking those at night at the community college.

Finding Seven: High expectations translate into high goals

This is related to Finding Four, and the follows from Finding Six. Once students are shown what they are capable of doing, they can see their future in a more positive light. Because of their newly found success in school, they see themselves as being able to achieve more and do better by themselves after they leave school than they ever had before.

I'm here to get my diploma. It's so valuable. People talk about getting a GED, but everybody knows it's not the same thing as a diploma.
Almost all of us have been offered jobs at our (school placed or counseled) job sites. [teen mother] We want to change the statistics. We want to show that we can graduate and have a successful career just like everyone else has. We don’t want to be welfare queens. We want to show everyone that Teen Parent Program girls can do it. After I had my baby I got goals for the first time, and teachers here showed me how to meet them. [Career goals were elevated by coming here. From fast food to just hanging around, students wanted to do things like corrections, nursing, workers comp counselors, etc.] [The students did not want the program to be cut or eliminated] Spend a bit of money on me now, well a lot, and I will pay it back and more later when I have a good job. You can get your GED in a month, and then colleges don’t really see what you can do. If you work hard here and raise your GPA, they will see that you worked and improved yourself.

School Issues

Finding Eight: Success in the school creates school spirit and a pride of place.

Students performing well in schools acquire a pride in their school that affects many levels. Students who feel respect for who they are have a feeling of psychological safety. They do not have to feel guarded about who they are, which creates the freedom for them to find their success in their own way. A school spirit based on accomplishment and cooperation promotes success for all.

Student comments:

You can leave your backpack in the hall for a couple of periods because it’s convenient to do that, and no one will mess with it while you’re gone. It’s safe here. Everyone knows us, and we know everyone. We don’t have to worry about our things being stolen. Well, I did have my CD player stolen, but it was returned. The doors are locked. The teachers and security guards all know who has business here and who doesn’t. I was visiting another school, and I was stopped in the hall and told to go to class. I didn’t go there. They didn’t know that. They just thought I should be in class or something. Here, they know everybody who goes to school here. We have school spirit. It’s about us. It’s about our school. We take care of our school. It’s one of our work sites. Look around. We eat here. Do you see gum or food on the floor or the tables or the walls? (No.) We show our school spirit by doing things like wiping off the tables. We don’t have a football team or a rally squad, so our school spirit comes from this being in the place where we like to be. We are like a family at this school. We have family time activities every week. When I come here in the morning, every adult says Hi to me. In my old school, no one noticed me. Here I have a place and I count for something. In other schools it’s like, do this, do it our way. You have no power. We’re all here because we want to be. If I couldn’t go to this school, I’d probably just drop out. Everyone here has gone through something [a difficult like situation] so we all know what it’s like and we are here to help each other. [teacher] We have students who have found success and acceptance here. They graduate and don’t want to leave.