

6 Things to Say to Kids at Risk of Dropping Out

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This article is sponsored by the National Guard Youth Challenge Program, a preventative youth program that has helped thousands of high school dropouts 16 to 18 years of age change their lives.

The student that you've been worried about all year drops by your room to say hi. That's great, but shouldn't he be in class now? You ask why he's not where he's supposed to be and you get a shrug: "I'm always in trouble in that class anyway," he says.

Every year, more than 1 million students drop out of school in the United States. That's 7,000 every single day of the school year. It's overwhelming, and yes, sometimes there is nothing any teacher can do. But every once in a while, the right words at the right time just might make a difference.

You know the stakes: High school dropouts suffer more health problems as adults and live shorter lives than graduates. They are more likely to be involved in crime and to be incarcerated. And, of course, it goes without saying that high school dropouts earn less than students who finish school.

But here's one of the saddest statistics: The vast majority of students who drop out regret their decision. "The Silent Epidemic," a 2006 report on the perspectives of high school dropouts, found that three-quarters say if they had it to do over again, they would have stayed in school and earned their diplomas.

So what do you say to the student who is standing in front of you, failing report card in hand? Keep in mind that dropping out is a process that involves multiple decisions. Here are six key points when you can help guide a student back on the path towards graduation.

1. "I'm suspended for a week, so I guess it's my vacation."

What You Can Say: "I'll check in with you every day so you don't lose momentum."

When a student is suspended, even for a short period of time, he loses track of his classes, which means he loses track of his daily assignments, routine and ongoing relationships. It doesn't take long for students to get out of the habit of going to school. Regular check-ins keep the student connected to school and eases the transition when he returns.

2. "I don't fit in here anyway."

What You Can Say: "Commit to doing just one thing."

High school can be an isolating place. For a student who has already been retained and struggles with grades, a disagreement with a teacher or a fight with a friend can push her out

the door. Telling her that she's wrong ("Of course we want you here") won't make a dent. Instead, try to have her commit to one thing that will keep her involved with school, whether it's going to track practice or chorus or attending extra-help math sessions after school.

3. "I didn't make it in today."

What You Can Say: "I'm going to set a time to come to your house to talk to you and your mom."

Poor attendance is obviously a major red flag, yet only 47 percent of dropouts surveyed for "The Silent Epidemic" said that their parents or guardians were ever contacted about their school absences. In over two-thirds of cases, by the time the school and parents were connecting, the high schooler had already committed to dropping out. So take a page from the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project and show up at home. Whether it's you or another staff member at your school, by making a connection, you could help keep the student in school or help him find an alternative solution.

4. "I'm failing three classes. This is BS."

What You Can Say: "Let's set some time to talk and figure out some next steps."

First, get to the root causes. Did the student miss too much school? Does he feel like he was unprepared to begin with? Is he getting sleep? Once you have the root cause, figure out what's gone wrong with his report card and how to tackle it in the upcoming weeks and months. He may need to advocate for himself with other teachers to manage the various deadlines and expectations from each class.

5. "My life is too crazy right now."

What You Can Say: "Talk to me."

When a student is dealing with disruptions at home or a pregnancy or working a lot of hours, school can quickly take a backseat. At this point, she doesn't need a teacher, she needs an ally. Knowing someone at school cares about you and will listen can make the difference in whether or not a student keeps coming to school. If she doesn't want to talk about the big issues, talk about the small stuff—her new hairstyle, television, sports. Talking about those everyday events builds trust.

6. "I just can't be here anymore."

What You Can Say: "I hear you. Let's see if we can find another way."

Sometimes the best way forward is a fresh start. It's time to talk about alternative pathways to graduation. There are options beyond simply getting a GED. Your school district or state most likely has a list of available programs. For example, the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program has helped over 121,000 16-to-18-year-olds get to graduation and find a mentor and a new direction in life. No program is right for everyone, but there is a way forward for every kid.

Teachers: What do you hear from your students at risk of dropping out? What do you say to them?