

Almost everything works:

Good news about high
school completion

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all in for youth
United for school completion.



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Executive summary

The issue

The high school completion rate is a barometer of Alberta's social and economic well-being. An educated youth population provides the foundation for social inclusion and prosperity, now and in the future. The world has changed, and young people who don't complete high school risk a future of precarious employment, poor health, and life on the margins. Only 9% of job openings from expansion and replacement over the next few years will require less than high school completion and, because of technological advances, "a subset of people with low skill levels may not be able to earn a reasonable standard of living based on their labour."

Despite gradual increases in high school completion rates over the years, 22% of Calgary's students don't graduate in three years and 17% still haven't finished in five years. Local improvements haven't kept pace with those of provinces such as Nova Scotia, which has boasted a three-year completion rate over 90% for the past few years.

Ultimately, by the age of 24 only 8% of Calgarians remain without some type of high school or post-secondary certification, but the direct expense to both the individual and society of educational upgrading and the indirect social, health, and justice expenses during these "lost years" is considerable. The best outcome for all is high school completion by age 20, and in as few years as possible.

Luckily, research reveals a wide range of strategies and interventions that are effective, some of which could be strengthened or led by community organizations. The good news? Almost everything can work to improve high school completion rates. We just have to do it right.

What is happening now

Some of the strategies and initiatives undertaken in other provinces to improve high school completion rates are now being implemented in Alberta. Recognizing the growing importance of high school completion for individual students and for society, Alberta Education built on the learnings from a pilot project begun five years earlier and embarked on a comprehensive High School Redesign (HSR) Initiative in 2013. The Initiative reflects much of the current research on dropout prevention; with excellent early results reported by a few schools and school districts.

While most of the new Alberta initiatives have yet to be rigorously evaluated, some are very interesting and hopeful, and merit close monitoring.

The broad, overarching strategies that are effective in improving high school completion rates are as follows:

1. Monitor the progress of all students, and proactively intervene when students show early signs of attendance, behavior, or academic problems.
2. Provide intensive, individualized support to students who have fallen off track and face significant challenges to success.
3. Engage students by offering curricula and programs that connect schoolwork with college and career success and that improve students' capacity to manage challenges in and out of school.
4. For schools with many at-risk students, create small, personalized communities to facilitate monitoring and support.

Some students are at greater risk than others

In Calgary and elsewhere, some groups of students face great disadvantage in finishing school, including those with mental health challenges, youth in government care, sexual minority and gender-variant students, Indigenous students, and some types of ESL students.

In addition to the challenges unique to each of these groups, many of these and other students live in low socio-economic status (SES) families, where parents have low incomes, low education levels, and low status jobs or intermittent employment. Low SES is a risk factor on its own for high school dropout. Low SES families are often unable to provide the learning environments and supports that help students to learn and succeed at school from early childhood through the high school years; systemic biases in the education system mean that students from lower-SES families may be streamed into non-academic educational pathways, even when they could master academic stream courses with more encouragement and help; and, even in a city as rich as Calgary, the struggle to meet the most basic of survival needs is preventing many students from attending and fully participating at school.

What more can be done

While it is recognized that the most effective strategies to improve completion rates target children before or during elementary school, research reveals a wide range of strategies and interventions that are effective at the high school level if they are properly implemented. Under the right conditions and with appropriate supports, most young people can successfully complete high school. Overall, the key to success for vulnerable students appears to be a relentless focus on student learning—achievement, engagement, and well-being—but schools can't do it all and they can't do it alone. Help is needed to get students to regularly attend and participate in school, support their academic and personal growth, and understand their options and plan for the future. There is a clear role for community in providing or facilitating five things that make a difference: financial help, coaches and mentors, tutoring and other forms of academic support, after-school programming, and parental engagement initiatives.

Some of this work is already being done by Calgary organizations, including the United Way and partners through the All In for Youth Initiative. But much more needs to happen to improve high school completion rates and the life chances of disadvantaged students in Calgary. Now is the time for all organizations with a commitment to positive youth development to join forces to ensure that all youth in Calgary succeed in school and in life. Almost everything works: We just have to do it.

EXAMPLE: All In For Youth's Success Coaches

All in for Youth (AIFY) is a Calgary-wide initiative spearheaded by the United Way of Calgary to support students to complete high school. AIFY's flagship is the Success Coach Program, administered by Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary in partnership with United Way, Calgary Board of Education, and Calgary Catholic School District. Success Coaches are close in age to the students they work with and are not school system employees. They work closely with students at risk of leaving school early, providing one-on-one mentoring and support, monitoring school performance, providing academic and career planning, and connecting students with academic and financial supports. Beginning in 2012-13 with two Success Coaches, the program has expanded to 15 Coaches in 13 schools, and has served 3,097 students. Preliminary data show that, over the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years, Coaches worked with 389 students, 84% of whom have either graduated or are still attending in 2017-2018.

Based on the impact of the AIFY Success Coaches, the Calgary Catholic School District has now introduced its own Success Coaches, who are teachers, with one Success Coach in every school. This new initiative is being monitored for effectiveness.

1. Introduction

The high school completion rate is a barometer of Alberta's social and economic well-being. An educated youth population provides the foundation for social inclusion and prosperity in our province, now and in the future.

This paper describes what is already underway in Alberta and what else might be done by stakeholders, especially those in community-based organizations and schools, to help students at risk of dropping out to overcome challenges and receive a high school credential in the K-12 system within three years of starting grade 10 ("on time") or, when this is not realistic, within five years of starting grade 10, by the age of 20.

While it is recognized that the most effective strategies to prevent high school dropout target children before or during elementary school, the focus in this paper is on supporting vulnerable youth during their high school years. Research reveals a wide range of strategies and interventions that are effective, some of which could be strengthened or led by community organizations. The good news? Almost everything can work to improve high school completion rates. We just have to do it right.

2. The high school completion imperative

For individuals, high school completion is widely recognized as a vital step toward living a fulfilling life. As well as being the prerequisite for entering the world of work and post-secondary education, a high school diploma is increasingly associated with health and longevity, civic engagement, and employment.¹

Because of technological advances, "a subset of people with low skill levels may not be able to earn a reasonable standard of living based on their labour. We see that already." David Autor, MIT⁸

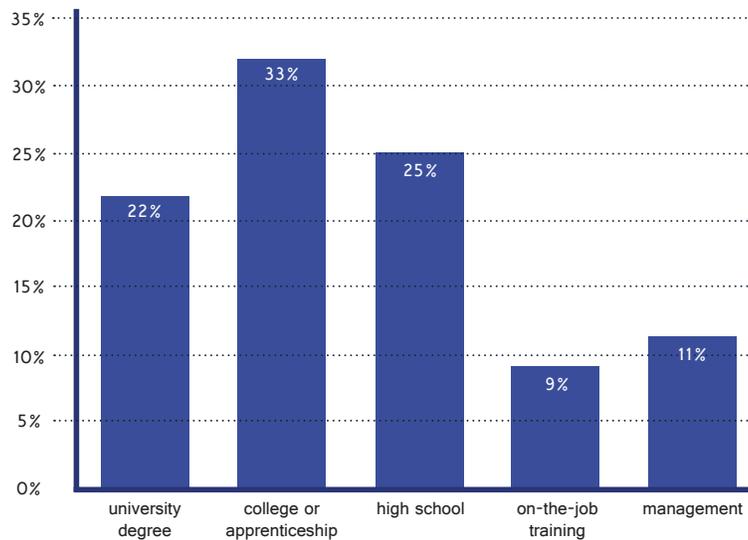
- In 2016, the employment rate of Canadians aged 25 to 34 without a high school diploma was at its lowest point in 20 years: 51% of women and 22% of men aged 25 to 34 without a diploma were not in the labour force, up from 40% and 12% in 1990.²
- The two occupations employing the most Canadian men without a diploma were construction trade helpers and labourers and transport truck drivers:³ (the latter of which is expected to be automated in the coming years⁴).
- More than 60% of the income of Canadian women aged 25 to 34 who did not graduate came from government transfers, such as social assistance, in 2016.⁵
- Canadian women aged 25 to 34 who did not graduate were almost twice as likely as female graduates to be single parents (19%; 10%); and to report that they had a disability (11%; 6%).⁶

In some ways, Alberta's workers have been buffered from this trend by the natural resource-based economy, and young Albertans without a diploma have fared better economically than those in other parts of the country, with higher than average employment rates and wages.⁷ Yet, this economic fluke may be coming to an end and, in this province too, earnings are closely associated with education level, especially for those aged 15 to 24 (Figure 1). In the coming years, as in other parts of Canada, employment will be increasingly tied to education: Figure 2 shows that only 9% of job openings from expansion and replacement over the next few years will require less than high school completion.

Figure 1. Average hourly wages of Alberta youth, ages 15 - 24, by education and gender, 2016 ⁹

Education level	All	Male	Women
Less than high school	\$14.16	\$15.16	\$12.98
High school graduate	\$16.66	\$17.63	\$15.28
Post-secondary certificate or diploma	\$20.31	\$23.03	\$17.89
University Degree	\$23.69	\$23.01	\$23.98

Figure 2. Job openings from expansion and replacement demand by skill level, 2015 -2024 ¹⁰



High school completion rates also have profound impacts on society as a whole. High rates lead to better post-secondary enrollment, innovation in all sectors, and higher tax revenues, and to lower health, justice, and social service costs. The estimated annual cost to Canadians with respect to health, social assistance, and criminal justice for each person who does not complete high school is about \$18,000.ⁱ 2016 census data show that 5,955 Calgarians aged 20 to 24 had not completed high school or any other type of post-secondary diploma or degree, which amounts to roughly \$1.1 million per year in this city alone. This does not include tax revenue and associated costs to society due to dropouts' lower earnings. The long-term social costs of high school dropout include launching and perpetuating inter-generational poverty and widening of the education and income gap.¹¹

ⁱThis figure was originally calculated by Havinsky in 2008, Hankivisky, O. 2008. *Cost Estimates of Dropping Out of High School in Canada*. (Ottawa, ON: Canadian Council on Learning), retrieved December 24, 2017 from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.510.4857&rep=rep1&type=pdf>. It has been adjusted for inflation using the Bank of Canada's online inflation calculator, <https://www.bankofcanada.ca/rates/related/inflation-calculator>.

3. Completion rates in Calgary and Alberta

3.1 What do we mean by “high school completion” and “highschool drop out”

“High school completion” and “high school dropout” mean different things in different contexts, which can be confusing, and makes it difficult to compare and make thorough use of the data released by school districts, provincial governments, and the federal government. In common parlance, a high school dropout simply is someone who did not graduate from high school but, as shown in a textbox, this is not true in most research. Likewise, someone might be considered a high school completer by the Alberta government but not the federal government, even if they have never completed high school or a post-secondary program of any kind.

Therefore, this paper sticks mainly with three- and five-year high school completion rates, which are somewhat consistent among provinces and school boards, and may be the best reflection of what’s going on with high school students up to age 20, the age at which students can no longer attend high schools in Alberta. Ultimately, by the age of 24 only 8% of Calgarians remain without some type of high school or post-secondary certification,¹⁴ but the direct expense to both the individual and society of educational upgrading and the indirect social, health, and justice expenses during these “lost years” is considerable. The best outcome for all is high school completion by age 20, and in as few years as possible.

Caution!

Number of high school completers
+ Number of high school dropouts
≠ Total number of students

For keeners only:

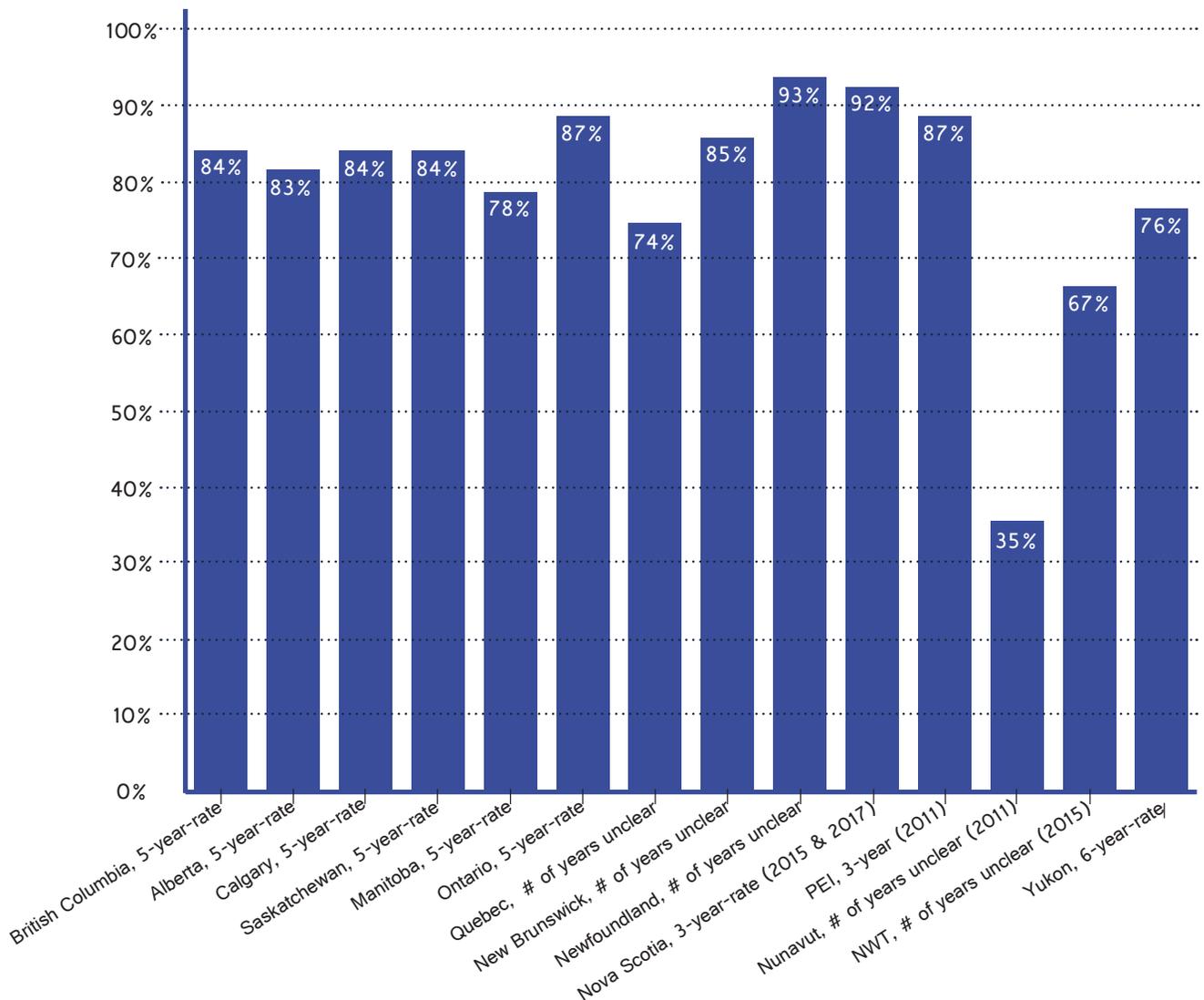
- Alberta calculates the annual dropout rate based on the percentages of Alberta students aged 14 to 18 in public, separate, Francophone, charter, and accredited private schools who, in the following school year: are not enrolled in the K–12 system, are not enrolled in a post-secondary institution in Alberta, are not registered in an apprenticeship program in Alberta, and have not completed high school. Students with some types of disabilities are not included in the annual drop out rate.¹²
- For Statistics Canada, dropout rates are based on the number of individuals aged 20 to 24 who are not attending school and have not attained a high school credential. This age cut-off is used because research indicates that, by age 24, young people usually have decided whether or not to return to complete some form of high school certification.¹³
- The Government of Alberta defines high school completers as people of any age who have either:
Completed a High School Diploma, a Certificate of High School Achievement, or a High School Equivalency Diploma by obtaining a GED or by earning or being awarded sufficient credits through courses or awards or;
(ii) registered in, although not necessarily completed, any type of post-secondary education or training program, whether or not the person completed high school or the post-secondary program, many of which don’t require a diploma or certificate.
- For Statistics Canada, high school completers are people aged 25 to 64 who have completed a high school diploma or equivalency certificate, regardless of any other qualifications obtained, and data from the 2016 census that were available for this paper were specific to the 25 to 34 year age group.

3.2 Calgary and Alberta lag behind Ontario and the Maritime provinces in improving three-year high school completion rates

When Albertans of all ages are factored into the mix, in 2014 this province had the lowest percentage of high school completers (73%) among all of the provinces and in Canada as a whole (86%), although percentages in the territories were lower still.¹⁵ However, these percentages are not helpful when we think about improving completion rates since, as explained earlier, non-completers over age 24 rarely complete high school.

Of more interest in the current discussion is high school completion during adolescence, via the ordinary, provincially-funded school system. While three-year (“on time”) high school completion rates remain low in Calgary and in Alberta relative to many cities and provinces, this city and province are in about the middle of the pack when it comes to five-year completion rates. Recent data and definitions are not readily available in some provinces, but Figure 3 presents the best available completion rate data overall (beginning from grade 10) by provinces and territories. Readers are reminded to be cautious when comparing among provinces, given the differences in the number of years to complete reported by the provinces. For example, Nova Scotia’s three-year completion rate has been over 90% for several years; Alberta’s three-year rate (described below, not presented graphically) has been 75% to 78%

Figure 3. High school completion rates, 2015-2016 unless otherwise noted, with varying completion rates reported¹⁶



Local rates have been improving: Alberta's five-year completion rate rose from 80% in the school year ending in 2011 to 83% in 2016; the three-year rate rose from 74% to 78% over the same period.¹⁷ Three-year completion rates for students in Calgary's public school district rose from 73% in 2012 to 76% in 2016; five-year rates rose from 80% to 84%.¹⁸

Provincial completion rates are similar for English as a Second Language (ESL or English Language Learner, ELL) students and lower for Indigenous students in Alberta. For ESL students, the provincial three-year completion rate rose from 62% in 2012 to 74% in 2016; the five-year completion rate increased from 75% to 79% over the same time period.¹⁹ For Indigenous students, the three-year provincial completion rate rose from 46% in 2012 to 54% in 2016; the five-year completion rate increased from 53% to 59% over the same time period.²⁰

In the Calgary public system, the three-year completion rate for Indigenous students remains very low, only 36% in 2016-2017;²¹ in the Catholic district, however, this rate rose from 57% in 2011 to 81% in 2017. The Catholic district attributes this improvement to the introduction of a First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) Education team, which is profiled later in this paper.

Students in some other provinces have made great strides than Alberta has in improving completion rates in recent years. In Ontario, for instance, the five-year completion rate climbed by 18% over 12 years, from 68% in 2004 to 87% in 2016; the four-year completion rate increased by 23% over the same period to 80%. Likewise, the Maritime provinces have been among the top performing provinces for over a decade. Nova Scotia's three-year graduation rate was 92% in 2017²² and, most notably, Nova Scotia now boasts a First Nations' on-reserve completion rate of 88%. Factors contributing to improvements overall in these provinces include student success teams, programming that aligns with career aspirations; improved instruction and "no fail" student assessment practices, meaning that students have many chances and receive a great deal of support to succeed; and working with community agencies to provide supports to students.²³ Nova Scotia's exceptional success in improving Indigenous completion rates may stem from the establishment of a specific Mi'kmaq education authority in 1999, which now boasts over 50% Mi'kmaq teachers and a curriculum that stresses Mi'kmaq culture and language.²⁴

4. Who drops out of high school and why

4.1 Paths to dropout

There are two paths, which often intersect or co-occur, to high school dropout: the long, slow "education life course" path, and the "rational choice" response to stressful life events.

Education life course

For many young people, dropping out is the culmination of a lengthy process in which different but interrelated factors collectively lead to the decision to drop out.²⁵ Some dropouts face multiple challenges all their lives that eventually lead them to leave school. The greater the number of challenges, the greater the risk that a young person will drop out. In these cases, "educational life course" challenges lead to early school leaving.

While the focus of this paper is high school-focused initiatives, research shows that academic pathways often begin very early in life, and the risk factors for dropout usually emerge during the elementary school years, even by kindergarten. Many studies in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere have identified students in kindergarten, grade 1 or 2, or grade 6 and successfully predicted whether they would complete high school by age 21. The most robust early predictors of dropout include poor reading ability and behaviour problems,²⁶ and, by grade 6, also include additional factors such as motivation and self-perceptions about ability to succeed at school (“academic self-efficacy”). In fact, Canadian researchers have recently created a short questionnaire for grade 6 students that can reliably predict risk of high school dropout.²⁷ Clearly, being able to identify students who show precursor signs of disengaging from school is an important step in preventing serious problems before they occur.

A brief summary of the key factors for gradual disengagement followed by dropout is provided in Figure 4. Each factor listed can be either a risk factor for dropout, or a protective factor against dropout, depending on whether it is positive or negative. For example, strong intellectual abilities protect students from dropping out; cognitive challenges increase the risk of dropout.

Figure 4. Key factors influencing school completion or dropout

	Individual factors	Intellectual and verbal skills, mental health, ²⁸ social engagement, academic aspirations of peers ²⁹ Grades, sense of motivation and competence, level of school engagement, academic aspirations, attendance, behaviour at school, level of investment in academic and extracurricular activities ³⁰
	Families and community factors	Family socio-economic status, family functioning, parental value placed on education, parental education level, ³¹ first- and second-generation immigrant youth from particular ethno-cultural groups, refugee youth
	Quality of the school experience	School climate, relationships with teachers, discipline policies, classroom size, pedagogical approaches, etc.

ii. Rational choice, at least in the eyes of the student

New research has delved more deeply into challenges and stressors that sometimes arise in adolescence that can divert students who had been on track off course to graduate. This route to dropout, which can be concurrent to the educational life course described above, is sometimes described as the “rational choice” path. When stressful life events occur, like pregnancy or parenting, conflict with the law, or serious family conflict or abuse, the decision to dropout may seem like the best choice at the time to the student. Even less severe challenges, such as conflict with peers or financial hardship, frequently precede a decision to drop out, especially when several challenges occur in tandem. A recent Montreal study showed that about two of every five dropouts had been exposed to some kind of significant stressful event several months before quitting school, and that exposure to two or more severe events was 12 times higher among dropouts than among students at risk of dropping out and average students.³²

4.2 Some students are more likely than others to experience risk factors and stressors

Students from particular demographic or minority groups are more likely to experience or encounter specific or multiple risk dropout risk factors.

• Students from low socio-economic status (SES) familiesⁱⁱ

Students from low-SES families are less likely than other students to complete high school. While public education is often described as the “great equalizer,” it cannot overcome all social and economic disparities and, sometimes, it even perpetuates them. Briefly, many children from low-SES families are disadvantaged from early childhood and sometimes start kindergarten less prepared to learn than other children. Educational disparities grow over time, as parents may be less able to support their children’s learning at home, guide academic and career choices, and obtain academic supports like tutoring and enrichment activities.³³

By high school, students from low SES families may experience high life stress due to economic instability and its implications for their learning process. For example, study time might be cut short by working to help support the household; attendance may be compromised by transportation challenges; learning can be compromised by lack of food, poor nutrition, or unmet health care needs.

Parents’ own education levels have a large impact on their children’s educational outcomes, but this is mostly because highly-educated parents tend to place greater value on education. In Canada, family factors rarely influence dropout among students with very high academic abilities. However, for students with medium and low cognitive abilities, family factors play an important role in explaining their dropout decisions. For the least skilled children with parents who are themselves high school dropouts, whether their parents value education or not makes a strong difference in their chances of dropping out.³⁴

Finally, there is suggestion of bias in schools against low-SES students. Research shows that low-SES students and, as proven in some Canadian cities, students belonging to non-dominant population groups, are more likely than other students to be streamed into applied-level classes, often leaving them ineligible to apply to university, and suggesting racial bias in the public school system.³⁵ Although Alberta data do not appear to be publicly available, analysis of Ontario’s high school completion data shows that students in applied streams are less likely to complete high school.³⁶

In addition, several recent studies have linked streaming with race and class inequities in Ontario’s education system.³⁷ One study reported that “[c]hildren from working-class and some minority families continue to be pejoratively labelled with exceptionalities and special needs in elementary school, streamed into dead-end programs that encourage many of them to drop out of secondary school, and excluded from post-secondary education.”³⁸ A second study found that “streaming students or grouping students by ability is likely to reproduce and even exacerbate patterns of disadvantage based on family backgrounds, including socio-economic status and race.”³⁹ Other recent research from Ontario indicates that “programs of choice,” where school districts offer a range of programs catering to different student interests, are also fostering race and class divisions and inequities in that province.⁴⁰

ⁱⁱ While there are more complex approaches to measuring socio-economic status, the most basic calculation includes three factors: income, occupational prestige, and education level. Statistics Canada sometimes looks at other factors, such as educational resources in the home, or household assets in addition to income. See <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-004-x/def/4068719-eng.htm>.

· Students with mental health challenges

Mental health is directly associated with academic performance and high school dropout, and Alberta data reveal a 130% increase in adolescent patient admissions to hospitals over the past decade.ⁱⁱⁱ A recent Australian research review suggests that 40% of students experiencing anxiety or depression and 50% experiencing psychosis do not complete high school in that country.⁴¹ Research from elsewhere in the world is less clear about the extent of the problem, but two recent American meta-analyses of published studies found that externalizing disorders (disruptive behaviour, attention problems, social problems, substance abuse/addictions) are strong and independent predictors of dropout. The research is less clear about whether internalizing disorders (mood disorders, such as depression) on their own predict dropout.⁴²

Although there remains much to sort out with respect to adolescent mental health and school dropout, because most psychiatric disabilities emerge in adolescence and early adulthood, it appears to be universally agreed that “[s]chools are a key setting for promoting positive mental health, fostering resilience, detecting and responding to emerging mental ill health.”⁴³ In 2010, the Mental Health Commission of Canada created a framework to promote mental health improvement among children and youth; one recommendation was that trained personnel should provide mental health interventions to students in need.⁴⁴ At present, access to psychologists within Alberta’s education system is minimal and there is usually a waiting period, according to the Alberta Teachers Association. The Calgary Board of Education is gathering information on the extent of the problem, how learning can be affected and whether provincial funding may be available to address the growing need.⁴⁵

· Youth in care

Students in the care of the child welfare system are at increased risk of high school dropout. As explained by the Government of Alberta, learning challenges such as academic delays and emotional concerns are more common for children and youth in care. This is often due to the traumatic or neglectful situations that brought them into care.⁴⁶ Once in school, the achievement gap widens over time, leading to high school dropout.⁴⁷ A large new study from Ontario reported that youth educational aspirations, caregiver educational aspirations for youth, time with current caregiver, internal developmental assets, and positive mental health were associated with good grades and school retention; neglect, grade retention, special educational needs, ethnocultural minority status, behavioural problems, and soft-drug use were associated with poorer educational outcomes.⁴⁸

A recent American study found that, for youth in care, participation in school clubs more than doubled the chance of graduating, holding other factors constant, but relationships with adults at the school had no impact. The authors speculate that this was because so few of these students had relationships with adults at the school, not that such relationships were not a good idea,⁴⁹ because other research has consistently shown that stability and positive relationships with peers and adult mentors improve school engagement and success for youth in care.⁵⁰ In fact, in many studies, youth in care have identified the role of a committed, consistent adult or mentor in their lives as being instrumental to their educational success.⁵¹

· Sexual minority and gender-variant students

Sexual minority students frequently experience peer victimization that is associated with school absences, lower grades, and greater expectations not to finish high school.⁵² It appears that the experience of victimization affects learning processes by reducing students’ motivation, concentration and self-efficacy, and can contribute to school avoidance and harmful coping strategies that can undermine success in school and lead to dropout.⁵³

Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) or queer-straight alliances (QSAs) are often identified as a way to provide students with a safe space in the school, protect students from bullying, and improve school climate for sexual minority students.⁵⁴ There is also some evidence that, by reducing victimization and, when they are visible and active, increasing school engagement,⁵⁵ GSAs can reduce dropout rates.⁵⁶ With these outcomes in mind, new legislation came into effect in Alberta in December 2017 to ensure that GSAs can be established and supported in all Alberta high schools.⁵⁷

· Indigenous students

High school completion rates in Calgary and in Alberta are low for Indigenous students, a problem that is common for Indigenous people in colonized countries around the world. A long list of factors contribute to Indigenous students' academic outcomes, including but not limited to poor attendance, lack of student engagement/motivation, the experience of racism and discrimination, health or teen parenting challenges, lack of suitable learning materials, poor instructional practices or assessment methods, poverty-related challenges, and delays in mastering critical reading, writing, and mathematics skills in the early years.⁵⁸ Other barriers to completion can include a "mismatch or poor fit between elements of the mainstream, formal, off-reserve school environment (pedagogical approaches, curriculum, assessment methods), and the particular learning needs, interests and values of Aboriginal students and their families."⁵⁹

Research from Canada, the United States, and Australia over the past two decades shows that schools in which Indigenous students experience success are those with high expectations for student achievement; effective leadership and governance structures; multiple programs and support for learners; secure and welcoming climates for children and families; grounding in Indigenous culture, language and traditions; high percentage of Indigenous staff and quality staff development; assessment linked to instructional and planning decisions, and community partnerships and alliances.⁶⁰

· English as a Second Language (ESL)/English Language Learner (ELL) students

Overall, ESL students fare as well as other students in terms of high school completion. However, research from British Columbia and elsewhere suggests that there may be great variation among ESL students based on parental education levels, overall SES, country of origin, time of arrival, and immigrant or refugee status.⁶¹ Cross-Canada research suggests that about half of refugee students complete high school and continue to post-secondary education, 30% have trouble completing, and 20% do not finish. These differences are explained by ethnocultural group, refugee camp experience, appropriate grade placement on arrival, parents' health, urban residence, and number of months in Canada.⁶² It is crucial to recognize that, in terms of high school completion, refugee students must not be grouped with other immigrant students, as they often require intensive academic and cultural supports.

The term "immigrant paradox" in this context refers to the trend where children in immigrant families tend to do better in school than children of Canadian-born parents. It should be noted that there is educational outcome variation by country and culture of origin among these children. In addition, immigrants are selected based on factors including education, language skills, and work experience, such that, among recent immigrants, 52% have a Bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 24% of the Canadian-born population.⁶⁴ As discussed elsewhere, parental education level is associated with high school completion, quite apart from the immigrant parents' expectations and aspirations for their children's educational attainment, which are positively linked to their children's academic performance in high school and beyond.⁶⁵

With the possible exception of refugee students and some groups of highly vulnerable immigrant students, there is evidence that, in some immigrant populations, students are less likely to be influenced negatively by their peers and more likely to have peers and parents who support their academic achievement and place high value on education, which can offset other challenges. For example, Canadian research indicates that poverty has a lower negative impact on school dropout for first- and second-generation students compared to their third-generation-plus counterparts. "Immigrant parents tend to have high levels of enthusiasm and educational ambitions for their children, and in line with both the immigrant paradox and the optimism perspectives, it seems that these values turn into healthier behaviours and greater school perseverance and success for students with an immigrant background."⁶³

5. What works to improve high school completion rates

Three recent, comprehensive reviews⁶⁶ of published research on initiatives to prevent or decrease high school dropout or the risk factors for dropout have reached the same conclusion: If they are implemented properly, almost all types of initiatives are effective, and roughly equally effective, most reducing dropout by around 10%.

The broad, overarching strategies that are effective in improving high school completion rates are as follows:⁶⁷

1. Monitor the progress of all students, and proactively intervene when students show early signs of attendance, behavior, or academic problems.
2. Provide intensive, individualized support to students who have fallen off track and face significant challenges to success.
3. Engage students by offering curricula and programs that connect schoolwork with college and career success and that improve students' capacity to manage challenges in and out of school.
4. For schools with many at-risk students, create small, personalized communities to facilitate monitoring and support

Based on a review of 167 high-quality studies, the Campbell Corporation concluded that: Overall, results indicated that most school- and community-based programs were effective in decreasing school dropout. Given the minimal variation in effects across program types, the main conclusion from this review is that dropout prevention and intervention programs, regardless of type, will likely be effective if they are implemented well and are appropriate for the local environment. We recommend that policy makers and practitioners choosing dropout prevention programs consider the cost-effectiveness of programs, and choose those that fit best with local needs as well as implementer abilities and resources.⁶⁸

The types of initiatives identified as effective are listed below. The most common initiatives are school or class restructuring, followed by vocational training and supplemental academic services, and almost all of the initiatives are based in schools, although many need not be provided by school staff.

- School or class restructuring: Small learning communities, block schedules (replacing many 40-50 minute classes with fewer, longer classes), career academies (a school within a school, often with industry partnerships), small class size
- Vocational training: Coursework, internships, or employment oriented toward work or career interests (next most common)
- Supplemental academic services: Remedial education, tutoring, homework assistance
- Community service: Planning and carrying out a community service project (commonly coupled with a weekly life skills curriculum)
- Mentoring, counseling: Adult mentors or trained counselors focusing on students' school work, career/work ambitions, and personal issues
- Alternative schools: Schools designed to provide educational and other (e.g., behavioural) services to students whose needs aren't adequately addressed in traditional schools.
- Attendance monitoring and contingencies: Monitoring and services to increase attendance; some offer financial incentives
- College-oriented programming: College preparatory curriculum, college-oriented academic advising
- Multi-service package: Large, comprehensive programs often including academic, vocational, and case management
- Skills training, including cognitive behavioural therapy: Generally oriented toward improving self-esteem or attitudes about school, or preventing drug use
- Case management: Connecting students and families with appropriate services
- Other: Recreational programming, residential services for homeless, etc.

Unfortunately, the reviews cannot provide guidance about implementation quality because most of the studies included in the reviews did not provide detail about implementation; rather, they tended to make reference to “start up challenges” and “implementation delays” and so on.

Three examples of successful high school completion programs that bring together several of the initiatives listed above are Canada’s Pathways to Education program, the University of Winnipeg’s Collegiate Model School, and A Chicago Experiment.

Pathways to Education

Pathways to Education is a comprehensive support program developed to improve academic outcomes of low-income high school students. The program began in 2001 for entering grade 9 students living in Regent Park, the largest public housing project in Toronto, and has since expanded to several locations in Canada. The program includes proactive mentoring, daily tutoring, and group activities, combined with intermediate and long-term incentives to help students to meet mandatory participation requirements. Comparing students from other housing projects before and after the introduction of the program, high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment rates rose dramatically for Pathways-eligible students, in some cases by more than 50%.⁶⁹ Part of the success of Canada’s Pathways to Education project is likely attributable to the financial support provided to the students, including meal vouchers, transit passes, and scholarship money for postsecondary education.⁷⁰

University of Winnipeg’s Collegiate Model School⁷¹

The Model School opened in September 2008 and by 2016, 51 students had graduated, with 75% pursuing post-secondary education. At any time, 40 to 50 students, 95% of whom are Indigenous and all of whom have faced challenges and persevered, are enrolled in grades 9 through 12. The students are identified by teachers and non-profit organizations as being bright and capable of university entrance, but facing various barriers that require extra supports to overcome. Certified teachers work with the students in all core academic subjects and work with the student to create an individual education plan. Key features of the schools include:

- experiential, community-based learning;
- a full bursary and the opportunity to earn up to \$4,000 in tuition credit at the University;
- instrumental supports including transportation costs, nutrition, supplies, equipment such as a laptop computer, a fitness centre membership, and recreation programming;
- training in First Aid and CPR, Level 1 Coaching certification, refereeing, babysitting certification, etc.; and
- the opportunity to work full time in the summer at a community outreach day camp for inner-city children and youth aged 7-12

A Chicago Experiment⁷²

The pilot of an intervention targeting high school students at high risk of dropping out appears to have increased the graduation rate by 46%. The program has two components:

(i) a non-academic component that runs for 27 weeks and consists of a one-hour, once-per-week manualized small group program (“Becoming a Man”), in which youth are exposed to pro-social adults. The program also provides them with social-cognitive training that follows the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy. The curriculum includes strategies to develop specific social or social-cognitive skills such as generating new solutions to problems, learning new ways of behaving, considering another’s perspective, thinking ahead, and evaluating consequences ahead of time; and

(ii) an academic component consisting of a daily one-hour tutoring session, with one tutor for two students, using a specific individualized instruction model that can be delivered at low cost by first-year instructors with no formal teaching credentials or experience.

5.1 The local scene: Alberta schools

In 2013, Alberta Education introduced many of the principles and approaches that have been so successful in other provinces, meaning that improvements in high school completion in this province may be imminent. Recognizing the growing importance of high school completion for individual students and for society, the government built on the learnings from a pilot project begun five years earlier and embarked on a comprehensive High School Redesign (HSR) Initiative. The Initiative reflects much of the current research on dropout prevention; its foundational principles are mastery learning,⁷³ rigorous and relevant curriculum, personalization, flexible learning environments; educator roles and professional development; meaningful relationships; home and community involvement; assessment; and welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments.⁷⁴

Policy changes arising from the Initiative so far include expansion of the dual credit program, where high school students can earn credits that count toward both high school and a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree (including first period apprenticeship opportunities).⁷⁵ A potential policy change may be the removal of the Carnegie unit, a 25-hour per credit requirement, to allow for more flexible teaching approaches.⁷⁶

Many Calgary public and Catholic high schools are part of the Initiative. Schools are free to adapt and adopt components of the Initiative to their own situations⁷⁷ but, in all cases, the idea is to increase high school completion through mastery learning, meaningful relationships, and relevant learning opportunities.⁷⁸ The Catholic school board's Indigenous initiative, described below, is not part of the provincial High School Redesign Initiative, but it is also grounded in dropout prevention research.

Evaluation of seven of the first schools in Alberta to adopt the Initiative (none of them in Calgary) reported increased student attendance, increased high school completion rates, and decreased dropout rates. Anecdotal evidence of academic gains was not backed up by scores on standardized tests, but the evaluators noted that significantly increasing academic achievement is not central to the project mandate. It was observed that High School Redesign requires a great deal of leadership, staff time, and other resources, and it is not easy to implement; success hinges on multiple, inter-related school culture and leadership conditions and factors that allow for "a relentless focus on student learning: achievement, engagement, and well-being."⁷⁹

While most of the new Alberta initiatives have yet to be rigorously evaluated, some are very interesting and hopeful, and merit close monitoring. Examples include Kanai High School's quarter system, Rocky View School District's attendance project, Calgary Separate School District's Indigenous initiative, and, as a stellar example of a comprehensive approach for all high school students, St. Joseph's High School Redesign initiative in Grande Prairie.

Calgary Separate (Catholic) School District's First Nations, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) Initiative⁸⁰

Thanks to a comprehensive support initiative, the three-year high school completion rate of Indigenous students in Calgary's Catholic school district rose from 57% in 2011 to 81% in 2017. Supporting Indigenous students to succeed at school is one of four priorities in the district; the goal is for no Indigenous student to drop out of high school. All K-12 schools have incorporated Indigenous culture and history into their programming, and schools are actively pursuing professional development to deliver new curriculum for all students. But improvements in completion rates thus far are mostly attributable to the introduction of comprehensive, wraparound supports for all Indigenous students, most notably:

- A special team that includes two family support workers has been designated to work with Indigenous families and schools to encourage parents' involvement in their children's education, facilitate communication between home and school, and to provide or otherwise obtain whatever students and families need, from parenting supports to housing and other basic needs, to enable students to attend and be engaged at school.
- The team is part of a larger Diverse Learner team and works with the Teaching and Learning Team to provide students with supports including psychologists and learning supports. Students are closely monitored to ensure that they are on track to graduate.
- Changes to curricula include the introduction of Aboriginal Studies 10, 20, and 30 and working with St. Mary's University to grant both high school and university credits ("dual credits") for the grade 12 course.
- Taking a relationship-based approach with students, with greater focus on supporting and encouraging attendance, with a call back strategy for kids who frequently miss class. Also, to improve attendance by students from a nearby reserve, the district moved its programming, rather than trying to transport the students.
- The incorporation of Indigenous culture into both programming and regular school life, such as bannock breakfasts, guest speakers, arts performances, and special projects. Some students have indicated that the one-on-one personal and basic needs supports in conjunction with affirmation of their cultural roots are crucial components of the initiative. In response to feedback from students, the district now plans to build in more learning supports, which may further increase Indigenous students' high school completion rates in the coming years.

Rocky View School Division's attendance project⁸¹

In September 2016, the Division piloted a new model of attendance prevention and intervention in four schools, including one high school, with the most severe attendance problems. An internal investigation had revealed that 22% of the entire student body was affected by problematic absenteeism, which is associated with poor academic performance and high school dropout. The new model focuses on identifying students who are at risk of chronic absenteeism and reaching out to them to see if the school can help them to address whatever issues are interfering with their attendance. The most common issues have been student and/or parental mental health issues and financial issues, where families' inability to meet basic needs with respect to transportation, physical health, housing, and/or food prevent students from getting to or staying at school. By assisting families to obtain mental health assessments and by providing help with basic needs (ranging from food gift cards to a car battery to dental care), the number of students with chronic attendance problems was reduced by 57% over the school year, although most of the children assisted were in elementary school, and no links can be made at this time to high school completion. The pilot has now been expanded to the whole school division.

Quarter System at Kainai High School, Cardston Alberta⁸²

In 2010, Kainai High School (KHS) implemented the quarter system in an effort to address high drop out rates; lack of credit attainment; lack of student engagement; and absenteeism. Rather than taking four or five courses in each of two semesters in a school year, students take two courses in each of four quarters of the school year. This allows for longer classes, project-based learning, daily one-on-one time with teachers, and a Monday to Thursday school week leaving Fridays available to catch up on work or recover credits from previous quarters. Analysis of student data from 2009 to 2013 revealed an increase in attendance, credit attainment, and graduation since 2009. Improved outcomes may be attributable to focusing on only one core course at a time; earning credits quickly; having more time with teachers; and having hands-on learning opportunities.

St. Joseph's High School Redesign, Grande Prairie⁸³

In 2015-16, as part of their Alberta High School Redesign work, Grande Prairie's Catholic high school launched an experiment with a view to improving student outcomes. The first grade 10 cohort entered grade 12 and the second grade 10 cohort entered grade 11 in September 2017. In September 2015, all willing grade 10 students, who numbered about 100, or about 50% of all grade 10 students, were placed in four common classes of about 25 students, taught by a team of four teachers. The key structural and pedagogical features of the experiment were as follows:

- Rather than beginning the high school "streaming" process, in which students begin a path to complete particular courses not only to graduate, but to enable access to different types of post-secondary training and education, all students collectively completed the same four academic-stream core courses (math, social studies, English, science).
- A key message from administration to teachers and from teachers to students was that "failure is not an option."
- All discipline was handled collectively by the teachers, without involving administration.
- All four teachers collectively worked with, planned for, and assessed each student, with the student, rather than the individual subjects, as the focus.
- Assignments were cross-curricular, and teachers allowed a "flex and flow" for each student, e.g., if a student had completed their work in math, they could then turn their attention to their social studies work, or join a different classroom.

Results

Although the experimental cohorts have not yet graduated, three-year high school completion rates improved from 72% in 2012 to 82% in 2017. Improvements have been even more pronounced for Indigenous students, for whom the three-year completion rate almost doubled over five years to 89% in 2017. Since the experimental cohort has not yet graduated, it is likely that the dramatic increase in completion is due to school-wide changes in school climate and teaching that have occurred since September 2015, as follows:

- "The core group of teachers gradually changed their philosophy about the purpose of working with kids from a sorting and ranking approach to helping kids learn at whatever pace and in whatever capacity they can, to helping kids discover their passion. Teachers began to grasp that effective practice can change brains as well as outcomes, to understand that it is not true that the brain you're born with is the one you die with." Teachers also began monitoring students to ensure that the academic stream they decided to pursue aligned with their passions and interests; students were not being guided or forced into a particular stream simply due to "our subjective approach to assessment."
- Disciplinary problems virtually disappeared, cliques diminished, and students were kinder to one another. The students performed to the teachers' expectations; they simply did what was asked of them. This will be more challenging in grades 11 and 12.
- Since 2015, Safe and Caring Schools data have reflected improvements on indicators of inclusivity and belonging among students as a whole, particularly among students in the first experimental cohort.
- The 2016 student Tell Them From Me (TTFM) survey also revealed improvements in student engagement, with large gains on indicators such as attendance, homework completion, value placed on learning, effort in school, and post-secondary aspirations, along with improvements on some indicators of emotional health, such as sense of belonging at school and having an adult advocate at school (in this case, a 20% increase over the previous year).

5.2 But schools can't do it all: Roles for the community

"Intellectual capital is the result of stimulation and support for exploration and achievement in the home, the neighbourhood, and the schools. To think that this can be changed by mandate – operating only through schools—is preposterous." R.E. Nisbett⁸⁴

Collectively, all the research points to the same conclusion: While much of the responsibility for improving high school completion rates rests with government, school boards, and individual schools, schools can't do it all. Help is required from community institutions—non-profit organizations, advocacy groups, police, social service providers, health care providers—to support students who need more help than schools can provide.⁸⁵

The five key things, some of which can overlap, depending on the intervention, that community organizations can provide, convene, or fund are: (i) financial help, (ii) coaches and mentors, (iii) tutoring and other forms of academic support, (iv) after-school programming, and (v) initiatives to support and facilitate parental involvement.

5.2.1 Make sure that poverty doesn't stand in the way of academic success

Both the academic research and unpublished grey literature show that financial hardship is a serious barrier to high school completion. Students can be preoccupied with basic survival issues, which can interfere with attendance and learning. Research completed by United Way of Calgary identified financial hardship as the most serious barrier to student success after lack of positive adult mentors and role models. Food and transportation problems were also prevalent.

While not confirmed to improve high school completion rates, earlier studies collectively involving 38,000 American students in high-poverty schools suggested that student incentives increase achievement when the rewards are paid directly and quickly to students in all grades for behaviours associated with good outcomes (e.g., reading a book, attending regularly, completing homework), but paying students based on academic performance was ineffective. This appeared to be because the students didn't know what they needed to do to improve their academic achievement, but financially rewarding them for specific tasks improved their grades.⁸⁶

Burns Memorial Fund High School Bursary Program

The goal of the High School Bursary (HSB) Program is to support students so they are able to graduate. The Program provides a monthly basic living allowance during the school year to Grade 12 students who are within two semesters of graduating high school and in need of financial assistance to cover expenses such as rent, food and transportation. The program also helps with tutoring, school fees, and post-secondary application fees. Feedback from bursary recipients confirms that receiving financial support allowed them to not work or work less, not worry about making ends meet, and focus on school. Evaluation shows that the HSB Program helps students in financial need to finish high school. The HSB program graduation rate ranges from 70% to 80%, with the lowest rates for students with poor attendance and/or low parental engagement in their learning. Preliminary results from a newly introduced policy requiring frequent attendance suggest that the completion rate may rise in 2017-2018. Likewise, the Burns Fund's new strategies to improve young people's natural supports may also influence graduation rates down the road.

YMCA Calgary's Summer Explorers program

Summer Explorers was introduced over 10 years ago when YMCA staff observed that newcomer high school students in an after-school program were keeping their summer jobs into the fall in order to help support their families. Some of the youth did not return to school; others returned but struggled to stay on track to graduate. Summer Explorers ensures that youth are on track to complete graduation requirements; provides financial support to those in need; and exposes participants to different organizations, communities, and resources in Calgary. Participants attend summer school to complete their graduation requirements in July, for which they receive an honorarium, and complete a minimum of 20 hours of volunteering in August, for which they also receive an honorarium. Evaluation of the program is underway.

5.2.2 Provide coaches and mentors

Many parents are unable to provide the types of supports and encouragement that students require to succeed. Mentoring can be used as a dropout prevention strategy to provide high school students with supportive relationships from nonparental adults to address their academic and non-academic needs. The most important roles for a mentor in this context are to ensure that the student stays on track academically, help raise the student's educational goals and aspirations, improve behaviour and attendance, and offer a sounding board for the student's personal concerns. A high-profile example of a successful student mentoring program is Check and Connect, an American program that assigns high school students a "monitor" to track student performance and provide individualized attention to students. At least two large experimental studies have reported that Check and Connect had statistically significant positive effects on helping students stay in school, including students with emotional and behavioural challenges.⁸⁷ Other examples include New York City's Success Mentor Corps and two local programs, the Calgary Separate School District's coaching program for Indigenous students and the Success Coaches initiative led by United Way of Calgary with school and community partners.

All In For Youth, Success Coaches⁸⁸

All in for Youth (AIFY) is a Calgary-wide initiative spearheaded by the United Way of Calgary to support students to complete high school. AIFY's flagship is the Success Coach Program, administered by Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary in partnership with United Way, Calgary Board of Education, and Calgary Catholic School District. Success Coaches are close in age to the students they work with and are not school system employees. They work closely with students at risk of leaving school early, providing one-on-one mentoring and support, monitoring school performance, providing academic and career planning, and connecting students with academic and financial supports. Beginning in 2012-13 with two Success Coaches, the program has expanded to 15 Coaches in 13 schools, and has served 3,097 students. Preliminary data show that, over the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years, Coaches worked with 389 students, 84% of whom have either graduated or are still attending in 2017-2018.

Based on the impact of the AIFY Success Coaches, the Calgary Catholic School District has now introduced its own Success Coaches, who are teachers, with one Success Coach in every school. This new initiative is being monitored for effectiveness.⁸⁹

New York City Success Mentor Corps⁹⁰

NYC Success Mentor Corps is a mentoring model that focuses on facilitating relationships between students and mentors in the school environment to help reduce chronic absenteeism and help schools meet critical student and family needs. The program began in 2013 and now reaches 10,000 at-risk students each year. There are three primary mentor models, which share core components but differ by the pool of mentors from which they are selected: (1) "external" mentors, staffed by existing or newly recruited non-profit school partners (e.g., AmeriCorps, social work students, retired professionals, etc.); (2) "internal" school mentors (teachers, coaches, security officers, etc.); and (3) "peer" mentors, 11th- and 12th-grade students supporting 9th-graders through an integrated school program where senior peer leaders are part of a leadership training course all year and for which they receive school credit. Although the program has not yet been evaluated for impact on high school completion rates, it has dramatically improved attendance, which may improve graduation rates.

5.2.3 Provide or fund academic support programs

Useful forms of academic support to help struggling students master academic content include small group and one-on-one tutoring, homework clubs, and summer programming to prevent summer learning loss and give disadvantaged students a leg up, although the key characteristics of effective tutoring strategies at the high school level are under-researched⁹¹ and, with few exceptions, have not been evaluated for their impact on high school completion. One of these exceptions is Match Tutoring, described below.

Calgary YMCA Math Tutoring Tables⁹²

The YMCA's Math Tutoring Tables connect small groups of students once a week with volunteer tutors at four YMCA locations and two schools in Calgary. Tutoring is tailored to the math curriculum for grades 10, 11, and 12, and volunteer tutors are trained at no cost by a private tutoring company. The students are provided with snacks and receive a free semester-long Y-Pass if they regularly attend the tutoring program. Participant numbers are not available but, since 2013, tutors have logged 8,738 hours of volunteer time. Ninety-three percent of participating students reported that their math marks increased because of the tutoring program; 74% reported feeling more positive about their overall performance in school. Thus far, the program has not determined whether the program improves the likelihood of high school completion.

Match Tutoring⁹³

Match Tutoring (now known as SAGA Innovations) is an intensive, small group math tutoring program in the United States that includes group behavioural counselling. Tutoring is provided by recent graduates and retired teachers who are willing to work for a very low salary. A study found that, with an hour of one-on-two math tutoring provided daily over eight months, high school students with weak math skills, attendance issues, and behavioural challenges gained one to two additional years of math knowledge. Their scores on standardized tests were higher than those of other students who did not receive the tutoring and, while impact on high school completion has not yet been assessed, students who received the tutoring were "back on track" to graduate. The researchers concluded that this study indicates that conventional wisdom about directing failing high school students to vocational or technical training can be a mistake for many students.

5.2.4 Provide or fund structured after-school programming

Structured, intentional after-school programs using evidence-based practice and having sufficient resources can be effective vehicles for delivery of learning supports, social supports, mentoring, and volunteering, all of which help to prevent high school dropout. Most of the research on after-school programs with an academic component, such as tutoring or homework help, has shown that some programs are effective in improving academic outcomes and others are not, often due to the number of hours of support and the length of time over which it is provided.⁹⁴ In Canada, the Raising the Grade program, described below, appears to be the first after-school program that explicitly seeks to improve high school completion rates via the provision of multiple types of supports. Unfortunately, we don't know yet whether the program achieves this goal.

Raising the Grade⁹⁵

Raising the Grade (RTG) aims to promote high school completion and participation in post-secondary education. A partnership between the Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada (BGCC) and Rogers, the primarily after-school program provides young people at risk of dropping out of high school with enhanced supports and diverse, youth-driven learning opportunities, including technology-based learning, academic support, career exploration and discovery, mentorship, and positive, supportive relationships. Thus far, due to implementation challenges and data limitations, it has not been possible to evaluate the program to determine its impact on high school completion. However, a five-year developmental and qualitative evaluation indicates that the program is probably effective.

5.2.5 Support and facilitate parental engagement

As discussed earlier, research indicates that, in general, low SES parents are less likely than other parents to highly value education, to support and provide structure or use home involvement strategies, and to participate at schools.⁹⁶ At the high school level, what matters most is that parents provide structure for homework completion and leisure time (“home involvement”) and communicate the value of education and encourage and support homework completion and education and career planning (“academic socialization”). Attending school events and volunteering at school or on trips may have no or little impact on academic outcomes, although it may support students’ mental health, possibly by conveying a sense of caring or sending the message that they value education, as long as parents respect their children’s independence and privacy.⁹⁷

Much of the responsibility for encouraging parental involvement in school rests with high schools themselves, and there exist many guides and strategies for their use. However, community organizations can help by making it easier for low-SES parents to support their children’s learning, for example, by offering programs at the school that involve parents, helping with transportation and providing childcare for young siblings,⁹⁸ reducing family financial stress, and assisting parents to overcome language and cultural barriers to involvement. Community organizations can also help to fill in where families cannot, for instance, by providing mentors and coaches, academic supports, and exposing students to education and career opportunities (e.g., job shadowing, field trips to academic institutions). In addition, because valuing and aspiring to attend post-secondary education is associated with high school completion,⁹⁹ both school and community efforts to increase low-income parents’ awareness about the value of education may be another low-cost, effective way of preventing dropout.

Government of Ontario, Parents Reaching Out Grants¹⁰⁰

In Ontario, non-profit organizations, parent groups, public school boards, and post-secondary institutions can apply for up to \$30,000 in funding for regional or provincial projects to enhance parent engagement in support of improved student achievement and well-being. Projects must meet a demonstrated need to support parent engagement and address one of four areas: parents as partners; creating a welcoming school board and school environment for all parents; skill-building opportunities for parents (e.g., skills to support learning); and enhancing communication between school and parents. To date, it appears that the majority of grants have been awarded to projects targeting the parents of elementary school children, but grants are available for projects at all grade levels.

6. Conclusions

The imperative to complete high school has never been greater. The world has changed and it is clear that graduating from high school is vital to young people's social and economic success and to the well-being of society as a whole. But even now, despite improvements in high school completion rates, 22% of Calgary's students don't graduate in three years and 17% still haven't finished in five years. Some groups of students face great disadvantage in attending and engaging in school, moving through and mastering the curriculum and, unless we move now, they will be left behind in the workforce and society.

One of the clearest themes emerging from the research is the ways in which poverty interferes with student success: Low SES families are often unable to provide the learning environments and supports that help students to learn and succeed at school from early childhood through the high school years; systemic biases in the education system mean that students from lower-SES families may be streamed into non-academic educational pathways, even when they could master academic stream courses with more encouragement and help; and, even in a province as rich as Alberta, the struggle to meet the most basic of survival needs is preventing many students from attending and fully participating at school.

The research about and real-life examples of initiatives to improve high school completion rates show that, under the right conditions and with appropriate supports, most young people can successfully complete high school. As described in the research, what works is a relentless focus on student learning: achievement, engagement, and well-being.¹⁰¹ This has been clearly demonstrated by successful initiatives such as the Calgary Separate School District's Indigenous Initiative, where every aspect of students' well-being is addressed, and Grande Prairie's St. Joseph's High School's High School Redesign Initiative, where school culture and pedagogy shifted to do "whatever it takes" to help every student to succeed.

Alberta's High School Redesign Initiative is very promising and, in schools where it has been fully embraced, is beginning to show success. But schools can't do it all and they can't do it alone. There is a clear role for community in providing or facilitating five things that make a difference: financial help, coaches and mentors, tutoring and other forms of academic support, after-school programming, and parental engagement initiatives. Some of this work is already being done by Calgary organizations, including the United Way and partners through the All In for Youth Initiative. Unfortunately, most of the locally-provided community initiatives have not been assessed to determine their effectiveness in improving completion rates; evaluation of such initiatives would help in making decisions about where to make investments for maximum impact.

Much more can be done to improve high school completion rates and the life chances of disadvantaged students in Calgary. Now is the time for all organizations with a commitment to positive youth development to join forces to ensure that all youth in Calgary succeed in school and in life. Almost everything works: Now we just have to do it.

Endnotes

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