



STAYING IN!!

Youth once on the path to quitting school explain why motivation is central to learning and graduating

The latest in a series of reports on the changing face of public education

April 2007

ee education | evolving

*A joint venture of the Center for
Policy Studies and Hamline University*

ABOUT EDUCATIONIEVOLVING AND THE ‘OPEN SECTOR’

Much of the work being done by EducationIEvolving is to help create and sustain an “Open Sector” in public education – in Minnesota and elsewhere in the country. By “Open Sector,” we mean a “space” in public education that is open to new entrants – new schools that are started from scratch by teachers, parents, community organizations and multi-school networks. The “Open Sector” is also open to new authorizers or sponsors – entities other than school districts that oversee schools. The “Open Sector” is open to new learning programs and to new ways of governing and managing schools. As part of a broadening definition of public education, the “Open Sector” is open to all students who choose to attend schools in that sector.

The “Open Sector” is based on the premise that we cannot get the degree of change and improvement we need in education by relying only on fixing the schools we now have. And, to get enough new schools that are fundamentally different, we need a combination of public policies and private actions that will allow new schools to emerge and that will create an environment in which they can succeed. This kind of positive environment for creating and sustaining new schools can be established on a state-level through actions led by state policy makers. It can also be done – and is certainly needed – in major urban communities all across America.



Though chartered schools may be the most visible part of the “Open Sector” today, this concept of a positive environment for creating and sustaining successful new schools is not limited to charters. The “Open Sector” can also include schools operating within a district or state on some kind of contract other than a charter – as long as they are truly autonomous, accountable and open to all students who chose them.

There is also no prescribed or uniform learning program presumed by this vision for creating many more schools new. In fact, there’s an urgent need to better understand, respect and address the individual differences in students. It’s likely, however, that successful new schools in the “Open Sector” will be smaller and that they will make it possible for all students to take a more active role in their learning and to develop more direct and nurturing relationships with adults.

EducationIEvolving – a joint venture of the Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University – is undertaking a number of initiatives during the current year. They include a national initiative to convince policy makers, education reform leaders, journalists and others that *creating new schools* should be an essential element in achieving needed changes and improvements in teaching and learning – at least equal in importance to *changing the schools we now have*.

One focus of this initiative is to introduce the concept of an “*Open Sector*” – to help create the kind of legal and political environments in which new schools can be created and succeed. Another is challenges the fundamental premise that teachers in schools must always be “employees.”

EducationIEvolving’s leadership is provided by two Minnesota public policy veterans: **Ted Kolderie**, senior associate at the Center for Policy Studies, and **Joe Graba**, a senior policy fellow at Hamline University. Its coordinator is **Jon Schroeder**, former director of Charter Friends National Network. EducationIEvolving’s activities are regularly updated on the initiative’s unique and continually refreshed web site www.educationevolving.org. To receive additional copies of this or other EIE reports or print and electronic updates of EducationIEvolving initiatives, contact EIE by phone at 651-789-3096 or by e-mail at info@educationevolving.org.

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STUDENTS REINFORCE CASE FOR FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT SCHOOLS

Introduction

The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) set an ambitious goal: that by 2014 all children will be proficient in terms of high state standards. Advocates of the law say it has led to higher standards and greater accountability (U.S. Department of Education 2005).

Many state legislators, school administrators, and others are indeed making schools' learning programs more rigorous and are "getting tough" about youths meeting specific standards in order to graduate. States are increasingly focused on heightening graduation standards beyond minimum competencies, or "safety-net standards" like balancing a checkbook and reading the newspaper. A proposal offered by Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty and approved by the Minnesota legislature in 2005, for example, requires that students take Algebra I by the end of eighth grade and Algebra II and Chemistry or Physics in order to graduate from high school.

In our national discussion there is perhaps some confusion between what schools offer and what students learn; some tendency to see 'education' as something that adults do to children. It really is still fairly common to hear talk about schools "delivering education" to students. This mind-set makes it fairly easy to believe that there is some one 'effective intervention' that will work with all students.

These notions should set off a warning bell for policymakers. They could take the country down a track that would not lead to

the achievement of our national goals. Their effect could be to drive up the quit-rate; reducing both high school graduation and college admission. Indeed, something like this might already be happening. Quite large numbers of students are leaving school or, while not leaving, are not learning well.

This failure is now appearing in the statistics. California denied 40,000 diplomas in June 2006 to students who did not pass its achievement test, for example. And in the state of Washington 32,000 students from the Class of 2008 have not yet passed a math test required for graduation. "We've got students who are frankly demoralized," Washington Governor Christine Gregoire told the Associated Press. "The last thing we need is 49 percent of our 10th graders thinking it's useless to go on, and dropping out of school" (Blankinship 2006). Confronted with this failure, states are tempted to try to 'game' the accountability system in order to make student performance appear better: if not reducing the standards then putting off the 'high-stakes' tests or lowering their passing-scores or fudging on the promised 'consequences' for failure.

The country needs to think critically, and soon, about whether its effort to improve learning would perhaps be more likely to succeed were the focus to shift from accountability-requirements to student motivation. Policymakers and educators should consider approaching learning as a voluntary act; as something that students do, encouraged and assisted by adults.

In Minnesota a member of Governor Rudy Perpich's staff used to correct people who talked about farmers growing corn. No, he

would say. Farmers do not grow corn. Farmers help corn grow. The distinction is subtle yet fundamental. Students learn. Teachers help students learn. And motivation matters: Students have to want to learn.

So the effort to improve learning has to engage the question of whether school motivates students. When learning was optional motivation was irrelevant. But now that learning is considered imperative, motivation becomes essential. So—if NCLB is especially about helping the now-not-learning youths to learn—we need to ask whether the current strategy built on the notions of increasing rigor and raising standards can alone achieve that end. And whether the national effort now needs to think much more about how students look at conventional school, and what kind of school they say would improve their motivation to learn.

This paper considers the opinions and experiences of some of the youths who our nation hopes to engage—youths who quit school, attended a school with a low completion rate or faced significant obstacles to school completion.

The exploration begins with a simple overview of the scope of the problem, identifying just how many youths are failing to complete school each year in the United States. Next, the paper reviews three papers examining youths' perspectives, identifying 10 major factors that non-learning youths said are correlated with students failing to complete school. The review also describes what factors the youths believe might have improved their chances of attending school and graduating.

Following the review, a discussion of the findings suggests that no one factor is likely to motivate all youths to learn well. Youths have a human, and democratic, tendency to choose whether or not they will learn in a particular school.

The paper then asserts that, given the varying motivations of different students, rigor and standards may improve the learning of some while leaving others behind. The question becomes: How can states appeal to students' varying motivations?

Minnesota, which for 15 years has been running a parallel strategy allowing for the creation of fundamentally new and different schools, is now home to a growing variety of schools that are appealing to a variety of students. This paper tells the stories of five Minnesota students who were once on the path to quitting

school, but ultimately chose to attend unconventional schools that they believed would better suit their needs. The youths describe the various aspects of these environments that engaged them. Once engaged, they learned better. At the time of publication, all five had either graduated or made significant progress toward graduation.

The Minnesota students' experiences suggest that it's possible, even likely, that they are attending school and learning because Minnesota's laws allow for fundamentally new and different schools to accommodate their varying motivations. In their cases, increasing rigor and raising standards would not have been enough. Their stories make us aware that our national dialogue about NCLB should at least consider whether states should adopt a two-bet strategy in their education policy, advancing customization in addition to standardization.

National graduation rate has stayed at 70 percent for the past 30 years

In June 2006, USA Today released a story that shocked no one who knows the major statistics about schooling. In an Editorial Projects in Education Research Center study, Christopher Swanson found the nation's overall graduation rate to be 69.6 percent based on 2002-2003 data. That means 1.2 million of the estimated four million eligible to graduate each spring are not likely to complete school each year (Toppo 2006).

Swanson's study suggests that students who are not completing high school may be disproportionately from large, urban school districts. Three of the nation's 50 largest school districts are graduating fewer than 40 percent of students "on time and with a regular diploma", he reports. They are: Detroit (21.7 percent), Baltimore (38.5 percent), and New York City (38.9 percent) (Toppo 2006).

According to Jay P. Greene, Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Public Policy Research, the nation has not made much progress toward improving its school completion rate in the past three decades. Greene reports that the United States has had a national on-time graduation rate of about 70 percent since rates peaked at 76 percent in 1979 (Greene 2006).

Some disagree with Swanson's and Greene's school completion estimates, pointing out that his calculations, which are based on census data recording how many diplomas are awarded to the 17 year old population, may overstate the problem. A portion of the students who make up the 30 percent who do not complete school in four years do in fact go on to graduate, Swanson's critics contend, just not within a four-year time frame. Some estimates that account for late graduation put the national graduation rate at 82 percent (Toppo 2006). Yet even these high estimates indicate that 720,000 students per year are not graduating from high school.

Effective strategies for addressing the 18 to 30 percent national high school quit rate are the subject of an intense national dialogue, particularly as we consider how to move ahead to accomplish the goals of NCLB. Adults engaged in the dialogue do not often have the perspectives of the youths who are doing the quitting. Adding their perspectives to the conversation is the goal of the following sections.

What influences school completion? Studies suggest youths quit school for a variety of reasons; and varying factors might influence their return

A review of three recent surveys suggests that youths that our nation hopes to engage—youths who quit school, attended a school with a low completion rate or faced significant obstacles to school completion—have varying perspectives about the factors which positively and inversely affect school completion. The three studies, published between 2003 and 2006, have varying goals, samples, and levels of academic rigor. EducationEvolving selected these works for inclusion in this analysis because they were the only three identified (during a 2006 period of study) that explicitly sought to aid understanding of factors influencing school completion through the voices of students. This report modestly seeks to add to this limited body of research and to encourage academic researchers to consider the youths' collective perspectives in the design of their studies.

1) **"The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts,"** conducted in 2006 by **John M. Bridgeland, John J. Dilulio, and Karen Burke Morison at Civic Enterprises,** is

based on data gathered from four focus groups and 467 interviews of ethnically and racially diverse youths aged 16 through 25 who did not complete high school.

The authors interviewed youths from 25 locations with high drop out rates—including large cities, suburbs, and small towns; however, the interviewed sample did not represent the nation as a whole. Focus groups took place in Baltimore [38.5 percent graduation rate (Toppo 2006)] and Philadelphia [55.5 percent graduation rate (Toppo 2006)]. The authors call for educators, policy-makers, and leaders from various sectors to make addressing the high school dropout "epidemic" a top national priority.

2) **A 2003 study by Sue Burrell of the Youth Law Center** in San Francisco, California is based on six focus groups in different California locations, each with approximately 15 youths who had been in the juvenile justice or child welfare systems. The purpose of the study, titled, "Getting out of the Red Zone: Youth From the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems Speak Out About the Obstacles to Completing Their Education, and What Could Help," was to help lawyers representing youths facing these circumstances to understand how educational barriers affect youths' outcomes in school and in other areas. It is not clear how many youths in the sample dropped out of school, although according to the report many (if not all) faced barriers to completing their schooling.

The Youth Law Center selected participants for the focus groups after pre-interviews that found them to be from "a broad range of life situations" and from racially and ethnically diverse demographics that were primarily of color. The Youth Law Center initially located the participants via contacts with individuals and organizations that the Center had from its day-to-day work.

3) **Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos,** student and parent activist organizations that "fight for educational equality, student rights, and justice for immigrant people" (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004) **wrote 'North High School Report: The Voice of Over 700 Students,' in Denver, Colorado in 2002 and 2003.** Low graduation rates and test scores concerned the groups, so they decided to interview students to find out why and to call for reform.

Characteristics of the individuals surveyed are unknown, but at the time of the interviews the school population was 83 percent Latino with 67 percent receiving free and reduced-price lunch. Denver Public Schools reported that 59.9 percent of students graduated in 2002.¹ The Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos study reports that the highest rate of attrition at North High School was in ninth grade (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004). This is similar to the Civic Enterprises study, which also found highest attrition in the early grades.

EducationEvolving's analysis of these three studies found that youths identified 10 common factors as inversely related to school completion. They are: (1) Lack of motivation; (2) Lack of personal attention from teachers, counselors, and/or administrators; (3) Teaching strategies and curricula that are not challenging, interesting, interactive, or culturally relevant; (4) Poor academic performance; (5) Gradual disengagement or absenteeism; (6) Personal circumstances not conducive to school participation; (7) Limited access to campus and to resources that would aid learning activities during non-school hours; (8) Discipline and attendance policies that were too harsh and/or too unstructured; (9) Bureaucratic processes and requirements following disruption in school attendance; (10) Students sensing they were not respected—feeling stigmatized, discriminated against, and powerless to participate in discussions about school policies.

The following brief discussion of these factors, as they are described in the three studies, highlight the details surrounding these inverse relationships and also describe factors that participating youths thought would be positively related to school completion. Often, the hypothesized positive relationships were recommendations that the youths offered when investigators asked how to “turn around” inverse relationships. Where the problem was gradual disengagement or absenteeism, for example, youths and their parents recommended that schools inform parents early-on about students missing classes and school days.

Not all of the discussions contain recommendations, however. Sometimes the reviewed studies contained extensive discussions about implications that were written by adults. Since this paper's purpose is to review youths' opinions, the adult-described impli-

cations regarding how to improve school completion are discussed here on a very limited basis, and sometimes not at all.

Factor #1: Lack of motivation

Fifty-eight percent of the students surveyed for the Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos study at North High School in Denver, Colorado said they did not feel motivated by teachers or administrators to succeed in school (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004), and 69 percent of youths participating in the Civic Enterprises study said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006). Seventy percent of the Civic Enterprises study participants (all non-graduates) said they would have been able to graduate, however, if they put forth the effort (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006).

Although this paper's discussion of “lack of motivation” as a factor is short, there may be a number of factors influencing students' motivation to attend school and graduate, including nearly all of the following nine. The discussion following descriptions of the 10 factors makes recommendations to pursue further information about the possible relationships between factors.

Factor #2: Lack of personal attention from teachers, counselors, and/or administrators

All three of the reviewed studies found that youths think lack of attention from teachers, counselors, and/or administrators at their schools is inversely related to school completion. In the Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos study, 36 percent of students said they did not get enough attention from teachers at North High.

The study pointed out that there were 600 to 700 students to one counselor, and only one bilingual counselor for the school's 1500 students, 300 (20 percent) of which were English Language Learners (mostly Spanish-speaking). The students saw lack of counselors as a critical problem, as they thought counselors to be the adults responsible for helping students stay on track toward graduation.

North High School students also described that the teachers did not know them, were not able to take extra time to help them, and that teachers disproportionately paid attention to high achiev-

ers. Manuel, in 10th grade, said, “I think people ditch because they get frustrated because the teachers don’t take the time to go over things that they don’t understand.” Salina, also in 10th grade, said, “Teachers should be nice and interested in their students when they ask questions. Some teachers don’t let students ask questions.”

Chris, another 10th grade student: “I get treated like a student and not a person...Some teachers don’t even know my name and don’t care that we might be having problems at home.” A ninth grade student: “I don’t get enough attention from teachers because they are always paying attention to the smart kids.” A 12th grade student: “...the principal and the administration do not get involved with students enough—only the high achievers are recognized” (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004).

Sixty-five percent of Civic Enterprises study participants said there was a staff member or teacher who cared about their success, but only 56 percent said they could go to a staff person for school problems. Just 41 percent said they had someone in school with whom to talk about personal problems. Sixty-two percent said their school needed to do more to help students with problems outside of class.

“If they related to me more and understand that at that point in time, my life was...what I was going through, where I lived, where I came from. Who knows? That book might have been in my book bag. I might have bought a book bag and done some work” (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006).

Young people participating in the Youth Law Center focus groups also described lack of attention from adults at school. “There are only four counselors for many, many students. You have to make an appointment and they only spend 5-10 minutes with you,” said one. “I needed more support in school,” reported another.

A third youth stated, “I was by myself. No one came and asked how I was. I went off into the cracks. Teachers see kids hanging their heads; they need to really sit down and talk to kids. They shouldn’t call the police; they shouldn’t give up on kids” (Burrell 2003).



Youth in all three studies said that strong adult-student relationships in the school would improve school completion rates.

Many Civic Enterprises study participants said their best days were when teachers paid attention to them (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006). Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos specifically called for an improved counseling department with an increased number of counselors, including bilingual counselors, who encourage and mentor students to go to college beginning in ninth grade.

They requested that the same counselors work with the same group of students for all four years of high school so the counselors could get to know the students. They also asked for the school to “create families within the school that support them and are led by an adult mentor/advocate” (Jovenes and Padres Unidos 2004).

The Youth Law Center study participants also said increased counseling for emotional and social support as well as college mentoring would lessen barriers to school completion. One student suggested, “We need to have somebody there when the kids get out of juvenile hall and foster care. They need structure, help, money, and counseling for kids.”

One parent said, “We need counselors to be more in the community where kids are messing up, and have counselors to keep them going to school.” Some youths who had established relationships with counselors noted that when a counselor or other adults knew them, they received individualized help, which allowed them to better reach personal goals. The young people indicated that such personalized help can be especially important to youths who feel like no one wants to help them succeed. They said:

“I have a counselor to talk to. He tells me the classes I need to get into college to be a psychologist. Before the end of the year he scheduled an appointment for me.”

“My counselor at boot camp helped me. Now I am about to graduate.”

“My probation officer took me to places when others turned on me. He physically took me to schools” (Burrell 2003).

A former student of North High School, who moved on to attend the Career Education Center Middle College of Denver when he did not complete school on-time (so he could earn credits that applied to high school *and* an associate’s degree), stated that a counselor’s guidance could have resulted in his on-time graduation.

He explained, “Counselors need to pay more attention to the students. My counselor never told me I wasn’t meeting the requirements to graduate.” He found out two weeks prior to the school’s graduation ceremony, where he expected to receive his diploma with his peers. This young man’s sentiment was echoed by students interviewed throughout North High School. Thirty percent said they have never been given “necessary” information about college.

Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos reported that North students receive their first official information about college at the “Senior Meeting” held in the fall of 12th grade, which the activists believe is too late for college applications and scholarships. Seniors must sign a contract that details what they need to do to graduate, but, according to students, getting support for understanding and carrying out the terms of the contract is “nearly impossible”. There is one counselor for all the seniors.

Forty-four percent of the students at North High School said they had not met with a counselor about their course schedules, even though a schedule must include specific courses if a student is to stay on track toward graduation.

Also, courses a student takes can influence college admissions. Some universities require a certain amount of foreign language coursework while the state’s requirements for graduation may be less, for example. The inability to work with someone who understands these requirements troubles some students at North, who want to be more certain that their schedules are coinciding with colleges’ expectations (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004). It seems their concerns are legitimate, as 37 percent of North students were carrying less than a full course load at the time of the study. Diana, a freshman, said, “I still don’t have any college preparation...I think it’s bad that no one talks to freshmen about college just because we are ninth graders” (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004).

Attention from teachers for both educational and personal needs is positively associated with school completion according to the Youth Law Center study participants. Some of the participants first received the amount of attention they desired while attending continuation schoolsⁱⁱ and institutional schools (at juvenile detention centers or residential treatment programs). The study

reports that the majority of its participants were displeased with these schools, often feeling ostracized from a “regular” setting or that they required more structure and/or challenge than the schools were providing if they were going to attend school and learn. Nevertheless, a “discernable minority... ‘found’ themselves” and were pleased to have “wonderful teachers and individualized services”. Some said,

“I chose to go to a continuation [school]. I had a hard time with math. [In continuation school] there were a lot of programs...and it was easier to get attention. Classes were shorter and you went at your own pace. I graduated with a 4.0.”

“In middle school, I got F’s and was distracting everyone. At [residential treatment school], I couldn’t do that. I received consequences for my actions, stopped distracting others and myself, and saw that I could get A’s. My teacher encouraged me. I used to beat myself up when I got a problem wrong; now I am not afraid to ask questions, knowing I can get help without people laughing at me.”

“My teacher at [residential treatment school] was amazing. She taught 12 to 15 students on different levels, gave them all the support they needed educationally and emotionally, gave extra help, and would help not only with education things but also personal things. She would stop and talk to me, and showed her concern.”

“When I was at continuation school, one of the teachers became a role model, friend, and parent figure for me and helped to motivate me when I needed it” (Burrell 2003).

Factor #3: Teaching strategies and curricula were not challenging, interesting, interactive, or culturally relevant

All three studies suggested an inverse relationship between school completion and students sensing that teachers’ and schools’ expectations for their performance were low.

The Civic Enterprises study found that 66 percent of youths studied said they would have worked harder to earn a diploma if more had been demanded of them, including higher academic standards, more studying, and more homework. Twenty-six percent did not do any homework and 80 percent did one hour or less of homework each day.

One youth said, “They just let you pass, anything you got.” Others indicated that since make-up work was always allowed, there was not much incentive to attend class. One participant said,

“The work wasn’t even hard...once I figured I wasn’t going to get any learning done in there, there wasn’t any need to go”

(Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006).

In the Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos study of North High School students, 47 percent believed they were not learning what they should be at their grade level. Forty-one percent thought the quality of education at the school was low. Celia, a ninth-grade student, said “I’m learning the same thing now like in seventh and eighth grade.”

Students also noted that the amount of advanced-placement courses offered at a nearby school far exceeded what was offered at their own school. They thought this was due to the North’s low-expectations of the students it served in general when at least some were capable of taking advanced courses and when all might perform better if the school had higher expectations of them.

“[North should] have more classes that prepare you for college and put more emphasis on college,” said Monica, a 10th-grade student (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2006).

The Youth Law Center study participants, who sometimes had to attend multiple schools due to multiple placements in foster care or juvenile detention centers, also felt underestimated by their schools. The participants in the study often attended continuation or institutional schools associated with juvenile detention centers where some sensed curricula choices in these alternative settings were not on par with curricula offered in “regular” schools.

“Continuation school can never benefit me. They teach me things I already know. This is difficult because I want to go into the medical field, and they teach you things you learned in fifth and sixth grade.”

“The work is all outdated at [continuation school]. You go [back] to regular school and don’t know what they are talking about.”

“I didn’t learn anything [in juvenile hall school].”

“At [continuation school] I was just given a packet. You didn’t have to do the work.”

“At the shelter [community] school kids go to the first 12 grades in one class—there is no way that the credits transfer to regular school” (Burrell 2003).

All three studies suggested that “tracking” strategies sometimes keep low-performing students in low-level classes, or alter-

native education programs, which sometimes have less-qualified teachers and, for some students, coursework that is too easy.

In the Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos study, the authors explicitly hypothesized that tracking strategies may be inversely related to school completion. Although it is not clear that students are making the suggestion, the study recommends that North High School and its teachers should support students’ ability to do high-level work, including offering more advanced courses.

The study bases this suggestion on findings presented in *Dispelling the Myth—Revisited* by The Education Trust. According to Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos, The Education Trust studied 1,320 schools across the country with student body majorities of low-income students of color, where student performance in reading and math is in the top third of all schools in their states.

The Education Trust found the schools had three things in common: high standards and expectations for all students, rigorous curriculum, and highly qualified teachers (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004).



According to every reviewed study, boredom resulting from teaching strategies and curricula choices is also inversely related to school completion. A Youth Law Center study participant said, “[At continuation school] few of the teachers tried to make class interesting and get students involved.”

Another said, “Teachers act like they care but they just give you work and don’t help. Teachers are lazy. They just ask you to turn work in” (Burrell 2003). At North High School, 65 percent of the students said “the number one reason why students ditch is that class is boring”.

A 10th grade student reported, “People ditch because they are bored or the teachers don’t challenge them enough...” (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004).

Forty-seven percent of the former students surveyed by Civic Enterprises said a major factor influencing their decision to drop out was that classes were not interesting. Seventy percent said schools did not do enough to make learning interesting. “It was boring...the teacher just stood in front of the room and just talked and didn’t really like involve you,” one said.

A female Baltimore participant said, “There wasn’t any learning going on.” Others reported, “They make you take classes in school that you’re never going to use in life”; “[there was] nothing I was interested in”.

According to the Civic Enterprises authors, participants “expressed sadness that they were not challenged more and that the classes and teachers were not inspiring” (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006).

When asked about specific actions schools could take to improve the chances that a student would stay in school, youths participating in the Civic Enterprises study most frequently said that schools should make teaching and curricula relevant and engaging (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006). Thirty-nine percent of students interviewed at North High School for the Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos study said the best way to better attendance and graduation rates would be to improve the quality of classroom teaching and curriculum (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004).

Civic Enterprises study participants said that hands-on and outside-of-classroom learning was a very important component of teaching and curriculum improvement. They desired a stronger connection between school and work. Eighty-one percent said opportunities for real world learning, such as internships and service-learning projects, would have improved their chances of graduating (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006).

About 75 percent of youths participating in the Civic Enterprises study said schools could offer smaller classes with more one-on-one instruction, involvement, and feedback. The participants, who had all dropped out in the past, proposed this change 12 times during the studies’ four focus groups. Eighty-one percent suggested that schools could have better teachers, often stating that teachers need to keep classes more interesting (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006).

Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos recommended that teachers be interactive—working directly with students daily and not “just assign[ing] hand-outs and readings.” Salina, a 10th-grade student, said “North should make high school more fun and interactive, more hands on.”

A senior student suggested, “Teachers should make class worthwhile—not forcing kids to come, instead making them want to come” (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004).

The Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos study also recommended that teachers make classes more interesting by utilizing programs designed to make curricula more culturally-relevant. The school could also offer more courses, including advanced placement and elective courses, in Spanish (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004).

Participants in the Youth Law Center study said lack of cultural relevance in the curriculum was a barrier to school completion. They said, “The curriculum was not geared toward women or African-Americans” and “[Schools] need to have books with African-Americans in them; they need to be up to speed with what is happening in the world” (Burrell 2003).

Factor #4: Poor academic performance

While dropping out is sometimes synonymous with “failing out” in the minds of American citizens, the Civic Enterprises study was the only study to explicitly mention that “failing in school” was inversely related to school completion. Thirty-five percent of the former students participating in the study said failing in school was a top five reason why they dropped out. The youths who had the most trouble with academics were also the most likely to express doubt about whether they would have worked harder if more had been expected of them.

Thirty percent of the Civic Enterprises study participants said that prior to dropping out they could not keep up with school work, and 57 percent thought that passing from one grade to the next was difficult. They said passing was difficult due to lack of attention from teachers and uninteresting classes, and also that tests were too difficult.

Fifty-five percent of participants said more needed to be done to help students with problems learning. Forty-five percent said their previous schooling had not prepared them well for high school. Thirty-two percent said they were required to repeat a grade prior to dropping out (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Morison 2006).

As stated earlier, students who had high GPAs and said they were bored at school were most frequently part of the 66 percent of

all youths studied who said they would have worked harder if more had been demanded of them.

Generally, there are two widely varying opinions between youths who had high GPAs and youths who had low GPAs while attending school. Yet both groups sought something different than what their schools offered them.

Factor #5: Gradual disengagement from school, including absenteeism.

Forty-three percent of all the youths participating in the Civic Enterprises study said that missing too many days was a major factor influencing them to drop out. Somewhere between 59 and 65 percent of the participants said they missed class often the year they dropped out and 33 to 45 percent missed class often the year before they dropped out.

The Civic Enterprises authors point out that national data show absenteeism is the most common indicator of student engagement and a significant predictor of dropping out. Disengagement may be related to poor academic performance, as Civic Enterprises reports that youths who said it was difficult to pass from one grade to the next also frequently reported that at some point they had missed too many days to catch up. One Baltimore male said, “Like in the middle of the year, I just started going out with my friends, and I never went to school. It’s like I forgot about it” (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006).

Young people and their parents did not perceive that the schools communicated with their parents or guardians about their gradual disengagement (defined as a pattern of refusing to wake up, missing school, skipping class, and taking long lunches), which may have helped them get the guidance needed to complete school. Only 47 percent of the youths surveyed by Civic Enterprises said their parents were contacted by the school if they were absent and just 48 percent said their school contacted them to find out why they left school or to encourage them to return. From the youths’ perspective, the majority of parents were “not aware” or just “somewhat aware” of that their teenaged children were about to leave [quit] school. Seventy-one percent of the participants said a strategy to improve chances of graduation would be to improve communication between parents and schools, and increase parental

involvement in their teens’ education (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006).

Parents interviewed by the Youth Law Center expressed that had school administrators and teachers involved them in critical decisions related to their teens’ attendance they may have been able to stop the process of disengagement. They believed that schools only involved them when their youths were already much disengaged from school. At that point, it was extremely difficult to get youths back on track for graduation. “Schools shouldn’t wait so long—my son didn’t attend for 23 days before they called me,” one parent said.

Some parents, on the other hand, thought parental involvement was no guarantee that youths will be better off. In their experience, schools did not follow through with decisions made with parents, especially regarding students receiving special education. “I’ve been to many Individual Education Plan meetings for my foster children, and after all the planning, nothing ever gets done,” said one parent. Another said, “My foster son was falling through the cracks. We finally got [special education] testing but school just placed him anywhere. I received a letter from school about him not participating, and found that he had been mainstreamed without me knowing about it. Then I complained, and he ended up in another ‘class’ where the school just had him walk around with the janitor” (Burrell 2003).

Factor #6: Personal circumstances not conducive to conventional school participation

Thirty-two percent of the former students surveyed by Civic Enterprises said a major factor influencing their decision to leave school was that they had to get a job and make money. Twenty-six percent said a major factor was that they became a parent, and 22 percent had to care for a family member or take care of other tasks at home because parents were out working or were otherwise unavailable.ⁱⁱⁱ

These students were most likely to say they would have worked harder if their schools demanded more of them and provided the necessary support. They reported doing reasonably well while they attended school and believed they could have graduated if they had stayed (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006).

Some of the Youth Law Center study participants said they had to earn money and take care of family as a first priority.

“I wasn’t worried about school, but was worried about living—how to get money, and how my mother and sisters were going to make it.”

“My job made it difficult to get into...schools; by 11th grade I didn’t even want to try and became more interested in supporting myself. I was moving from family member to family member and needed a way to survive.”

“Child care is not available to help facilitate work or school” (Burrell 2003).

Factor #7: Limited access to campus and to resources that would aid learning activities during non-school hours

Thirty percent of students interviewed for the Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos study reported that their time on campus was limited because North High School required them to leave campus during free periods. Students understood this to mean that they are not to access the library and computers, although it is unclear in the study if this was truly the school’s policy. Regardless, students sensed that their access to resources was limited. Classes ended at 2:45 PM, but the library closed at 3:30 PM and was not accessible during lunchtime, leaving some students without a quiet place to study and with only a small amount of time to access books, computers, and the internet. Although a computer magnet program was designed to increase students’ access to computers, only 50 percent of students were aware of the opportunity and just 27 percent said they had a chance to apply.

The Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos study suggested that school completion rates might improve if North High School extended school building and library hours so students could access extra help and study resources. North High School could also give students access to counselors and mentors after classes and to bilingual tutors well into the evenings and on Saturdays. Making students aware of the resources like the computer magnet program is also critical (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004).

Seventy percent of the youths participating in the Civic Enterprises study said after-school tutoring, Saturday school, summer school, and extra help from teachers would have improved

their chances of staying in school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006).

The Youth Law Center study participants, too, said access to and awareness of resources such as tutors and jobs programs would remove barriers to school completion. One student said, “We need more paraprofessionals and tutors. We need to advertise that these services are available” (Burrell 2003).

Factor #8: Discipline and attendance policies that were too harsh and/or too lenient

Thirty-eight percent of Civic Enterprises study participants said that they had “too much freedom” and too little order, discipline, and rules. Lack of structure, for them, was inversely related to school completion. School policies did not make sure students attended class, nor did they limit chaos in schools and classrooms.

When too little structure was combined with limited attention from adults and unappealing teaching methods, some youths felt it was easy to disengage from—and eventually leave—school. “It was more compelling to leave than to stay” (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006).

A Philadelphia male said, “Once you get in high school, it’s more like you have more freedom. In middle school, you have to go to your next class or they are going to get you. In high school, if you don’t go to class, there isn’t anybody who is going to get you. You just do your own thing.”

Another former student said, “Streets would call you. Being there listening to somebody talking to you all day, writing on the board, and then you start looking outside at the streets... We got to leave for lunch in my school. And then once we got out there, smelled that fresh air...”

When asked what would improve students’ chances of school completion, 68 percent of Civic Enterprises study participants said “keeping students from skipping classes” and 62 percent said “maintaining classroom discipline” (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006).

But some schools’ attempts to improve structure and safety can be inversely related to school completion, students said. Young people who participated in the Youth Law Center and Jovenes

Unidos and Padres Unidos studies described that zero tolerance and other suspension policies were too harsh for the students' actions and in fact contributed to disengagement, which led to absenteeism and, in some cases, to dropping out. Eighty-five percent of the students at North High School disagreed with the school's use of suspensions, for example.

According to Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos, students were suspended for minor offenses such as being late to class, wearing clothing of colors associated with gang activity, and asking too many questions. "If you get suspended for a stupid reason that makes you get behind in your school work..." said Veronica, an 11th-grade student. Senior student Everardo said, "How can you discipline students and teach them a lesson if you kick them out of school—give them a vacation?" (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004).

Some of the Youth Law Center study participants who had been suspended described their experiences as they related to school completion. Some quotes imply that school officials were not responsive to students once they had been suspended, even when they tried to get back on track. Quotes also indicate that some students found it difficult to catch-up with academic work following suspensions. Assistance with their social and academic problems, rather than discipline that removed them from a place where they may have received support, may have helped them on their journey to school completion. Finally, quotes imply that schools sometimes threatened suspension to coax students to change schools instead of finding students the support they may needed.

"You miss a couple of days, and they try to kick you out for 30."

"I left school because of peer pressure; I was kicked out for cutting so much. It's been hard to find my credits, and hard to get back on track from when I left."

"When I was expelled, it took three months to get into community school."

"I did not go to school for a year when I got expelled. I was in the streets using drugs, and did not believe in myself. If someone had reached out to help, I would have done better."

"I tried to enroll in another high school, but my lack of credits, and my having been suspended for more than 20

days kept me out. I caught a case and spent time in 'jail'. Once you're kicked out, stuff is on your record and it's hard to get anyone to look at you twice."

"Schools threaten parents. They say, 'we won't expel your children if you'll put them in another school'" (Burrell 2003).

The Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos study recommended that North High School eliminate zero-tolerance policies that encourage out-of-school suspensions for minor offenses. The school might instead adopt in-school suspension policies, restorative justice, or peer mediation as disciplinary alternatives that would allow students to continue academic activities, the study suggested. Further, the authors/activists recommended that students be involved in designing disciplinary reforms (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004).

Factor #9: Bureaucratic processes, requirements following disruption in attendance

While suspensions and expulsions interrupt some students' school year, often for much longer than the period of the suspension, there are a number of other ways in which students' school year can be disrupted. For youths participating in the Youth Law Center study, for example, there were disruptions in schooling when students transitioned from schools in the juvenile detention or residential treatment centers to "regular" schools. There were also disruptions when students had (sometimes multiple) changes in placement within the child welfare system.

"I have been in 47 placements through three [child welfare] agencies," said one student. "I did not have a lot of school options. I kept talking to social workers and eventually got to go to a regular school," said one.

Another student stated, "I was in eighth grade for two months, doing well, but then was moved 11 times in nine months. It was almost impossible to go to school" (Burrell 2003).

Youths who had a desire to attend school and graduate stated that, following a disruption, students must contend with bureaucratic processes and requirements that can cause a further delay in schooling. Lacking skills in self-advocacy, and often lacking a relationship with an adult who would advocate for them

or provide them guidance, students were left frustrated and confused about how to move forward with schooling.

One student said, “It took me three weeks to get enrolled in school because of the delay in transfer of transcripts and credits when I moved.” Another said, “The court ordered a one-day visit with my mom, but it was on the day I was supposed to enroll, so I missed one month of school.”

A third youth said, “There was a school rule that you have to attend the last day of class and be in class more than 90 percent of time, as well as in the first two weeks of school and last two weeks of school. I missed the last week of school and lost that semester. I don’t know if there are exceptions.”

It is not clear in the report if there were processes to work around the enrollment date or to make-up for missed days, but if there were, the students seemed unaware of them.

Some students lost credits and had to attend school for more than four years to graduate. “I went to placement in three different counties. When I got back to [my original county] I lost all my ninth grade credits. I graduated, but had to go an extra year.”

One student wanted to catch up on credits during summer school, but found this was not an option. At her school, students who were not failing were to attend a community college for credits, but the youth was not prepared to navigate the college processes. “Because summer school is only for those who are failing, I was told to go to City College. I was 16 years old, and did not know what to do. By the time I figured it out, the classes were too full, and I did not get in” (Burrell 2003).

Factor #10: Students feeling not respected. They felt stigmatized, discriminated against, and disappointed at having little or no representation in discussions about school policies.

Half of the students surveyed at North High School for the Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos study said they did not feel respected at school. The study implied that feeling disrespected may be inversely related to school completion. Students sensed that adults in the school did not respect their humanity, and in some cases made judgments about students based on their race.

“I wish teachers would...respect the human being for who they are and most teachers don’t do that here,” said a ninth grade student. Twenty-one percent of the students interviewed said they were harassed or treated unfairly by security guards whose job was to protect them.

Students perceived that security guards treated Latino students, particularly those who were Spanish-speaking, more harshly than White students. “Racism (concerns me most about North),” said one student, “because it makes people feel like they have low self esteem.”

Students also said rules imposed by adults at school did not treat youths as responsible people. They were not allowed to leave the lunch area for the entire lunch period, although the area had just 444 seats to accommodate 650 students. No student could use the library, gym, or go outside during lunchtime.

Ninety-four percent of students surveyed were not happy with how lunch was handled. Kara, in 11th grade, said “Student rights [is the issue of most concern to me] because we are able to make our own decisions.”

Also at North High School, students believed they had few, if any, opportunities to voice opinions and influence decision-making, except regarding social events. This made them feel powerless to suggest changes that could positively influence school completion. One student asked, “When are we going to be heard? When are we going to be trusted? I come here to learn how to be an adult, not to be treated like a kid.”

The study recommended that students be invited to all school committee meetings and have voting power as well as influence over agenda setting. Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos also desired that students have a key role in all school decision making, including the ability to influence policies related to attendance, discipline, school curriculum, and school culture.

The authors/activists thought schools should provide a monthly, student-led forum open to all students to present concerns, discuss issues and find solutions (Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos 2004).

Some participants in the Youth Law Center study sensed that they were stigmatized and undervalued by adults at school because they were in the child welfare system.

One student said, “When the teacher found out that I was in foster care, she looked down on me. She did not believe I had done my own work.” Another reported, “One teacher gave me the keys to the supply closet but took them away when she found out I was in a group home.”

Other participants in the Youth Law Center study said they felt stigmatized because of their past mistakes, even after they took active steps to get on track toward graduation. One student said, “I was suspended 24 times in my freshman year. I hit people, jumped out of bus windows, etc. Four years later teachers come up to me and bring up what happened four years ago. I can’t get away from my reputation as a freshman.”

Another said, “The judge said, ‘Go to school,’ but the school says, ‘You dropped out too many times, we can’t enroll you,’ so I don’t know what to do.” One student was disappointed that while he was in an institutional school he did not earn the same amounts of credits he would have earned in his former, conventional school.

Some youths said their dreams for the future seemed out of reach because of the stigma associated with what they had done in the past, affecting their desire to complete school.

“I have a felony, so it is hard to get a job.”

“I wanted to be a doctor, but you can’t write prescriptions with a felony conviction. I felt like shit when they told me.”

“After you have been to juvenile hall, people don’t want to hire you full-time, it’s hard to get a work permit and then if you get a permit they only give you three hours, so it’s easier to sell drugs because there is too much paper work for three hours’ work” (Burrell 2003).

Discussion of reviewed studies

It is not possible from this review to draw any definite conclusions about the extent to which any one of the 10 factors, or additional factors not discussed, may be influencing school completion, first because there are just three studies and second because none is based on multivariate analysis.

Readers might find themselves wondering about how the factors may be related, calling to question what are truly the major factors causing students to drop out of high school (as opposed to the factors that are merely correlated with dropping out).

Does “poor academic performance” cause students to quit school, for example? Or, as suggested by some of the study findings, is poor academic performance a result of other factors that may be the real reasons why students quit, such as teaching strategies and curriculum choices or the amount of personal attention a student receives?

And how, for example, is “lack of motivation”—the variable with the highest percentages of students indicating it was inversely related to school completion—related to the other nine variables?

Do some of the factors influence youths’ motivation more than others? What would improve youths’ motivation to attend school and learn? Might there be different answers depending on the characteristics of the youths being studied?

The Civic Enterprises study begins to answer that question. The researchers gathered data about participants that allowed them to examine some characteristics of participants associated with specific answers.

Some of the authors’ findings are reported in the earlier discussions about factors related to school completion, such as the grade point averages of students who said they were bored in school. The Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos study and the Youth Law Center study did not employ such analysis techniques. Nevertheless, it was clear that some of the students quoted were in a particular grade.

Sometimes quotes were clearly made by a student of a particular sex and/or by students who were in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems. Such distinguishing characteristics are helpful for evaluating if different youths say different factors would improve their chances of completing school. Still, more research is necessary to learn more about youths’ preferences.

For some of the 10 factors in the review, including “poor academic performance”, “gradual disengagement or absenteeism”, and “bureaucratic processes and requirements following disruption in school attendance”, only one study indicated that youths cited the factor as being related to school completion.

It is important to note that, in a different study situation, youths who participated in any of the studies may also have said these and other factors were related or not related. Responses may

be a function of study design, study purpose, participants in focus group discussions, and more.

Future research should consider whether each of the factors mentioned only once merely correlates with school completion or indeed causes some students not to complete school.



In all three studies reviewed, large majorities of the youths studied offered some similar ideas about which factors could have positively influenced them to complete school. Schools could offer relevant, engaging, and interactive curriculum, for one. Also, school climates could better foster personal relationships between students and their teachers and peers.

But perhaps more evident in the findings is that youths offer quite varying opinions about factors that help and hinder school completion. The variety suggests that there is no one factor that policymakers could address to motivate *all* youth on the path to quitting school to stay in school and learn.

Some youths, for example, suggested that schools should provide more structure and discipline to keep them interested in school and learning. At the high-school level, no one was “going to get” them if they missed classes or didn’t return to school following off-campus lunch. Had adults noticed students leaving, and cared about them returning, the youths may have faced fewer obstacles to completion.

But for other youths, schools’ attempts to provide structure in a large school setting were too limiting. North High School kept students confined in a cafeteria during lunchtime and did not allow them to pursue learning resources elsewhere on campus. Students wanted to feel more responsible for their learning and decision-making, and felt that school policies that assumed they were irresponsible hindered their motivation to stay in school and graduate.

Seventy-five percent of youths in the Civic Enterprises study, in which all participants had dropped out, said schools could improve students’ chances of school completion by offering smaller classes with more one-on-one instruction, involvement, and feedback.

Yet some youth participating in the reviewed studies didn’t place so much emphasis on these factors. Flexibility in school

hours and learning pace, access to resources like counselors and computers, and other factors mattered to these youths, too—sometimes more than class size.

The youths’ responses also varied regarding the appropriate level of difficulty for school curriculum. In the Civic Enterprises study, youths who had high GPAs prior to dropping out often said that more challenging curriculum would have improved their chances of completing school.

Youths who said failing in school was a top five reason why they dropped out, on the other hand, often thought that passing from one grade to the next was already too difficult. Students surveyed in the Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos study advanced a third opinion, making a research-based argument that students’ academic performance improves when expectations are higher. The authors recommended more challenging courses in order to improve performance and keep students attending.

So, on the issue of curriculum, three different populations of youth offered three different suggestions for how to improve school completion.

According to the Youth Law Center study, young people in juvenile justice and child welfare had varying opinions about continuation and institutional schools. Among the study participants, a “discernable minority” said continuation and institutional school settings gave them what they needed to “find themselves” (Burrell 2003). Most of the youths who were pleased with the alternative-education settings said they received a significant amount of personal attention, which was critical to improving their academic and social skills.

A much larger group, however, was displeased with their schooling in alternative settings. Some youths thought the academic expectations in their alternative schools were too low and that teachers were not engaged with students. These youths generally believed “regular” (conventional) schools ought to do more to accommodate all students.

Often, they desired to attend the schools that “everyone” seemed to be attending but believed they would not do well in these schools unless the schools changed to be more inclusive.

It is important to note that youths’ opinions about alternative schools had little to do the schools being alternative and more to

do with the characteristics of the individual schools, including characteristics which were described as being positively and inversely related to school completion in the literature review.

The *characteristics* of a particular school may be more important to a student's chances of completing school than the *category* of the school (conventional, alternative, chartered, home, magnet, or otherwise). Schools can espouse many different characteristics that influence students' opinions about them.

Some youths participating in the Youth Law Center study, for example, thought that teachers at alternative school were significantly more engaged with students than teachers in their conventional schools had been.

Other youths thought just the opposite. This suggests that the youths studied were evaluating all alternative schools based only on the one or more they had attended. In some alternative schools, students may have received more attention while in others students may have been told to quietly do their work and not bother the teachers.

Had one of the Youth Law Center study participants who did not find success in one alternative school tried another alternative school, his or her opinion about all alternative schools may have changed while his or her opinions about characteristics that are important in a school may have remained the same.

It is the case, however, that citizens—including youth advocates, researchers, and legislators—are in the habit of evaluating schools by categories, and not by characteristics.

Despite identifying a “discernable minority” who found success in alternative schools after facing significant obstacles to school completion in conventional schools, for example, the Youth Law Center recommended that child welfare and juvenile justice attorneys strive to “reduce exclusions from regular schools...and implement procedures to return them to regular school programs whenever possible, as quickly as possible.”

This strategy does not accommodate youths who seek characteristics in a school that they might not easily access in conventional schools in their geographic locations. Schools that can accommodate very flexible learning paces, for example, might be better options for youths who have multiple child welfare placements in a year.

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In summary, the review of three recent studies suggests that a wide variety of factors can influence youths' learning and school completion, and different youths will be motivated by different factors. It seems some will be sufficiently motivated by increased rigor and standards in conventional schools, and some will not.

Many will be motivated by interactive curriculum and personal relationships. Still, some will not. Any school would be hard pressed to accommodate all of the youths' varying motivations in one setting. Nevertheless, understanding conventional settings to be their primary option, some young people and their families and advocates believe that every conventional school must accommodate every student's motivations in order to be fair and for all students to receive a high quality education.

Students are successful when schools appeal to their motivations

Case studies of five Minnesota young people affirm the positive impacts of fundamentally different schools and schooling

Given the varying motivations of youths our nation hopes to engage, one might hypothesize that state legislatures that are increasing rigor and standards as their primary strategy to improve learning will improve the learning of some while leaving others behind. If states were to make students' individual motivations central to education policy and school design, people influencing K-12 education might find ways to customize youths' experiences with schools and schooling so that a variety of motivations could be accommodated.

Where states have allowed for the creation of new and fundamentally different schools with new and fundamentally different learning methods, customization is already happening.

Some states are advancing a two-bet strategy in their efforts to improve student learning—working to improve student learning with customization *and* standardization.

Minnesota, for instance, now requires all students to pass Algebra II and Physics or Chemistry in order to graduate. At the same time, Minnesota is encouraging the creation of new and fun-

damentally different schools that can tap into the motivations of students who are not sufficiently motivated in conventional settings or by rigor alone.

Minnesota legislators adopted its chartered school law in 1991 (the first in the nation), removing school districts' exclusive on the creation of schools and allowing fundamentally different schools to emerge. Fifteen years later, Minnesota is home to 131 chartered schools, many of which are unconventional.

According to October 2006 data provided by the Minnesota Department of Education, almost 14 percent of all public school students enrolled in the Minneapolis and Saint Paul school district boundaries (in the central cities) are attending the areas' 58 chartered schools.

As more chartered schools open and district enrollment declines^{iv} in the Twin Cities, the population of students attending chartered schools is growing rapidly. In Minneapolis, the percentage of students enrolled in chartered schools climbed from 10.3 in the 2004-2005 school year to 14.4 in 2006-2007. In Saint Paul, chartered school enrollment grew from 11 to 12.4 percent over the same period.^v

While student enrollment in chartered schools as a percentage of overall district enrollments in Minnesota is relatively small, at 2.8 percent, the numbers suggest that there is indeed a market for fundamentally different schools.

As the market grows, the question is: Is Minnesota's parallel strategy helping the state to improve student learning? In answering that question, several others come up: Are Minnesota's chartered schools appealing to youths not learning well in conventional settings? Are they serving youths who might have left school altogether had they not had the option to attend a fundamentally different school?

If so, why did these youths decide the chartered schools were worth attending in the first place? And what about the schools, if anything, continues to motivate the youths to attend and learn?

To inspire more research and thinking that will answer these questions, EducationEvolving (EIE) interviewed youths who are now attending or recently graduated from Minnesota chartered schools that are fundamentally different from conventional schools. EIE approached teachers and administrators from 33

chartered schools to ask for assistance in finding students who identified themselves as having either dropped out of conventional schools or were well on their way to dropping out.

EIE elected to target specific schools based on their geographic proximity to the Twin Cities (so we could access the students easily) and their distinctiveness from conventional schools. Teachers and administrators from only a portion of the targeted schools responded to EIE's inquiry.

While 33 students or recent graduates from eight schools were interviewed, EducationEvolving selected the five cases included in this paper based on the following criteria: (1) The students' ability to communicate their experiences and perspectives in a compelling manner; (2) No two interviewees from the same school would be presented; (3) The case studies presented would represent diverse demographics and backgrounds. The sample of students depicted in the studies are not representative of Minnesota students as a whole.

The selected students or recent graduates were:

- **CODIE WILSON**, a self-described "former gangbanger" and ward of the State of Indiana who went from having failing grades in a traditional Indiana public high school to receiving very high marks at Saint Paul's chartered High School for the Recording Arts (HSRA). Codie's grades earned him the opportunity to take advantage of the school's partnership with local music production company Studio 4. Recording and producing music was a motivating factor that Codie openly acknowledges "saved his life" and led to his 2003 high school graduation and his current mission to help other young people achieve the same turn-around in their lives that he experienced at HSRA.
- **MATTIE ERSTAD**, a talented math student who completed calculus ahead of schedule as a junior in high school, but believes she would have quit school had she not received personal attention from teachers and gotten out of conventional course and class structures by attending Watershed (alternative) High School in Minneapolis and the project-based Avalon Charter School in Saint Paul.
- **TRAVION ALLEN**, a Native American and African American who went from believing he was "a dummy [who]

didn't know nothin'" to feeling like a math genius after receiving extra help from teachers and after learning, through culturally-relevant curriculum, that his capacity to make a contribution to society is far greater than he once thought. After graduating from Oh Day Aki on time in 2007, he will attend one of three colleges to which he has already been accepted.

- **KRISSY BANKS***, a young woman attending TRIO Wolf Creek, a distance-learning charter school sponsored by the Chisago Lakes School District with flexible hours and teachers who make it a practice to offer social support in addition to academic support. Krissy says the flexibility and support make her attendance possible as she works 40 hours per week during the third shift at a plastics factory, is pregnant, and doesn't receive the parental assistance that some other students do (for example, in applying for income assistance and social services).
- **SUSAN VANG**, an "A" student attending Hmong Academy in St. Paul, with plans to earn a Ph.D. in psychology. Susan once failed to attend conventional and alternative schools because she was not challenged by the academics and no one seemed to care if she did not attend. When she was frequently truant at Hmong Academy, adults were (and still are) relentless in reaching out to her. Their belief in her inspired Susan to believe in herself, get involved in school activities, and earn good grades.

**Asterisk indicates that Education/Evolving changed the interviewee's name at the student's request.*

In the following case studies, each of these youths describes how factors similar to those identified by the young people studied in the reviewed literature had at one time hindered their learning and influenced them to strongly consider quitting school.

Ultimately, however, each student consciously left a conventional school because s/he had discovered a fundamentally different school that would better suit his or her needs. In every case the student's decision was life-changing. Students' attendance improved dramatically, they learned both academic and life skills, and either graduated or were on track to graduate on time at the

time of publication (which means they met or were meeting Minnesota's current graduation standards).

What motivated them to attend school and learn? Each student studied was seeking something different than the other students were seeking. No one combination of factors turned all of these students on to attending, learning, and graduating; and no one combination of factors turned all of them off.

A school that worked well for one of the interviewees might not have worked well for the others. It is possible, therefore, that the variety of schools available in Minnesota made it possible for all five to stay on track toward graduation. Had Minnesota allowed for just one kind of unconventional school, and not a variety of them, it's possible that some or all of the students would have quit school altogether.

Codie Wilson

Graduated in 2003 from High School for the Recording Arts, a chartered school in St. Paul

When Codie Wilson heard about High School for the Recording Arts in St. Paul he had been involved in gang violence and was flunking his classes at Roosevelt High School in Gary, Indiana. "I was about 17. I was a freshman. No, I was a junior or a sophomore—I really didn't know at the time [because] I had failed classes. My grades [were] bad. I had all Fs. Wasn't nobody doin' nothing in the school. I didn't feel like there was anything I had to keep up with. I didn't think I was going to graduate and I didn't really care. I wasn't trying because I wasn't interested in school. . . It was mainly a fashion show. Classes was too long. Seven classes a day. So seven hours of sitting in the class, not really doing much."

Codie had been "in so much trouble" and was a ward of the state. "I [was placed in the child welfare system] 'cause I pulled a gun on my dad for beating my mom. You know, one night, when he was abusing her, I pulled a gun. They was having they problems. [I was] going to school every day, worrying about my dad coming home, worrying about if my mom gonna be living or not, you know. A lot the stuff that was going on in my house was affecting me at school, too...It's difficult to come to school and sit in front of a class and not be real independent with yourself.. You're dealing with a lot."

Codie's mom and some of his brothers eventually left Indiana and went to Minnesota, where one of his brothers enrolled in HSRA. Codie's brother called soon thereafter and raved about the school. Codie was a ward of the state, and was not supposed to leave, but he was so intrigued by his brother's excitement about HSRA that he put some money together and got on the first bus he could to St. Paul.

The move to Minnesota, Codie says, saved his life.

"I've been through a lot. If I wasn't here, I'd probably be in trouble or in jail or possibly dead. Wouldn't have been nothing to pull me away from the streets. I get a lot of bad news from Gary [Indiana]. People done went to prison from the same neighborhood I'm from. A lot of guys in my neighborhood where I grew up...are not here no more. They're not living. I lost a brother in Indiana in '99. The week he was supposed to [come to St. Paul and HSRA], he got killed. So I just look at the school as a lifesaver. That's the first thing I said when I got here: 'If this was in Indiana, there'd be a lot of lives saved.'"

Exactly how, according to Codie, is HSRA saving lives? For one thing, HSRA provides its students the opportunity to use a recording studio and learn about the various aspects of the music industry. That alone was enough to motivate Codie to get his grades up.

"My grades was like all A's and B's. Sometimes all A's. Like a 4.0 GPA. Grades started rising because you had to do work to get into the studio. The only way I could get in there was doing what I had to do with my grades. Plus, at this time, I really wanted to graduate because I was doin' so good and my mom was saying, 'One of my kids has got to get a diploma.' And I was doin' so good; feelin' so good. So I kind of rushed to do that [to graduate]."

The studio time was, to Codie, a positive outlet for his anger and aggression that he had never had before.

"You know, you got the Boys and Girls Club, but there's nothing like music and a person can express how they feel. My dad, he didn't really allow me to talk or speak. He was real mean; real aggressive. He just hollered at me if I had something to say. So [after] years of not talking and telling how you feel, I really couldn't get it out until I got to Minnesota."

Once in the studio Codie found that he was learning a lot of skills that would improve his opportunities in life.

"HSRA is a project-based school, so I put together my first CD as a project so I could graduate. That was my final project to get a diploma. Before I got here, I was recording. Like I'd put two radios together and I'd try to make a song. It wasn't going so good. Like I said, I was a ward of the state and I had done got in so much trouble. I didn't actually get into a real studio till I got here. I didn't know nothing about studios."

Codie learned how to write, produce, record lyrics, record songs, and make beats, but he quickly understood that developing a CD requires more than studio work.

"I [formed partnerships]. I got together with a rock band to do the sixth song. I got Kanshi [a classmate] on another track on the keyboard. I had to get all the graphics, do all the credits, put it all together like a project. And then [my teacher], TC, he helped with press. It was good for TC for a student to actually...do photo-shoots. I did all that—got the guy to come in and take pictures. [The photographer] asked me to put together a prototype of the cover. Then I had to get that together. Do everything. [I wrote] a little story about what I went through. I was still having problems when I got here with the street life. So I wrote about how I converted from being in the street life to living my life... I did a video. I had to put together a team of people to do all this. I had like twenty meetings."

Codie points to a number of ways in which HSRA motivated him to learn and graduate.

"The teachers here, they don't have like too much on their plate. When you're dealing with a classroom full of 30 kids...even inside as a child you don't want to come up to the teacher and say you have some issues because you got 30 other kids in the room with you and you always get blown off like, 'We'll talk about it later.' With all these kids, you really can't pull nobody to the side and talk about what you're going through that day.

"[Also, at HSRA,] it's not mandatory to come sit in class. If you have class, you go to your class. If you miss a class, you can catch up. It ain't like you always behind, like in a class with 30 kids [at conventional schools]. A traditional school is, you know: 'This is what we doin' today. If you don't get it, you can learn it

from somebody else. We ain't going over it again today.' They don't do reviews and stuff 'cause they doing so much and got too many people to worry about. In a school like [HSRA], you know, you can have a teacher go over it, go over stuff they went over earlier that day with you again, you know. Whenever you ask for it, you can get it.

"You can never feel like you've been blown off or the teacher's too busy to talk to you. You can sit at the lunchroom at the table with your teacher instead of them being in the teacher lounge. [In traditional schools] when the teacher be away from y'all and you got something on your mind—a question or something—you can't talk to her till she comes back out of the teacher's lounge. Here, you can eat with the teacher, sit at the table and talk about things. You know, there's so many ways to get your stuff done. I really never had no problem getting things out of the staff when I went to HSRA. If I forgot something, I could make up for it. If I needed help, I could set up a time to meet with 'em. It's more like family, you know what I'm saying? It's like family. The smaller it is, the more support for each other. In this school, I can know every kid's name, who they is and their situation, how to deal with them. So it's real easy to have a good relationship with the teachers here."

Codie said that the extra attention he received from teachers at HSRA helped him to learn—more than what he had learned at the more conventional Roosevelt High School in Gary, Indiana.

"The main thing is [students] at HSRA feel like they [are learning] something. They move on [with curriculum] in a traditional school [when some students aren't ready]...They don't go back for nobody. If you a little slower than the rest, they don't go back. You know, in traditional schools, I cheated a lot because I always miss-ed something or the teacher went too fast. So I'd always be like, 'Let me copy off of you.' I really didn't learn..."

Codie graduated from HSRA in 2003. With the skills and confidence he gained at school, Codie is currently working on his fourth CD and getting ready to release his third. He is also performing regularly. "Now I got two CDs out. I done a lot of major shows in the Twin Cities. I've got a show [coming up] in Omaha. I've got a show at Escape Ultra Lounge. I done did shows at the Midnight Club in Maplewood. So I did a lot of exciting things in

my life. I've been to Vegas. I lived in Vegas. [Performing music] took me to a lot of places; opened a lot of doors for me."

Codie also works at HSRA's front desk, where he can be a mentor and resource for students.

"To be here, I thank God. I didn't see myself here when I was younger, but I knew something was going to happen for me because I was payin'—going through all the struggles I was going through... Studio 4 and being a part of the staff, making music, doin' what I love to do... To see the family, come in every day and come to work, you know, it's a beautiful thing. I really don't even like taking a day off 'cause it's just something about this."

Codie is especially appreciative because at one time he was not sure whether his criminal record would affect his future. HSRA helped him with that, too.

"I've got a clean record because of this school. I'm felony-free. I've been shot before, so I know what it's like to almost die. [I know] this school is just, you know, a blessing."

Codie is proud that he can now use his experience at HSRA, and his music, to positively influence—give hope to— other young people who are facing problems like the ones he once faced.

"I done pushed a lot of kids to go here and a lot of them graduated. You know, just for me being who I am...I done gangbanged. I done all that. I been on both sides of the track. So it's like, a lot of people look at that like...for me to be coming to them [talking about] education and this positive stuff, when they knew me as this...negative...person. They say, 'Why he done changed...I think it's possible for *me* to change.' So it's good for them to hear from a person that's been on both sides of the tracks. I give them hope when they listen to my CD and they hear about the things I'm doing and what I'm trying to do. I try to be successful with my music so I can bring more to Studio 4; so I can invest in more students. Me working 9 to 5 is good and I want to make more schools like this in places like Gary. That's my goal—to bring a Studio 4 to Gary, Indiana."

Another goal of Codie's is to speak out about social problems that some students face. He wants to be useful in changing the world. "My artist name is Monsta Codie Indiana. I'm like the mascot of Indiana. I just speak for like the people who wanted to change, but your environment makes you who you is sometimes. I

speak for kids that just didn't have no choice but to live in Indiana and go through what they went through because they didn't know nothing else. [For example, kids] got license to carry [guns in Indiana]. A lot of young kids running around with permits to carry a gun! It's real scary. So I talk about that a lot on my CD."

Mattie Erstad

Senior, Avalon High School, a chartered school in St. Paul

Mattie Erstad attended three high schools before she and her family agreed that the learning environment at Avalon High School would be worth a try. First she went to Central High School, the largest high school in the City of St. Paul with just over 2200 students. Central is also the home of the most Rhodes Scholars of any public high school in the United States. It has an International Baccalaureate program and is a Blue Ribbon School. But Central didn't suit Mattie well.

"I was there for a year and a half and wasn't doing very well in school because there was so much work and I didn't have a relationship with any of my teachers. We went to class, sat through lectures, went home, did some homework, and went back the next day. I didn't feel like I ever actually learned anything. It was all black-and-white. There was all this paper work. It was always reading a chapter and writing a paper; reading and writing a review. There was no hands-on and very few discussions. Just a bunch of lectures and filling out answer sheets and tests and stuff."

"I wasn't doing well in any of my classes and when you start to fall behind, you just basically stay behind. If you missed an assignment, then you had to catch up on that. And once you were done with that, you were falling behind on the next assignment, so it just kind of snowballed."

Mattie explained she had been in the hospital November of her sophomore year. When she returned to school, a teacher was not willing to provide flexibility on a make-up work policy, which contributed to her falling substantially behind.

"I had missed a huge test in one of my English classes. The teacher's policy was after two weeks you couldn't take it if you had missed it. I came back and checked everything that I had missed and I didn't even know about this test and three weeks later

they were correcting it in class. So I had been too late and she wouldn't give me credit for it...so I dropped down to like 40 percent in the class and couldn't get it back up."

Mattie said that it was around that same time period, near the end of the first semester of her sophomore year, when she happened to go out to dinner with a friend who was attending Watershed High School in Minneapolis. Watershed is a Waldorf school [a developmental approach to learning where "teachers strive to transform education in to an art that educates the whole child—the heart and the hands, as well as the head" (AWSNA 2006)] that had just converted from a private high school to a chartered public school. It was the first time she had heard of unconventional public schools, and she was intrigued.

"I talked to my parents and we checked it out. I was not doing well [at Central] and when I shadowed [a student] at Watershed [the teachers and administrators] were all interested in what I had to say about school. I just had a conversation with them. It was more intimate. In the classes it was just about 15 people, maybe 20, so everyone knew each other and it was more like conversations between the students and teachers...[My parents and I] saw that it was much better-fitting for me just 'cause I like a small environment. [I like] teachers who know who I am just so they can understand what I'm going through..."

Watershed small size and learning program were also very different from Central's, and helped Mattie maintain her interest in academics.

"On Mondays we just worked on music and art, and we got out an hour early, so it was really different. You never had a case of the 'Mondays'. The other days it was just a rotating schedule...which was nice because it wasn't the same thing every day.... We had an open lunch, so we got outside. That was nice to be able to take a break from school. And just the small setting was nice. When I was at Central I'd get anxiety attacks and not be able to talk in front of class, so it was nice to be able to have a discussion in class and be a part of it without having to be nervous. It was a lot more art-based, too. A lot of things were hands-on and all of the teachers were really into alternative learning. They had all chosen to work there because they were really passionate about the kind of teaching. Like for our math project, we went and were

secret agents at the Mall of America and had to crack codes and go around the mall [solving things]. I had never experienced anything like that before with math. So I really liked math then.”

Mattie’s attitude about school changed while attending Watershed.

“I was always excited to go to school. When I’d come home, I’d talk to my parents about what I had learned and my parents had never heard any of that from me when I was at Central. And just because my teachers wanted me to learn so bad, they were so passionate about helping me learn, I would come home every day feeling like I had learned something new and I was growing. From where I started there to when I ended, I was a completely different person walking out of school.”

After completing her sophomore year at Watershed, Mattie planned to go to study as an exchange student in Norway for the fall semester of her junior year. Her parents worried that her health was not stable enough to leave the country, however, and they decided that Mattie could not study abroad.

Mattie’s parents also said that they wanted her to attend a school with more structure than what they believed Watershed offered. They gave her four choices of conventional district high schools in the Twin Cities area. Mattie was disappointed and skeptical about the idea of succeeding in a conventional setting, but felt she had to listen to her parents. She chose Highland Park Senior High because she knew several people who attended the school.

Highland is organized as three small learning communities of no more than 500 students. Each community offers a broad range of classes and community-based learning experiences. Highland’s programs include Chinese language and culture and Spanish immersion.

Having excelled in math at Watershed, Mattie immediately enrolled in Highland’s calculus course—a high-level math course that many advanced students do not take before they are seniors in high school or fresh-men in college. This was quite an achievement for Mattie, who had been a “borderline ‘C’” student while taking math at Central because, from her perspective, Central’s class did not allow for her to work at her own pace.

“Until you understood everything in the math class, you [were] kind of confused and every day was a drag.”

Despite the challenging coursework at Highland, Mattie didn’t feel like she would reach her potential while attending the school. The environment, while not exactly like Central’s, was still too big and too conventional.

“At Watershed, there were no bells or anything, so going back to a set schedule [was hard to adjust to again]. [When I first arrived], Highland only had four classes a day and that was long. Every class was an hour and a half long. The plus of that was that you only took a class for half the year. So I took calculus for half the year and then was done with it. [But eventually] they switched to what Central was—six classes a day. [After the switch, the school day] was always really long—waking up before the sun was up, all the classes were really big, and I didn’t really know half of my teachers. I wasn’t doing really well. I was basically a robot for the six months that I was there. I woke up in the morning and I went to school and I came home and I just... I don’t even remember half the days I was there because I was barely awake. I was just sitting through lectures and looking at the clock and going home.”

The situation seemed worse to Mattie when she was told she may need to sit through more lectures than she originally thought. At Highland, she would have to repeat some classes for which Watershed had been willing to grant her credits. Staying at Highland, therefore, would also mean that her graduation would be delayed.

“When I switched to Watershed, Central [administrators] got really mad and deleted my entire [first semester of my sophomore year]. At Watershed, they knew the classes I had taken, so they accepted that. So I was on-track. But when I went to Highland they said, ‘Well, you don’t have half a year at Central...’ So, if I would have stayed there all year I would have been held back my junior year to [redo] half a year’s work. I took health twice and there were a few other classes they were going to have me do again.”

The idea of being held back negatively affected Mattie.

“I didn’t talk to anyone there and there was nothing keeping me there. I was not learning and not going anywhere and I was going to be held back. I didn’t want to be a ‘super senior’ or a ‘super junior’ and I was about to say ‘screw it’ and walk out.”

The irony of her parents wanting her to attend a conventional school, according to Mattie, was that she was far more likely to stay at school all day while attending Watershed than she had been while attending Central and Highland.

“When I was at Watershed, you could ditch, but I really liked being at school and in all of my classes. I never felt like I just wanted to get up and leave and go do something else. [Nevertheless, while I was attending Watershed,] my parents were always worried that I was just going to walk out of school. [Ironically,] I did it all the time at Central but I never got caught because you could just go up to the front desk person with a notes and be like ‘Oh, I have a doctor’s appointment,’ and they don’t do anything. Half the teachers don’t even mark you tardy or absent. So it never really made sense anyways. And then, at Highland, you can just leave whenever. I didn’t want to fall subject to what I was at Central again. I wanted to get through high school and pass my classes so I could graduate and I knew if I started doing that, I would just start that cycle again.”

Mattie was certain that she was heading down the wrong track, but her parents still thought the best thing for her was a conventional school that, in their opinion, provided structure. Mattie, however, was open to other opportunities. A friend told her about Avalon, a chartered school serving about 150 students in grades 7-12 in St. Paul.

Avalon offers project-based learning, a strong student voice in what happens at the school, and a strong technological component with one computer for every two students on L-shaped desks that serve as the students’ own, permanent work spaces. Avalon calls its teachers “advisors” to recognize their different roles and relationships with students, who play a significant role in directing their own learning instead of “receiving” conventional classroom instruction.

Mattie worked hard to persuade her parents to let her shadow an Avalon student for a day and then to attend an open house where students showcase what they have learned through their projects. Her parents attended the open house, and they talked to a couple of teachers. After a week of discussion, Mattie’s parents said she could switch schools at the end of the semester.

“[At first] my parents were worried that I was going to leave [school regularly], but when I was in an environment where I wanted to be again...it was just...I mean, these teachers here could work at a [conventional] public school, but they choose to work at an alternative school because they like the style. They’re working a lot harder to help teach kids. [Also] there is a student congress, so the students’ voices are heard. Just being able to have a conversation with a staff member and tell them what’s going on in your life...not that they know every little thing about you, but they understand when you’re having a bad day. If you can’t focus in a class room setting, you can work in the café. I have attention deficit disorder, so sometimes I just need a change or scenery or just need to take a break. I just talk to an advisor and she lets me go to the café. I don’t feel rushed every day, but I’m also getting a lot of work done while I’m here. I haven’t missed a day of school this year. I haven’t been tardy once. [If I had stayed at Highland] I would have been a year behind and probably would have quit going.”

Mattie’s goal for after high school is to attend the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design or the Pacific Northwestern College of Art and Design in Portland. At Avalon, she is working on several projects through which she meets Minnesota’s graduation standards while also pursuing her interests in photography, documentary filmmaking, and community improvement.

“I’ve been researching different types of photography; different styles. So I’ve been working on that a lot during the day. I’m going to exhibit about a dozen or so photos and put them on the walls of the school and then put some into my college portfolio. I have a darkroom in my basement, so I’ve been developing for years. I wanted to be able to learn more about taking pictures and get school credit for it. So it’s really cool that I can choose what I want to learn and get credit for it.

“I’m also doing a documentary [film] on the difference between urban and suburban youth life. I’m interviewing people for that during the day and doing a lot of editing [in the evenings]. I have a bunch of friends who live out in the suburbs and...we were talking about the differences between suburban and inner-city kids and my [peers and I] wanted to show the differences because there’s a lot of stereotypes. So we went to [several schools] and

interviewed kids. We found that the suburbs and inner-city kids are actually really similar. It's all just the stereotypes that make it [seem different]. What you do after school...is pretty much the same all around whether kids are in gated communities or in the inner city.

"I'm doing a project on MySpace, too. How it's affecting the entire media and how it gets overblown. I'm gonna write a paper on that. So I've just been reading a lot of news articles and talk-ing to a lot of people."

For each of these projects Mattie is learning project management and partnership skills that will be useful to her future. She explained in elaborate detail how she manages each.

"First I do a brainstorm sheet, which is basically laying out what I want to do and estimating how many hours I will spend doing each part of the project. I show [the outcomes] to my advisor and then I get a parent's signature on it. After that, I do a project proposal and get approval. The [proposal involves] rewording [and writing more about] what I am doing, more brainstorming, working out timelines and deadlines and how I will meet grad standards. As I'm doing my project I write out standards reports—what I'm going to accomplish, any issues I'm having getting my goals done. I meet with my advisor almost every day just to go through problems and successes.

"Before the project is complete, I write a reflection where I just state all the issues I had along the way. My advisor reads it and gives me feedback and then I re-write it again. Then I meet with my advisors to finalize the project, I present my product, and I explain what I've learned. They ask me questions and I have to prove that I've actually learned something. Then they see if I have completed everything by the deadlines and I tell them what I think I deserve for a grade and why and we all have to agree on a grade. And every year, I have to present three of my projects. So, if I am really proud of my project, I can choose to present it at presentation night, which is basically standing up for like 10 or 15 minutes and talking to the parents and other students about what I did."

Mattie will graduate from Avalon on time, and she attributes that to the learning environment Avalon provides.

"I personally think the Avalon system works really well for me because I've been to other schools. I'm controlling what I do

and how I work on things. That doesn't work for everyone. There are students who come and think you can just slack off and pass. Those students normally don't stick around. But it's a great system for me. I know other systems and I feel really fortunate to have this option."

Travion Allen

Senior, Oh Day Aki (Heart of the Earth), a chartered school in Minneapolis

Travion Allen says that had he not found Oh Day Aki, a K-12 chartered school in Minneapolis, he would be "dropped out, hanging with the homies." Travion transferred to Oh Day Aki for his sophomore year after spending his freshman year at Minneapolis' Edison High School, where enrollment is 1150 students. Today, Edison is home to three small learning communities with special themes—business, finance, and entrepreneurship; education and public service; and cosmetology. Freshmen and sophomores are grouped into houses within their respective communities so they have a personalized learning setting. But when Travion attended, he sensed that the school was still very conventional. Travion thought the school's size made receiving individual attention next to impossible and, without help, the curriculum was too hard.

"That's why I hardly even went to school when I went to Edison. There's so many kids there that teachers have to help too many. Teachers can't get to know you on a personal level. You feel like, 'What's the point?' because, the teachers, they're not really going to spend time to help me. I would never understand the work that [they had us] doing. So what's the point of even going? If you miss any work it's so hard for you to catch up.

"[Also,] if you didn't understand something, [teachers at Edison] would wait until a group of people said they didn't understand it. [Only] then would they [slow down to] talk to the whole class. Teachers have too many kids to stop in the middle of the class and help you understand. I felt like I didn't know nothin'. I felt like a dummy, like, 'Man, what am I doing here?'"

"I was figuring, you know, when I graduate from high school [then I will feel] like, 'Thank God I'm done. I ain't doin' nothing [anymore]. I'm chillin' with the homies and all that.'"

When Travion heard about Oh Day Aki he understood the school to be for kids who were “feeling troubled” in schools like Edison. Since he hadn’t been attending school much, he thought changing schools would be worth a try, but he didn’t have much hope that he would be able to improve his academic performance at Oh Day Aki.

“I thought it was just going to be like [Edison]. Like work was going to be too hard.”

Right from the start, Travion found that the work *was* the same at Oh Day Aki. He had seven classes a day, and teachers were covering a lot of material, much like they did at Edison. With more personal attention from teachers, however, Travion felt that he could handle the academics well, and sensed he was making progress toward graduation. At Edison he had maintained a “C to D average”, but in time, at Oh Day Aki, he was earning Bs and Cs. By his senior year, he earned all As and Bs.

“I found out that when I got down on some work or didn’t know what I was doing, the teachers were real helpful. They’ll spend time. They’ll actually come and talk to you one-on-one if you need help with something. Basically [all] the teachers stay after school to help you if you don’t understand what’s going on. It’s cool because you know all the teachers’ names. You know them on a personal level.

“Like the math we’re learning now—sine, cosine, and tangent. When I went to Edison, we talked about it, but I never understood it. Now I feel like a math genius. The teachers break it down in so many ways to you. I actually wrote a problem on the board and solved it. Kids now ask *me* for help a lot. They’re like, ‘Can you help me? Can you help me?’ I’m like, ‘Wow, I guess I’m pretty smart.’ I’m doing so well in Algebra II that [teachers are] thinking of moving me up to trigonometry.”

Teachers’ willingness to give Travion personal attention extended across subject areas, and so did Travion’s success.

“Right now we’re doing slavery and the war in Iraq for my American and World History class. We go over *modern* history—like what is going on today. So it’s easier for most kids because they’ve seen it [and] heard it. [Again,] the teachers break everything down for us. At Edison, honestly, I couldn’t tell you anything

I did in my World History class. Here, I can tell you everything we did last year.

“[And] in English at Edison I’d always get Fs. But since I [started attending Oh Day Aki], my English teacher, Ryan, he has kept me up on my work. He’ll do house visits, help you understand your work. [He’ll] come talk to your parents. Let them know [about you]. Like, ‘[Travion] needs a little help in this area, but he’s doing really well in that [area]. He’s a great student.’ [Ryan has] come to my house like three or four times.

“It’s pretty cool because I’ve never had that kind of interaction with teachers before. [The teachers] know [if students have] an understanding/comprehension of what they’re doing. It’s easier [for teachers to see when students are getting behind] because they know students on a more basic level.”

Also influencing Travion’s academic success was that he felt truly respected by teachers. When teachers respected their students, he says, the students respected the teachers in return. Students passed on the respect to other students. The result was a school culture that made him feel secure.

“You can’t get a kid here to say, ‘I don’t like this teacher...’ Most every kid here likes every teacher. If [the teachers] do something you don’t like, they’ll come talk to you on a one-on-one level. Like, ‘What did I do to upset you?’ Then you can actually like sit down and talk to them about the problems you’re having. They talk to you about the problems you’re having at your house that keep you from coming to school, or problems you’re having at school that keep you from coming to school. It’s like everyone here is one big family and we’re all here together.

“I remember the first year I was here. I memorized everyone’s name in the first two months. All the little kids, they know my name. To get to see the little kids in school and help them [learn] something that they didn’t know...it’s quite nice. You feel like you have a level of [security] because you know so many people. You can actually talk to them. It’s easier to make friends here. At Edison, I always felt threatened because [there were] all these people I didn’t know. I was on a very low social level. So it wasn’t working out for me when it came to friends. That was another reason [I didn’t attend regularly].”

Travion's ancestry is both African and Native American (Chippewa). He was always aware that he was both, but knew little about Native American tradition and culture. As part of its culturally-relevant curriculum, Oh Day Aki offers Ojibwe and Lakota/Dakota language classes, American Indian History, American Indian Art, and American Indian Drum and Dance Club.

Travion did not expect that learning about his cultural background would affect his life. But once exposed to the cultural traditions of his ancestors, Travion's understanding of his own capabilities and talents improved significantly. At one time Travion was convinced that after high school he would not have the desire or skills to contribute much to society, but now he feels very different.

"My school has changed my whole outlook on life. When I came here and learned [about what it is to be] partially Native American, like, there's so many things I can do. I've actually learned that I can sing. Just yesterday I was helping [an adult] with the drums. We had some visitors from Germany and we were demonstrating how [Oh Day Aki and its students are part of] society even though we're not a big public [conventional] school. We are making a difference. Since I got here, I've learned that I'm so much better than I thought I was. I used to think I was like crap. I thought, 'I'm nothin'. I can't do anything.' But I'm actually a really good painter, a really good poetry writer. I can sing. I can do the drums...

"Before I got here, it was just like, 'Um, I'm Chippewa. What is that? I have *no* idea what that is.' But [the adults at Oh Day Aki] helped me understand what a pow-wow is, what the dances are... There's so many dances. There's so many songs...traditional songs, love songs, honor songs, flag songs, grass songs, sun dance songs. I'm learning a language—my language. They have really great language teachers here. We watch movies to learn what [our ancestors were] like and then we do language lessons.

"It's real cool because when I got here, all I knew how to speak was English and French. Now I know how to speak English, Ojibwe, and French, and I'm learning a little Lakota. I know most colleges require you to have more than one language. Now I know four languages.

"There's so many things I never knew that Native Americans do. I didn't think they were active in society, but they are. I didn't know the other side of me. My people, you know, actually have something to do with the way the world works. I just thought they were like a lost civilization that has no mean[ing] to the world.

"But when I came here I learned they're still a part of the world. They're active. Even though [we don't seek to be recognized around the world], we just do the little things for the satisfaction of knowing that we did it."

"[We have] 'circle time', for example. That's, like, one of the fun things about this school. It's a 10 or 15 minute social gathering where everyone in the school gathers around and listens to Native American drum. We do songs. We have little dance contests sometimes. We listen to others speaking Ojibwe. Native Americans nowadays, they're like losing touch with their roots. Speaking the languages helps kids get in touch with their roots. [Things like circle time are] letting kids know their culture can be fun."

Travion believes the culturally-relevant curriculum is important to offer all Native American students, who he says frequently have difficulty rising above society's low expectations for them.

"It's mostly Native American kids that don't get an education and it's mostly Native American kids that drop out because they feel like they don't know anything; [like] they're not going to go anywhere. [These students need schools] that focus on Native American kids because, honestly, society looks down on Native Americans. People think [Native Americans are] stupid. But [at Oh Day Aki] there's actually some bright kids. As bright as anyone. Like there's this girl, she was out of school for like two years. She [started at Oh Day Aki] this year and she's, like, top in her class.

"I have a story like that, too. When I came here, I was behind on credits...but being here [I was able to catch up].

"[Adults at Oh Day Aki are] trying to show Native American kids [that] you [may have] dropped out [in the past], but in the end, if you go to school, all the stuff you learn stays with you. [The adults] help everyone like that. They help kids feel like they're somebody, like they have basic needs.

"[Young Native Americans sometimes] feel like society treats them like they don't deserve what they get. Like they're going to end up with some deadbeat job or whatever. [But at Oh Day Aki,

adults] tell [students] it's up to them what they do with their life. They can get any job they want. It's just a matter of education and how they present themselves."

Oh Day Aki also exposes students to opportunities for outside-of-school learning. One day, during an after-school activity program where Travion was helping Oh Day Aki's seventh and eighth grade students with cultural education, some leaders of Youthrive.net saw him dancing and invited him to dance in front of the group.

Later, the leaders acknowledged Travion's leadership skills and confidence and invited him to get involved with Youthrive, an upper Midwest affiliate of PeaceJam International that focuses on youth working with adults to learn civic engagement, peacemaking skills, and an understanding of international peace and social justice issues. A PeaceJam involves attending a conference where Nobel Laureates talk about peace and, as Travion puts it, "what they went through to get where they are today."

In September 2006, Travion traveled to Denver where he was inspired by Nobel Laureates including the Dalai Lama, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, and Desmond Tutu. For school credit, Travion now helps Oh Day Aki organize its own "little" PeaceJam program to help kids "get out there and see things they haven't seen before."

Travion says that between Youthrive and Oh Day Aki he was finally able to "stick out".

"I wasn't willing to sit in the back and follow people. Initiative and confidence...those are things I have had since I was little. I'm not afraid to stick out. I don't care what anybody says. I do what I want because it's fun. I don't have stage fright or anything.

"When I was at Edison, though, I didn't really make any friends or get involved in anything except basketball because I was worried more about my grades because there was so much work. I was trying to figure out who my counselor was. I didn't know who my counselor was for most of the year. I just had stress all the time. I felt like I had no time to have fun. [At Oh Day Aki] I have time to work on my grades, work on my assignments, and still have fun. When I got up there [on stage to dance in front of the group], it was just me being me."

Youthrive built Travion's confidence by challenging him to use his skills to inspire other youths to engage in civic leadership.

At the Denver PeaceJam he had to get up and speak to a large group, and he learned that while he was a good communicator he didn't really know *what* to communicate. He found himself hesitating to speak. Youthrive seized the opportunity to teach Travion more skills, and he responded well.

"Now there's no hesitation...[I went to] National Youth Leadership Camp. They taught me how to talk in front of people, how to open up. That's what leaders have to do. They have to not be afraid, not to hold back what they feel is right and what they say. So, I think I gained vocabulary skills, organization skills and the ability to, like move around so much better. I'm not afraid to talk to people if they're doing something I don't like. I don't approach them all mean. I'll sit and talk with them person-to-person. And I'm just well-organized. I'm a much better person.

"[The camp] just taught me to get out in the world and make a difference. Like I don't need anyone to show me how to make a difference. I can just make a change myself. I used to just sit there and wait for someone to tell me, 'Okay, let's go somewhere.' Now, I'm like, 'I want to go somewhere. I want to run. I'm gonna go jog or something.

"I used to sit there and wait for my friends to come over. Now I'm one of the youth leaders. I'm one of the youth running the program! I'm thinking about going to college for leadership and business." (For more about Travion's experience at camp see Appendix A.)

In an effort to make sure students know that they can succeed in college and beyond, Oh Day Aki has formed partnerships with institutions of higher education to constantly expose students to campus life and the college application process. Travion says that seeing the colleges and knowing that college was a real possibility helped motivate him to graduate from Oh Day Aki on time in spring of 2007.

"At Edison we talked about college. People came in [to speak to us]. But here we get to go around on campuses. We have college field trips where we go to colleges and get a better understanding of what college is like. Near the end of the year we actually get to spend a week at a college. [Oh Day Aki] gives you so many opportunities. I feel like I would never have had these opportunities that I have right now. I already have three colleges I know I can go to!"

By November 2006 Travion had already been accepted to three colleges—University of Denver, University of Minnesota, and Minneapolis Community and Technical College.

Travion explains that Oh Day Aki’s unconventional nature made learning and graduation possible for him. While Edison could offer him facilities that were, according to Travion, of much higher quality, for him it was not the building that mattered. The culturally-relevant curriculum, and having access to a large amount of academic and social support from adults, helped him to believe that he could not only learn well, but could one day use his talents to improve society.

Travion contends that other young people not doing well in conventional schools can find their way, too, if they are given the opportunity to choose schools that will work for them.

“Kids look for more than one choice, not always doing just the things that adults want us to do. If you give a kid a chance to step up, nine out of 10 can step up. A lot of people come here and notice [Oh Day Aki] is not an all fancy, pretty school. It’s pretty shabby. But it’s not about that. It’s about the education.”

Krissy Banks*

Senior, TRIO Wolf Creek Distance Learning Charter School in Lindstrom

In November 2006, Krissy Banks was laid off from her full-time job at a plastics factory, where she worked the third shift. She is pregnant, due to have a baby in May 2007. She is also a senior at TRIO Wolf Creek Distance Learning Charter School in Lindstrom, Minnesota. Actually, Krissy is “a super, super senior,” which means that if she had graduated on-time she would have done so two years ago.

“I’m pretty much repeating my 12th-grade year because I dropped out and my transcript or whatever [was not complete]. I came here short on credits because I wasn’t doing well at Chisago Lakes High School ‘cause I wasn’t getting my needs [met by] the teachers...”

Krissy was determined to earn her diploma, but faced two challenges that made her question its worth while attending Chisago Lakes. First, too little attention—and, in some cases, negative attention—from teachers. Second, too little flexibility.

“There’s some teachers [at Chisago Lakes] that get into your face...,” she reported. “[One male teacher] asked me what am I doing at high school if I’m not even doing anything. He’s like, ‘Why are you here?’ I’m like, ‘Well, ‘cause I gotta get my diploma.’ Then we got into a fight and he sent me down to ‘structure’ and had a cop put me in handcuffs. I was sitting in a chair and he was all in my face and the cop didn’t do anything about it. [The cop] just let him [do that]! And my mom doesn’t know that because she [would have] completely believed the teacher over me at that point in time. But [the teachers] are horrible there [at Chisago Lakes].”

“Actually, there’s one teacher a Chisago Lakes—a phy ed teacher—and he cares about his students. It was heartbreak when I finished phy ed in 10th grade ‘cause he cared. He cracked jokes and when he seen something that wasn’t right, he’d ask you about it. Or when he seen someone getting picked on, he’d get in the middle of it and be like, ‘Stop that!’. You know, he wasn’t there to be a jerk. He was there to do his job. [Most teachers at conventional schools] don’t care about anybody. They just care about getting a paycheck every week or every two weeks. They’re not doing their job.”

At Wolf Creek, Krissy explains from her perspective, teachers *are* doing their job. To Krissy, this means that teachers—who are called “learning managers” at Wolf Creek—genuinely want to be at school because they care about students. Wolf Creek is a chartered school sponsored by Minnesota’s Chisago Lakes School District.

Instruction at Wolf Creek is technology-based and the majority of work can be completed at home or other off-campus location. Learning managers guide students, helping them plan lessons and providing academic and social support, but it is up to students to have the initiative to complete course work.

Even though Krissy has not gone to a school building daily since she started attending Wolf Creek at the end of her sophomore year, she senses that the teachers and other adults involved with the school really care about her success. Outsiders might argue that adults at Wolf Creek are going far above and beyond what a teaching position should require. Nevertheless, Krissy says her graduation is possible largely because of their extra support.

So what did the teachers do for Krissy at Wolf Creek?

“Here they care about your achievements and your goals in life because...they’re trying to succeed here with everybody. The teachers here are nice. They’re open. They’ll tell you everything. They help you. [At Wolf Creek] they understand, you know, ‘She’s not getting this’.

“At Chisago Lakes you couldn’t get that at all. And Tracy, the principal, we planned like my whole entire year. This is how many credits you’re going to get this term; this is how many you’re going to get the next term. She’s like, ‘You’re going to graduate. You’re going to do it.’ They’re very, very respectful and very positive for everybody.

“And, like, if there’s problems here [at Wolf Creek] they see it right away. They don’t ignore it. If someone’s picking on someone else they say, ‘Hey! That’s enough!’ Also, there’s two English teachers. So if one’s busy, you can go over to the other one. They don’t just sit here and push you away. I felt really dumb at Chisago Lakes because of the way the teachers made me feel. I came here and I’m just like, ‘Okay, this is like a new phase for me.’ And I’m learning more. I love it here.

“All public schools need that...teachers who want to be there every day and guide you. You know, for kids who have bad homes, they don’t get that from their folks. Their folks are out doing something else. Or [kids] get stuck home with their sisters all the time and they’re a parent and then you go to school and you want a safe place. But it’s not safe because you got all this, you know, the drugs and the cops and then you got mean teachers.

“I also think that if we all had teachers that are nice and that care about us maybe we wouldn’t all turn out the way we were. I don’t think half the students here or anywhere else would be doing drugs, dropping out, and not getting their high school degree if teachers were doing their job nowadays. I honestly think teachers have an impact on kids just like parents do.”

With the extra attention from teachers she receives at Wolf Creek, Krissy says she is doing more work and earning higher grades. Teachers work with Krissy and other students to ensure mastery of subject matter based on the school’s electronic curriculum. At times students can test out or move quickly through concepts that they understand fully.

“I’ve never pulled an A before in middle school or high school. But ever since I came here I’ve been pulling A’s. I’ve been passing all of my classes because I’ve been getting the help that I need at my level. Because they try to find your specific level, and then they go, ‘Okay, this person needs help like in math or social studies or whatever.’

“And they sit with you and they say, ‘Okay, we’re going to do this at this time. This next week...’ And then there’s some classes that are really easy that you could ace in a week. I know there’s two classes I finished in a week and I passed them with A’s. I either knew what I was doing or I was getting the help that I needed.”

Social support is also an important feature of Wolf Creek, according to Krissy. Last year she received some extra help from adults at Wolf Creek when she pursued her learner’s permit to drive.

“They were really happy. They were like, ‘We knew you could do it!’ I talk to my learning manager about a lot of my situations and she does her best to help out. Like they’re willing to help you find a job. It’s not like they’re going to sit here and let you hang. They do that kind of stuff for all the kids here.”

This year adults at the school are assisting her to prepare for the arrival of her baby.

“The secretary has been helping me out, trying to help me get paperwork filled out [so I can get aid from] the county. I told her that my step-dad works. My mom works. They don’t have time to take me. [I told adults at the school that perhaps an adult there, or another student, could drive me.] The secretary said she had time to bring me.”

Krissy plans to graduate in summer 2007. Her baby will be born in May 2007, yet she is certain that she will receive support from the school in order to graduate.

“Like my friend got pregnant and she stayed at the [conventional] high school [Chisago Lakes] and the teachers didn’t help her. She came here and she was able to graduate and now she has a really good job and her kid’s doing really good and everything. Like when you come here and you have a kid, they help you out by watching your kid so you can get some work done for like an hour. Or if you have questions or something, they’ll sit here and hold the

baby. They care, you know? If it wasn't for the teachers in this school I'd probably be dropped out and on my own. [I would] not [be earning] a diploma or GED."

In addition to receiving support from teachers, Krissy's ability to work off-campus and during evening hours also helped keep her in school. Before Krissy was laid off from the plastics factory she was going to school in the morning, right after work, every Tuesday and Thursday. She'd go home around 2:00 pm and go right to sleep. She'd do her school work when she wasn't sleeping or working.

"I'm able to get my school work done when I'm up...I can email or call my teacher. I don't miss any day unless I'm just in bed really sick or I have somewhere to go or something. But I call in and just tell them that I'm not going to be in that day, but I'll have my work done. And they're like, 'Oh, that's fine...' So they're really flexible about your school schedule and your work schedule."

Flexibility is especially important to Krissy now that she is pregnant. "I have to get up and plan my doctor appointments and go to those, too." Krissy reports that losing her job may be a mixed-blessing, due to the resulting increased flexibility to finish school.

"It gave me the time to study... It [also] gave me more time to sit down and say, 'Okay, this is what I need to do to get done [with school]. I want to try and get all of my classes done in the next two [quarters] and then the fourth [quarter] I won't be in school for a while because I'll be having my kid and stuff...but I'll have half my [remaining] work done and I won't need to worry about it so much [during that time]."

One of the important life lessons Krissy has learned at Wolf Creek, she says, is to be dependent on herself. She knows she can set and accomplish goals on her own.

"I used to be like, 'Oh, I've gotta have someone help me all the time. I've gotta copy from someone. But being here I've become more dependent on myself and I've learned a lot. Being here and knowing I can do stuff on my own, without having someone to hold my hand, you know, I'm more independent now. And now that I'm just learning how to do my own thing and get my own job

without having someone helping me, you know, I can thank this school for it.

"At Chisago Lakes they weren't so down for people graduating. They were just there for the money. Here, the principal is just really positive about me graduating this summer. And having that positive voice is the best because now I know I can do it because I have someone looking at me so positively."

In addition to learning self-reliance, Krissy was surprised to discover a passion for sociology.

"I had never heard of it and last year one of my learning managers brought it up to me. I was like, 'Oh my God! I could get into that!' Then I saw another student's [work packet for the course] and I was like, 'I can actually do this!' Now I take Contemporary Social Issues (CSI). You have to do research and write about your reactions to articles. Some are on school violence, for example. You work on the death penalty and divorce in the family, too."

One of her assignments was to write a paper on a serial killer. Krissy selected Ted Bundy. She excitedly shared her own ideas about what drove Bundy to kill so many women:

"I never figured I could actually do something like that! You know, you have to be like a rocket scientist to figure out why people kill people and that kind of thing. I'm just like, 'Wow!' It makes you think. It actually makes you think! I found out [that Bundy] didn't have a very good childhood. He actually rose above it; got away from his parents and stuff. But he was like really in love with this woman, [and] she didn't really love him. She ended up hurting him really bad and I think that's why he killed women, you know, because of this experience with a woman. She really got to him. She, like, cheated on him..."

"That was one of the things that triggered...flashbacks of his childhood. I think his parents beat him and he wasn't getting enough attention. Some people are like, 'Oh! It's never the parents,'...but in some cases it actually is. Like perhaps Eddie Gein [another killer]. It was his mom and his family that treated him really bad. I would get really into this stuff, but then I would have to put it down for a while. I don't think I could be a crime officer or anything like that because I think some things would get to me too much..."

Krissy's passion for sociology will have to be put on hold, at least for now. Her immediate plans include finding a part-time job where she will work at least until her baby is born in May. After she has her baby she will finish high school and then work and support her child.

"I just plan on having a job and then taking care of my kid as long as I can. Maybe in two to three years I'll go to a two-year college and become a massage therapist or something. I want to put my high school diploma to use."

Susan Vang

Junior, Hmong Academy, a chartered school in St. Paul

Susan Vang, a junior at Hmong Academy in Saint Paul, has some very concrete goals. She wants to earn a Ph.D. in psychology. She also wants to minor in education when she attends college, perhaps at the University of Wisconsin at River Falls or Madison. She earns As and Bs in advanced-placement English and history classes, Algebra II, Chinese, Chemistry, and Physical Education. It's hard to imagine that just two years ago, as a freshman, she was not attending school at all. She showed up for her first day at Edison High School in Minneapolis (where Travion Allen, profiled earlier, also once attended), got her schedule, left the campus, and never returned.

"I got in with the wrong group of friends," she reported. "I skipped all the time." Adults at Edison contacted her to ask her to return to school, she said, but it was of no use. "I heard from them, but I didn't really care at the time 'cause I was with the wrong crowd. I really got into bad habits."

Eventually, Edison expelled Susan for truancy.

"I was just like, 'Okay. Whatever.' I never took the chance of going back."

When she was still a freshman, Susan decided to solve the "wrong crowd" problem by finding a way to avoid the group altogether. She enrolled in Plymouth Youth Center (PYC), an alternative high school in Minneapolis. It's common for conventional district schools to refer students who are frequently truant to alternative schools (Farris-Berg and Schroeder 2003), and, when Susan heard of the opportunity, she was excited to get on track in a

new environment. But it wasn't long before she started skipping school again.

According to Susan she lost interest in attending because she was not being challenged academically. And sensing that no one cared whether she attended or completed her work, she wondered if school was really worthy of her time.

"I went there for a year-and-a-half. I was really bored. There just wasn't ever really any fun. I didn't see any challenge or any point to going to school, and [I didn't understand] where being there would take me in life."

"[Adults at the school] just threw me in any classes they could just so I could get credit. The work...it got done. But it [was] just the effort of actually getting to school to get my work turned in to get the credit where I wasn't doing well. There would be some weeks that I [didn't] go at all. There would be some weeks that I'd go a few times. But there was never really a whole week when I went to school a whole day every day. I'd leave after the third hour or something. There were a few months during my sophomore year that I didn't even care about school. Like I didn't even have the thought of going to school at all.

"One of the reasons I never really cared about going [was that] I never really felt challenged. It was just like...sometimes I would just sit in class and be bored, so I'd just feel like, 'Boredom I can have at home. So I might as well just not go [to school].' And then by not feeling challenged I just felt like staying home more often because I'm already behind on credits anyway because I don't ever go to school because I'm bored.

"[It seems simple to] do the work and get it done and get a grade for it. But the thing that was holding me back was...I'd run out of things to do. And when I'd run out of things to do...sometimes when I'm bored I get like really hyper, then I act up, and then I get kicked out and I barely get the credit I worked for while being in class. So, I just fell behind in credits and I felt like I didn't really need to go to school anymore."

PYC is a small school with a mission to work with young people who are facing significant barriers in life as they strive toward such full growth and active citizenship. While some youths at the school might say that caring relationships with PYC teach-

ers helped them to complete school, Susan felt like teachers ultimately didn't care about her graduation.

"It was like...if you weren't there then they didn't really care. It was like, if you're there and you don't care about doing the work, then you don't get the credit. But that's it. [They didn't care if you got the credit or not.] It was small, but...I didn't really have a bond with the teachers. They didn't put in the effort that they really cared about my education. I guess that's where...if they don't care, why should I care either? Being a teacher, you should actually care about your students."

Getting further and further behind, Susan started to question if she should drop out altogether. She was tempted to give school one more shot, but hadn't been interested in transferring to a conventional district school and wasn't aware of other options. She perceived that the district-run high schools would be too much like PYC.

"[Being at PYC] just kind of showed me that being at a [conventional] public school, the teachers don't really take the time out of their day to actually get to know the students at all. I was really at the verge of just saying, 'Forget school,' but I decided to give [Hmong Academy] a chance.

"I was talking to one of my guy friends and he said he was at Hmong Academy. He said, 'It's a good school. The teachers here are really supportive of me.' I asked him if he was challenged, like, if he thought the work was hard [at Hmong Academy]. And he said, 'Yeah.' I kind of figured that was all I needed—just a little challenge. So I decided to give it a shot."

Taking the shot would eventually pay off for Susan, but she started out at Hmong Academy the same way she did at Edison and PYC—skipping school. This time, however, a counselor at the school and many other adults were relentless in pressuring her to attend.

"The school would constantly call. They call and make sure you're okay and ask why you're not here. They put in all the effort [I need] to just help me make it. Teachers actually, like, push you to get your work done. Ms. D, she nags us about every single one of our classes. She makes sure we're getting our grades up; we're turning in everything. No matter what, she's always willing to help

us out. Not just her—everyone here. You can talk about anything [academic or social issues].

"So I just feel being here at Hmong Academy, the staff and the teachers care more about you. It makes me feel better about myself. It kind of made me realize that there are people out there that really care for me when, you know, I'm ready to give up on myself. There's still people that's there to care for me and support me. So it just made me change my whole mind and I started coming to school. I just figured [the school is] helping me help myself. I see [now] that I can't really make it in the world if I just give up."

Academically, Susan is performing "really well."

"When I have a 'B', I try to see what I can do to make that 'B' into an 'A'. I have all 'A's' except for two classes I have 'B's' in." She is also more involved with campus activities, which she said helps keep her attending. "I'm more involved now—in student council, in the newspaper, the yearbook. So I come to school to know what's going on; to know what to write about for the newspaper. Then the other reason would be middle schoolers. I just feel like if I'm here I can set a good example for middle-school kids so they wouldn't go through the same path that I went through. I talk with a lot of them. A lot of them know me. I try to be that older sister for each of them."

Susan seeks her own peer-mentors at the school, too.

"There's a few kids here that are just bad and whatever, but then there's other kids who show leadership; who support me. I look up to them."

Reflecting on why she almost dropped out of school Susan reported that the main thing adults can do to improve students' chances of graduation is to "give [them] the opportunity to challenge themselves."

What would have happened if Hmong Academy hadn't challenged her to challenge herself?

Susan speculated, "Working a dead-end job...two dead-end jobs. I don't know. I don't think I'd be in school."

Conclusion

To accommodate youths' varying motivations, states ought to consider a parallel strategy of advancing different schools for different youths.

The varying circumstances and motivations of today's young people suggest there is no silver bullet that policymakers and educators can use to improve school completion rates and help all students learn. The reality is that youths will decide for themselves whether or not they will learn at school.

That's true, of course, for all people who are told to do something. Therefore, we should expect—even accept as a premise in our decision making about education policy and school design—that we will need to appeal to youths' motivations if we want them to attend school, learn, and graduate. And we must remain aware that young people are different from one another, so each will use different criteria to make his or her own decision about the circumstances under which they will choose to learn.

In business, we accept this. Apple's iPod is the reigning king of mp3 players. Many consumers own iPods. But iPods don't fit some people's needs, so they buy different kinds of mp3 players that they believe will suit them better.

Some “need” smaller products. Some need more compatibility with electronic music files they already have. Some just don't like the design of the iPod, both externally and because of Apple's strict philosophies that limit music sharing. And there are a significant number of people who don't buy mp3 players at all, but stick with older technologies (like CD players), for any number of reasons.

While there are many brand loyalists, it would be difficult to find a business leader who thought iPods should be consumers' only option for playing music. Consumers are not expected to adapt to the iPod. Businesses make new products to adapt to the consumers.

Trouble is, when it comes to youth learning, many decision-makers influencing education have the mind-set that they can control student learning. Adults with this mind-set expect that *all* students, no matter how different, will adapt to and learn well in conventional school settings with conventional learning models.

They set increasingly rigorous standards for *all* students and expect that learning will improve simply because students are required to meet them in order to graduate.

These decision-makers believe that students who need more or less flexibility should just adapt to conventional settings and rigorous standards. Students who are motivated by more or less challenge, or more or less attention from adults, or who want to develop skills and talents not valued in conventional settings, should just adapt.

At the same time, youths, their families, and other activists who were either interviewed for this paper or for works reviewed in this paper generally acknowledged students' differences but frequently expected that every school must adapt to accommodate the needs of every student.

Their statements implied that when the federal government said NCLB would result in a high quality education for all, families across the nation expected this would require increased “fairness”, which to them meant that every student would be served well by every school. As states make standards more rigorous, these families are bound to expect that every school will change so every student can meet them.

Logically speaking, neither the decision makers' nor the families' “one size fits all” expectations are achievable. All students are not likely to adapt to one kind of school or one set of standards. All schools are not likely to accommodate all kinds of students.

Accommodating different youths will require that legislators and educators find ways to customize learning, so they will be able to tap into the varying motivations of those who are not now learning well. When families sense their varying motivations are being served, they may be more likely to believe K-12 is making an effort to serve all students well even if not within every school setting.

Recognizing this, some states are seeking to improve learning among youths not now learning well by advancing more than a strategy to increase rigor and standards alone. Some, like Minnesota, are advancing a parallel strategy to create unconventional schools. Legislators and educators in these states create magnet, home, and alternative schools, and enact chartering

laws that are open to the creation of fundamentally new and different schools.

While not all schools-created are innovative, and while some states' laws inspire and allow for innovation more than others, some schools and states are home to ground-breaking learning programs. With options, some youths find that learning can be customized to their individual motivations. Because these new and different environments exist, some youths who once faced obstacles to graduating from conventional schools are now attending, learning both academics and life skills, and completing school.

Endnotes

ⁱ The 59.9 percent graduation rate was reported in 2004 by Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos. But this graduation rate is higher than Denver Public Schools' 46.8 percent graduation rate calculated by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center for the 2002-2003 school year.

ⁱⁱ In California, continuation schools are for students 16 and older who are at risk for not completing their education. Students may be involuntarily transferred to continuation schools for truancy or commission of an offense for which they could be suspended or expelled.

ⁱⁱⁱ Information about the overlap in these circumstances was not available.

^{iv} From the 2002-2003 school year to the 2006-2007 school year, Minneapolis Public Schools' enrollment declined by 18.7%.

^v Calculations were made by Jon Schroeder, Education/Evolving's Coordinator, based on October 2006 enrollment data collected by the Minnesota Department of Education and posted on a school-by-school basis on the department's Web site: http://www.education.state.mn.us/mde/Data/Data_Downloads/Student/Enrollment/index.html

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Appendix A:**Travion Allen’s account of his experience at National Youth Leadership Camp**

“NYLC (National Youth Leadership Camp) was in Sandstone, Minnesota. My friend, Dominique, went to the camp, too. We were friends, but we got really close at that camp because it brings like a whole other emotional level to you—a level, like, of gratification. I don’t know, like I didn’t know some of the things were possible for me to do when I got there. But they give you, like, chances to talk in front of people.

“We had a presentation for like whole day on what we did [that day between] 12:00 PM to 9:00 at night. Dominique and I had to be in front of the camp and talk about everything we did.

“We got to do a lot of leadership activities. Like we got to go canoeing in the middle of the lake. They set [the activity environment] up like society—some people are rich, some people are in poverty. Some people had the nice little canoes and then some people had like the not-rich canoes, and then some people had little like poor canoes with brooms for oars. I was one of the poor people in poverty.

“The [activity started when] they told us there were some kids across the lake that didn’t have water and we had to get them water. But no one knew it was just an activity. We all thought it was for real. We tried to bring some kids some water. I was canoeing across the water. It was just all messed up, so I had to get on the back of the boat and kick until we got across the lake.

“Then when we got there, we had to be quiet. We couldn’t say anything because we were the poor people and they were the rich people. We couldn’t say anything and the rich people made us stay on this small little piece of land off the shore. If we’d say stuff, then they’d throw us in this little jail in front of everybody else.

“[On this small piece of land] there were a whole bunch of sticks on the ground and pointy little rocks and seaweed. I tried to step up because everyone else left their shoes in the boat. They [the other kids] was like, ‘Can we get our shoes? There’s too much seaweed and stuff over here.’ [But the rich people] were like, ‘Be quiet! Don’t say anything!’

“I went and grabbed my shoes [anyway] and everyone was like, ‘Man, can you get us our shoes?’ So I started grabbing everyone’s shoes and [the rich people] were like, ‘You’ve got 10 seconds to get back.’ There were like 14 pairs of shoes. I had 10 seconds to get back there with everyone’s shoes. So I started going over there and they were like, ‘It’s too late, put the shoes down.’ I just kept going and they were like, ‘Put the shoes down!’ I started getting upset. So she came over there and pushed them out of my hand back into the boat and said, ‘Come on.’

“They dragged me away from there, away from the people and handcuffed me and blindfolded me and had me standing there. And then we had to go up this little mountainside; walk up a trail. All the ritzy people had all these snacks and everything. All the people from poverty had like one bag of chips to share with like eight or nine people.

“So we all got like two chips out the bag. So I was blindfolded and they put a rag over my mouth so I couldn’t talk, so they’re bringing me up the little mountainside blindfolded and not telling me there’s tree branches. I’m hitting my head; just stepping on rocks. I almost fell off of a ledge. It just taught me if I believe in something to stick out because I was the only one that was trying to stick out, just trying to do what I believe in; trying to get everybody’s shoes on.

“They said we had to get to this little shelter, and they were like, ‘It’s gonna downpour, it’s gonna rain hard.’ But they were just messin’ with us. When we were walking up the mountainside, still blindfolded, they didn’t tell me I was too tall for the door. I walked—hit my head into the door.

“They were like, ‘Yeah, you might want to duck,’ right after I hit my head. I’m like, ‘Oh, now you tell me,’ and then I ducked. Then I walked into a furnace. Then they said, ‘Yeah, watch out. There’s a furnace in the middle of the floor.’ So they did all of this intentionally as a learning experience to show us that life isn’t always how you want it. Sometimes people have to sit and see other people get everything they want. You have to earn it. So when I got back, I was rewarded because I was the only one that stuck out in my group.

“Everyone else just kind of wimped with the boat. I was the only one trying to make a change; the only one trying to do

something. So I got an award for that. I don't know, it just taught me to get out in the world and make a difference. Like I don't need anyone to show me how to make a difference. I can just make a change myself. But ever since I got back from the camp, I've been different. Everybody's been saying that."

ABOUT THE REPORT'S AUTHORS

KIM FARRIS-BERG, author of "Staying In!!", operates her own consulting practice, where she specializes in policy, program, and process analysis and engineering. As coordinator of EIE's Student Voices Initiative, Kim has written a number of publications that integrate diverse student voices with adult-level discussions that influence decision-making on school and education-policy design.

During her six years working with EIE, Kim has also authored white papers on the role of unconventional schools in improving K-12 public education. She additionally contributes to EIE's ongoing observation and advancement of the teacher-professional partnerships concept and to the initiative's thinking about how technology will influence public education. All publications are available at www.educationevolving.org

Kim brings to EIE a broad range of experience advancing new ideas and approaches for addressing policy problems, emphasizing system-level change. Her clients have included the National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare, The McKnight Foundation, Collins Investment Group of RBC Dain Rauscher, and the Mayors Regional Housing Task Force of the Metropolitan Council. As former executive director of the Center for Economic Progress, Minnesota Women's Press named Kim a "Changemaker of the Year 2003". Kim's thought-provoking ideas on the causes of the gender wage gap appeared in the Minneapolis Star Tribune's *Business Forum*.

Kim has a master's degree in public policy from the Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. Her master's paper received the Lloyd B. Short Award for the Institute's best paper of the year and the joint Carlson School (M.B.A.) – Humphrey Institute award for best paper analyzing labor policy. She graduated magna cum laude from the University of San Diego, where she was most outstanding student in her international relations major and University Woman of the Year. She resides in Orange County, California.

TED KOLDERIE, who co-authored the "Staying In!!" introduction and has advanced the ideas that led to the development of this report, is a senior associate of Hamline University's Center for Policy Studies and co-founder and leader of the Center's EIE initiative. Ted has worked on system questions and with legislative policy in different areas of public life: urban and metropolitan affairs and public finance through the 1960s and '70s. He is most

recognized nationally for his work on K-12 education policy and innovation, which he has focused on since the early 1980s.

Ted was instrumental in the design and passage of the nation's first charter school law in Minnesota in 1991, and has since worked on the design and improvement of charter legislation in over seven-teen states. He has written about the charter idea and its progress in a variety of publications, and is the author of "Creating the Capacity for Change: How and Why Governors and Legislatures are Opening a New-Schools Sector in Public Education" (Education Week Press, 2005).

A graduate of Carleton College and of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Affairs at Princeton University, Ted was previously executive director of the Twin Cities Citizens League, a reporter and editorial writer for the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, and a senior fellow at the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH ASSISTANT

CARL PHILLIPS, research assistant for the "Staying In!!" report, provides administrative and research assistance to EIE, drawing on his experience beginning as a Teach for America volunteer in two Chicago elementary schools. He was then a high school social studies teacher for two years in Guadalajara, Mexico, where he both taught traditional courses and developed several on-line, project-based and interdisciplinary courses for his students.

In addition to his work with EIE, Carl is currently coordinator of curriculum and instruction for Breakthrough Saint Paul, a non-profit college access program for low-income middle school students in the Saint Paul Public Schools and a teacher training program for outstanding high school and college students.

Carl earned a BA degree in history, with a Spanish minor, from Washington University in St. Louis and completed the Teach for America alternative certification program at National-Louis University in Chicago. As an undergraduate, he also studied at Oxford University, at the Salamanca Language Institute in Salamanca, Spain and at Washington University's Summer Institute in Madrid. He is currently enrolled in the Leadership in Education M.Ed program at the University of Minnesota's School of Education and Human Development.

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

The cover photo, taken by EIE Associate Sarah Granofsky, shows one of this report's interview subjects, Codie Wilson, working with, Antonio "Kane" Bryant, a student at High School for the Recording Arts (HSRA) in Saint Paul. Kane, is pursuing his passion for both music and technology via HSRA's program of project-based learning.

ABOUT E/E's STUDENT VOICES INITIATIVE

Student Voices is an initiative of EducationEvolving, a joint venture of Hamline University and the Center for Policy Studies, both headquartered in Saint Paul, Minnesota. EIE is committed to helping K-12 education meet the challenges, demands, and opportunities of the 21st Century.

Students rarely have a place at the table during K-12 decision-makers' discussions about education policy and school design. Across the nation, however, it has become increasingly popular among research organizations and various media outlets to ask students for their "input." EIE's Student Voices initiative goes one step further by integrating what students report – their opinions and their factual reporting on what happens in school, sometimes in comparison with what they can accomplish – with adult-level discussions that influence decision-making around school and education-policy design. EIE then communicates what it learns to education-policy and school designers as well as those who influence them, such as think tanks, journalists, parents, teachers, and citizen groups.

EducationEvolving's Student Voices initiative focuses on six main strategies to accomplish these goals:

- Documenting student opinions about topics in education policy. Among the topics are:
 - What motivates different types of students to attend school and learn and what does not – as well as the importance of motivation in determining whether and how much students actually learn.
 - What students can do, and want to do, in school in comparison to what they are actually doing.
 - Students' specific ideas about what adults can do to improve 'school' and what qualifications and qualities adults need to be helping in improving student learning.
 - If, how, and what students are learning in unconventional learning programs.
- EIE thinks about what students report to us in the context of problems facing K-12 education and suggest how students' voices might influence current approaches to addressing those problems. Our reports, our Web site, meetings, student testimony, and other products are meant to help people think about K-12 problems and solutions in new ways.
- Some reports are written by EIE associates based on our own research and sometimes drawing on other researchers' work to document student voices. EIE also publishes research conducted by students. Students at Avalon High School in Saint Paul, for example, worked with EIE to conduct their own research on "What makes a school worth attending?" EIE published and distributed their report electronically and in print form. And the student-researchers presented their findings to policy makers at a public forum sponsored by the Twin Cities Citizens League. The students were later invited to present their findings to a large district school board in Southern California and their work was featured in the American School Board Journal. Other student contributors have testified before the state legislature in Minnesota.
- Ongoing development of an on-line clearinghouse for works documenting student voices (commentaries, media reports, student-prepared reports, and scientific research) that are available on the Web. Documents are organized by topics in education policy so legislators, journalists, researchers, and others who desire to learn quickly what some student citizens are communicating regarding a particular topic can easily locate information.
- Producing an online collection of videos documenting how and what students learn in unconventional school settings. These videos will be posted on the expanded and redesigned EIE Web site that will be launched in the spring of 2007 – at www.educationevolving.org.
- Encouraging adults who influence education policy to include students – more than superficially – in their own decision-making and policy-influencing efforts, whether students testify or participate as members.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT AND ITS AUTHORS

“Staying In!!” asserts that adults tend to see ‘education’ as something they have the ability to *do to* children. They commonly talk about “delivering education”. Acting from this mind-set, state legislators and school administrators are focusing more and more on making schools’ learning programs more rigorous and “getting tough” about youth meeting specific standards in order to graduate.

If the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is really about helping now-not-learning young people learn, however, policymakers need to think critically, and soon, about whether accountability-requirements can achieve that end on their own.

Examining the experiences of some of the young people our nation hopes to engage – those who quit school, attended a school with a low graduation rate, or were on the path to quitting – “Staying In!!” found that youth have a human, and democratic, tendency to choose whether they will learn. And what motivates students to choose to learn varies greatly. So no one factor will motivate all students to learn well. But our nation insists that universal learning is imperative. So it’s essential that we motivate young people to learn. And states must now consider how they will appeal to youths’ varying motivations.

In this report – through a series of in-depth case studies – five Minnesota youth who attend(ed) unconventional schools describe how various aspects of their learning environments motivated them to stay in school. Once engaged, they learned better. It’s possible, even likely, that these students are attending school and learning as a direct result of Minnesota’s strategy allowing creation of new and fundamentally different schools – running parallel to the state’s rigor-and-standards strategies.

Minnesota’s parallel strategy has made it home to a growing variety of schools that are accommodating varying motivations to learn. Given the Minnesota experience, our national dialogue about NCLB should at least consider whether all states should adopt a two-bet strategy in their education policy, advancing customization through new schools, in addition to high standards for learning.

Kim Farris-Berg, an independent consultant advancing new ideas and approaches for addressing policy problems, emphasizing system-level change, is the primary author of “Staying In!!” She also coordinates Education|Evolving’s Student Voices Initiative. **Ted Kolderie**, EIE Co-founder and leader, co-authored the report’s introduction. **Carl Phillips**, an EIE associate, teacher, and Leadership in Education M.Ed candidate at the University of Minnesota’s School of Education and Human Development, interviewed students for the case studies. Advice on student outreach and interview questions was provided by **Mary K. Boyd**, a veteran St. Paul educator, Center for Policy Studies board member and Interim Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Hamline University. Final editing, formatting and production was overseen by EIE’s coordinator, **Jon Schroeder**.

Learn more about **Education|Evolving’s** initiatives
and access its wide variety of publications at...

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EIE’s Web site describes -- generally approves and advocates --
the quite radical changes now appearing in K-12 education. But, be
aware that its perspectives do depart somewhat from conventional thinking.



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