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Failure is Not an Option: A look at the Dropout Crisis in America

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The documentary, *Failure is Not an Option: A look at the Dropout Crisis in America*, addresses an issue that has been affecting high school students for several years. Not many people are aware that a large number of students in the United States do not make it through high school and get their diploma. In fact, The Alliance for Excellent Education reports that as of February of 2009, about 30% of American students dropout of high school. To put it another way, about 7,000 students drop out of high school every day. When it comes to minority students, the statistics are even worse. In general, in the United States, about 70% of students graduate from high school, but barely half of African American and Hispanic students earn diplomas with their peers. My documentary was inspired by these shocking statistics and attempts to address them and find out why the statistics are as shocking as they are.

To get some answers, I interviewed teachers, students, and principals. I also looked at surveys that high school dropouts took to explain why they dropped out of high school. In a 2007 and 2008 survey, dropouts from Cincinnati Public or Hamilton County Public Schools said their school was the number one reason why they made the decision to dropout. This means that these students were so unhappy with the experiences they were having in school that they dropped out. After talking with current high school students about what kind of experiences they have had in their schools, I found that favoritism and over crowded schools were two of the problems. In terms of favoritism, students and teachers spoke about the different expectations teachers set for different students. Subconsciously or unintentionally, a teacher will see just a few students excel or

do well and focus the attention on those students only, while neglecting others. Students noticed this happening in their schools, and this uneven spread of attention was frustrating. Another problem the students I interviewed brought up was overcrowded schools. One student switched high schools because of too many students in his first high school. He said that because there were so many students in the classroom, it was difficult for the teacher to focus on the students and teach a lesson. Too many students also lead to disruption in the classroom making it difficult for the teachers to teach and the students to learn. These were just a couple reasons why students struggle in school leading them to dropout.

Other reasons why students drop out had to do with reasons related to the family, like having a child, or getting parents involved. During the interviews, many students noted how busy their parents are with work and running a home. Many times in lower income homes parents have to work long hours and sometimes even two or three jobs making it difficult to leave time for their children's education. Often times a child's success in school depends largely on how much of a priority school is to the parent as well as the child. Through the interviews, I also found that when teachers make the effort to reach out to parents who are less involved, it does help to get those parents more involved. At the school I gathered most of my research from, the teachers there recognized that so many of their parents worked odd hours, so the teachers would be flexible and work around the parents' schedule in order to ensure they were meeting with the parents. Through research and reviews of surveys, I found that this kind of extra effort was all it took sometimes to keep kids in school.

One survey asked dropouts if there was anything that the school could have done to convince them to stay in school, 36% said yes and gave some suggestions. Tutoring or academic assistance, knowing someone cared, and better teachers were the top three answers. It was a consensus that teachers with a good attitude about teaching, and teachers that showed genuine interest in their students would lead to more successful students. Both teacher and students found it important that all teachers take the position that all of their kids will go to college or do something else productive and make a difference in the world. Along with an optimistic opinion of all their students, successful schools believe it is important for the school to claim most of the responsibility of how successful the students are. Although they say it is the responsibility of a total community (family, teachers, and students) to keep students in school, educators at Taft felt the majority of responsibility falls on the school, because that is what they are paid to do. Overall, through the interviews and research, two strategies were identified to deal with the dropout crisis.

These two strategies were the focus of the documentary. Prevention, being one of them, addresses the root causes of why students dropout and how to avoid that. As a career-themed school, Taft Technology High School falls under the category of prevention strategy. The other focus of the documentary, Gateway to Success falls under the recovery strategy. Recovery programs aim to deal with students who have dropped out and how to still get them their diploma. Although both strategies proved to have their advantages and disadvantages, in the end, the prevention strategy proved to be the most effective. Even though

with recovery programs students can learn at their own pace and get the diploma when they are ready, this method does not work for most students. Recovery programs, like the Gateway to Success Program, give students more freedom to come when they want and many students do not come on a consistent basis.

Specifically at Gateway out of the 326 students registered in the program, only 70 have graduated so far, 180 are still technically registered, and 63 have dropped the program or have not been seen in a year. Therefore, prevention programs seem to be more effective in terms of combating the dropout crisis.

After gathering all of the data from surveys, interviews, and research, I compiled all of that information to what is now the documentary, *Failure is Not an Option: a look at the Dropout Crisis in America*. The final piece is an in-depth look into a problem that is far too often overlooked. Interviews from students, teachers, principals, and program coordinators provide a variety of perspectives and interesting opinions. It is a representation of a group of people that are also often misunderstood. High school dropouts carry a stigma in our society and the documentary does not serve to correct a stigma, but rather show their side and version of the truth. Sometimes all sides of the truth are not always shown before a judgment is made, and this shows the truth about why students dropout or say they dropout. With all of this, viewers of the documentary have the facts they need to then form their own opinion about high school dropouts and the education system.