

# Addressing the Dropout Prevention Challenge in the Age of the Corona Virus Pandemic: Effective Strategies to Keep Young People Engaged in Schooling and Learning

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# **Addressing the Dropout Prevention Challenge in the Age of the Corona Virus Pandemic: Effective Strategies to Keep Young People Engaged In Schooling and Learning**

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## **Executive Summary**

### ***COVID-19 and the Learning Landscape***

The Covid-19 pandemic has created huge challenges for all levels of society. Schools and students have been affected dramatically, with school facilities closed and most instruction now on-line. Since we don't know how long this crisis will last, or whether there may be a second or third wave and additional closures of schools, we need to start planning for a changed environment for education in the future. The on-line systems and lack of personal connections have created new concerns about high school dropouts. Those students who tended to dropout reported that they did so because school was boring and not connected to their lives.

The current situation presents even more potential for such students to be disengaged and to lose total connection with their education. The isolation of the pandemic causes a level of trauma for everyone involved (students, parents, siblings, teachers, and leaders). Students who have been at risk for school dropout are also more likely to feel despair, discouragement, and lack of motivation to negotiate the changing school landscape and lack of interaction with supportive teachers and other adults. So, the reality is that the dropout problem is sure to increase and expand, and educators around the country (and world) need to develop plans to help students continue their education and stay engaged in the educational process. Failure to address this problem could lead to bigger problems in the future and, with lessened interest, minority and low income students would be disproportionately affected.

### ***Fifteen Strategies and Engaged Learning***

Now is the time to step forward with ideas and programs that can be successful in the future. Fortunately, we have lots of research and ideas from the past that can help us shape

tomorrow's programs. The National Dropout Prevention Center/Successful Practices Network (NDPC/SPN) has identified 15 strategies that lead to improved high school graduation. Two of them directly influence the actual instruction of students in schools: *Service-Learning* and *Career and Technical Education (CTE)*. Much has been written about how these two programs are effective in both dropout prevention and in engaging students in active learning.

In fact, an entire volume of the Association for Career and Technical Education (*Techniques*, April 2010) has been devoted to the development of service-learning and its connection to CTE. They say, "Service-learning engages students in the educational process, using what they learn in the classroom to solve real-life problems. Students not only learn about democracy and citizenship, they become actively contributing citizens and community members through the service they perform. Service-learning and CTE are naturally linked – both provide hands-on experience in real-world settings and have the potential to engage students in activities that might not otherwise interest them. Therefore, it seems only natural that CTE seeks advocates from the service-learning community and vice versa. CTE in general, and career and technical student organizations specifically, already provide similar opportunities for youth oriented on the same results: strengthening connections with local communities by providing students an opportunity to enhance their learning through volunteer and service activities" (pg. 12).

### ***Examples of CTE and Service Learning***

There have been wonderful examples of this work exhibited recently during Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) and Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSO)-sponsored advocacy events on Capitol Hill (pg. 12). Some of the examples cited lay the groundwork for thinking about how schools can capitalize on these efforts to contribute to the educational modifications demanded by the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead of just thinking about on-line learning as the primary source of education during school closures or limited face-to-face meetings, service-learning and CTE can provide excellent alternatives/supplements to make learning engaging, fun, and contribute to positive community change. Clearly, it is a win-win situation. There are plenty of good ideas to draw from that are aligned with the needs of the COVID-19 era. Here are some examples:

- Students in a Culinary Arts program prepared desserts of various kinds and then sold them to raise funds for a community food bank. They also contributed delicious menu alternatives to the food bank.
- In another case, students in a Family and Consumer Sciences course provided childcare for families in a community, assisting single/working families with inexpensive programs that fulfilled the needs of the community, and providing the students with rich learning opportunities through interaction with children.
- In Shelby County, Kentucky, students in the schools engaged in Project-based learning during the pandemic. In this case, during the Covid-19 school closures, projects were assigned to students as an engaging way to let kids work, at home and at their own pace, during their school shutdown. These student-directed projects included integrated curricular activities utilizing research, writing, art and visual representation, and sharing information with their peers, parents, and teachers through posters, presentations, papers, and other modes of sharing (Mathewson, 2020).

All of these programs were/could be conducted off campus in students' homes and at local sites in their communities. Service-learning and CTE can provide meaningful alternatives to educators seeking to move education away from the classroom and school building and into real-world places accessible and available to youth throughout the community. The added challenge now is the required attention to CDC guidelines to sustain the health of students, faculty, and the community (social distancing, wearing masks, handwashing routines, and self-awareness of COVID-19 symptoms). These innovative strategies encourage individuality, student-led learning, and representing their ideas creatively and through the use of technology.

### ***Goals of this Paper***

One goal of this paper is to provide the background and foundation for immersive educational experiences and inclusion of service-learning and CTE as strong educational supplements to the changing nature of education in our country. The establishment and development of real-world and immersive programs and learning opportunities will not only address the unique challenges of the current pandemic, they will lay the foundation for improvement and expansion of proven educational efforts to embed active, experiential, community-based civic and social programs that will enhance the knowledge, skill

development, personal/social development, and career development of youth far into the future.

A second goal is to present meaningful, immersive, community-based learning opportunities (service learning, internships, mentoring, and coaching) for CTE and other students within the context of the new era of Covid-19 and related health issues. With creativity and effort, school leaders can develop immersive educational experiences for students that link them directly to the real world of Covid-19 and beyond. In this way, students will not only benefit from the educational and social benefits of community-based experiences, they will also contribute to the larger society through interactions with children, senior citizens, community agencies, and businesses operating within the Covid-19 context. In addition, service-learning, internships, and other immersive community-based educational experiences link students and supportive mentors and other adults who will strengthen the student's sense of personal and professional well-being and identity.

## Introduction

This is a strange and challenging time. Schools are confronting the combined issues of Covid-19 and historic racial inequalities. Schools around the country are closed and youth are dealing with an educational system that is almost entirely on-line. Zoom, Google Groups and many other systems are the only way teachers are connecting with students and parents. Students must rely on on-line interactions to maintain their social relationships with other students and friends. And some students who are typically not excited about school in the first place are avoiding electronic connections ... and teachers are at a loss as to how to make educational platforms that are accepted by youth, especially disaffected and challenged students. Many teachers are reporting that some of their students have literally disappeared from the classroom, either from lack of interest in remote learning or because they do not have access to the Internet. We should be concerned for all of these disenfranchised students.

Educational organizations are suggesting ways to address the new challenges. For example, 14 education and civil rights organizations, including the Alliance for Excellent Education, are offering recommendations in six areas to support states and districts in crafting an equity-focused response to Covid-19 (Almond, 2020):

1. Ensuring Equity in Fiscal Policies
2. Meeting Students' Basic Needs
3. Expanding and Improving Remote Learning
4. Easing the High School-to-College Transition
5. Extending Learning Time
6. Determining Students' Academic, Social, and Emotional Needs

Not only is equity an issue, but the instructional challenges of addressing “remote learning”, extending learning time, and dealing with social/emotional needs of children is of paramount importance. In fact, supporting the social emotional learning (SEL) and mental health needs of these students should be a first priority. This is heightened by the challenge that many students don't have access to the internet. In the U.S., some 15% of households with school-age children do not have a high-speed internet connection at home, according to

a Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data (Pew Research Center, 2015). Lack of access to the internet is a particular challenge for those school districts located in more isolated, rural regions, and school-age children in lower-income households are especially likely to lack broadband access. Roughly one-third (35%) of households with children ages 6 to 17 and an annual income below \$30,000 a year do not have a high-speed internet connection at home, compared with just 6% of such households earning \$75,000 or more a year. These broadband gaps are particularly pronounced in black and Hispanic households with school-age children – especially those with low incomes.

So, expanding and improving remote learning is a serious concern and challenge for many school districts. Fortunately, several approaches to highly effective education include community-based, project-based service learning, and CTE programs. While there are many challenges in developing such systems (including community coordination, supervision, and monitoring) there are many strong benefits for students. Research on both service-learning and CTE demonstrate that more engaging pedagogies have a strong impact on academic, civic and personal learning, and are more motivational than traditional classroom learning and/or on-line education (*The Silent Epidemic*, Bridgeland, et al, 2006; *Engaged for Success*, 2008). At the college level, service-learning has been shown to be one of the most effective of high impact programs (*High Impact Educational Practices*, Kuh, 2008, AAC&U).

Service-learning, community-based learning, and internships prove to be some of the most effective strategies for both academic achievement and personal growth. We can look to other countries who have successfully implemented a hands-on, real world approach for student learning. In recent years, Germany has expanded secondary and post-secondary apprenticeship opportunities for students to actually be placed in work settings to complete internships that often lead to full time employment (Spees, 2018). In these settings, students work side by side with other experienced workers and are mentored on a continuous basis by an assigned mentor or coach. As a result, more students are graduating from high school with career paths already established. This path is also an excellent option for a student who is unsure of a college-level career or who has already decided to pursue an occupation that requires expertise but not necessarily a four-year college degree. So, let's develop strong

educational systems and community-based learning opportunities that can avoid the problems of the digital divide (on-line learning) and create efforts that can be experienced by all students and can lead to the strongest and best educational growth. Clearly, service-learning, community-based learning, and internships/CTE can provide the responses to the pandemic challenges that will help all students to succeed.

### **The Role of Engaged Learning**

Research and sources from the National Dropout Prevention Center/Successful Practices Network (NDPC/SPN) provide good information about what and how we need to address the challenges of exciting and keeping students in school and completing their high school graduation. As indicated earlier, the NDPC/SPN has identified 15 practices that are effective in preventing dropouts and in engaging students in school (NDPC, 2018). Two of the 15 practices – *Service-Learning and Career and Technical Education/Internships* – have been designated as programs that directly affect instruction in the school; perhaps the most important component of achieving dropout reduction. Active, immersive, and community-connected learning is one of the most effective strategies to involve students in learning and in contributing to their communities. The NDPC/SPN has an issue paper that highlights this “engagement” as a primary strategy in connecting learning with life. *Weaving Student Engagement into The Core Practices of Schools* (Dary, T., Pickeral, T., Shumer, R., & Williams, A., 2016) provides a foundational document as to how and why engagement is critically important to learning (and dropout prevention) and how active practices of service-learning, CTE, and internships help to engage students in meaningful activities that connect their learning to life and make the process of schooling more fun, more interesting, and more satisfying.

This is particularly important during this challenging time of the Covid-19 pandemic because students are acting in far more independent and individual patterns and are primarily connected to their teachers, schools, and educational programs through electronic means. Zoom meetings and other group interactions are the primary mode of connection, and students who are neither highly motivated nor engaged are much more likely to “skip” their meeting times and course assignments. Allowing for an alternative approach, which focuses on

engaging students in real-world projects and learning, has the potential to be far more effective delivering the expected learning programs and agendas.

### ***CTE and Service-Learning programs: The Pandemic as Focus of Education***

The Covid-19 era and post-era bring diverse opportunities for student engagement, and these immersive community-based experiences cut across all areas of the curriculum and student development. In other words, this is an ideal time to engage students directly in the problem-solving processes that are impacting families, businesses, health providers, child development, leisure and hospitality providers, as well as governmental agencies at the local, state, and federal levels. Here are some examples of how we can engage CTE and other students in meaningful and needed immersive experiences within the community context:

- *Technology*: shadowing professionals in community settings that are addressing the need for enhanced Internet access and applications that are easy to use and understand by all students (schools, businesses, non-profits, health services, and others).
- *Developing and making masks and other materials*: completing an internship in a business or philanthropic setting that is manufacturing, distributing, or advocating for use of preventive measures to protect individuals from Covid-19.
- *Innovative, effective, and manageable janitorial/cleaning services*: completing an internship in a community setting that provides cleaning services for schools, churches, childcare centers, businesses, and other sites. Assist in developing reading materials for the general public that explain methods for using masks, keeping social distancing, and maintaining a high level of cleanliness of surfaces, cooking facilities, tables, desks, and other items used by the general population.
- *Automotive and appliance repair and installation for seniors and low-income families*: intern with an experienced automotive or appliance professional to learn repair and installation skills and deliver these services to seniors and families in low-income neighborhoods.
- *Business and accounting programs to assist diverse individuals and families in the community*: completing an internship with a business that provides direct accounting, financial planning, taxation procedures, or other business services to parents, senior citizens, and other individuals. Assist in delivering these services to needed groups.
- *Safe practices in restaurants and businesses*: shadow a manager of a restaurant or business and help develop policies and materials to use in the setting to maintain healthy routines aligned with CDC guidelines.

*Service-learning programs* that provide education and support for the surrounding community are illustrated in the following ways:

- *Virus and health-related knowledge and issues*: an ideal opportunity for students to complete an internship that involves writing research-based public information documents and advocacy information distribution about the Covid-19 virus and related health issues.
- *Programs to engage other youth in addressing Covid-19 challenges*: opportunity to work directly with younger or older youth to discuss and problem solve about the changing needs related to the Coronavirus. Model active listening, note taking, use of focus groups, and direct intervention for individuals in distress.
- *Programs to support seniors in nursing/retirement homes (in person and/or at a distance)*: students can work with a nursing or retirement home director to learn the diverse roles of that position, the health-related challenges of groups settings for senior citizens, and develop protocols for use by seniors, center staff, family members, and other visitors. Interface with the senior citizens and learn how to communicate effectively with them orally and through written communications.
- *Social media campaigns*: a technology-related opportunity to work with an organization to develop appropriate and effective social media messages related to the Covid-19 pandemic. These topics can include health routines, mental health challenges, coping with isolation, and negotiating unemployment or re-employment procedures.
- *Child development, child care, and early education*: the pandemic has challenged the field of early childhood education, including childcare, faith-based preschools, and publicly funded 4K and other preschool educational programs. Students in CTE and Family and Consumer Sciences can shadow a child care center director as he/she negotiates the pandemic, reopens a facility, problem solves how to comply with CDC guidelines, and communicates with parents about their needs and stressors. Students can learn more about child development and family relationships, especially in a time of family stress.

Creating meaningful connections to challenged populations or sectors of the community can be accomplished by community-based strategies listed below:

- Provide service to seniors in retirement and individual homes: help connect them with internet/technology; collect stories from seniors about previous challenging times in their lives; help provide opportunities for student writing, learning history, and learning about internet/technology fields.

- Learn about the role of parents/grandparents in family development/family functions, especially within a traumatic or crisis context. Assist families in planning for meals, childcare, home educational learning, and intergenerational needs.
- Provide opportunities for students to work directly with young children, pre-school and early elementary school, for tutoring, directed activities, and human connections (and storytelling).
- Provide a support system for working parents and communities to assist in providing guidance and supervision to young children (assist with creating local community child care centers/family programs). Develop learning materials and create resources for parents to use with children across the range of grade levels; assist parents in identifying developmentally appropriate educational programs to support their academic needs in math, science, language arts, and social studies.
- Teach teenagers about the theories and processes raising children/child development and the many responsibilities of parenthood. Develop simulations and scenarios for teenagers to engage in ways that teach them about the complexity of parenting and family life.

### ***Good Timing***

The challenges to education in America within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic are huge. Yet, they may also provide a unique opportunity to introduce/expand effective education so that learning can become more engaging and more impactful for students and society. As colleges and universities, as well as K-12 schools, struggle with how to implement/expand on-line learning and other distancing approaches, the demands of preventing the virus, such as social distancing and reduction of large group meetings, can be addressed through expansion of service-learning and CTE efforts. In fact, new research on volunteerism suggests that the act of volunteering has profound positive effects on individuals who are experiencing loneliness and depression ... one of the new conditions that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused because of people being confined to their homes. So, the service activities will help students to meet both personal and psychological needs. In fact, some universities are beginning to realign their admission criteria to focus more on students' commitments to community service and volunteerism and less to strictly GPA and other assessment and academic measures.

Studies have shown that volunteering helps people who donate their time feel more socially connected, thus warding off loneliness and depression (Harvard Health Publishing, June

2013). But volunteering has positive implications that go beyond mental health. A growing body of evidence suggests that people who give their time to others might also be rewarded with better physical health – including lower blood pressure and a longer lifespan (Harvard Health Publishing, June 2013). There are potential benefits for older people getting involved in the community collaborations.

College students who are considering a “gap year” to work in the community can actually take academic/service-learning courses that will allow them to do their community service and do it in an academic context. In so doing, they will have the opportunity to volunteer with people in the community and also connect with people in various professional/occupations to learn more about specific careers and jobs; and use these contexts to learn academic content and earn academic credit. The timing and current isolating conditions make developing service-learning and other community immersive programs a win-win for all involved.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

We have known for years what kind of programs help keep young people in school and assist them to graduate. Now we learn that some of those programs will also address some of the new demands of the isolationist educational programs that have created a new challenge to keep students engaged and help them graduate. Not only will strong service-learning and CTE programs help students both academically and personally, it will assist them in dealing with the new challenges of lock-down orders and social isolation. And it will provide the necessary programs for communities, such as new sources of child-care, new sources of engaging seniors in meaningful work, and in making schooling something that will connect young people with learning and life.

While these programs are ideal to address the social and educational conditions of the pandemic, they are not without their own challenges. They will require a great deal of coordination between colleges, schools, and communities. They will require involving all program members in creatively solving everyday problems, such as transportation, monitoring, program evaluation, and suitable training for all involved. The good news is the benefits of developing successful programs will far outweigh the day to day challenges of making things

happen. As senior citizens and community members are involved in the programs, they will bring resources and strengths that can enhance the overall effort. They have life experiences, energy, and personal interests in improving the community that will help to sustain and expand the programs in every community.

It's time. The Covid-19 pandemic has made connecting learning with life and community a terrific platform to deal with the problems of today and make tomorrow's effort successful and rewarding for all involved. Collaboration will be the key. Connecting higher organizations, like Campus Compact and the National Society for Experiential Education, will provide experienced professionals who are well versed in these two educational efforts. Adding the National Council for the Social Studies, the NDPC/SPN, and the myriad programs that exist to connect youth with community (YMCA, Boys/Girls Scouts, etc.) will provide the people and resources to hit the road running. These efforts are not new, only the unusual context of the national pandemic presents a different challenge. Let's work together to make education engaging and rewarding for students and for community. If we act, now the future will be bright and successful.

### ***Recommendations for Research and Policy***

Clearly, we will need to develop a research agenda to track these programs to see if they achieve the intended outcomes. While there is a history of research that shows both service-learning and CTE have demonstrated improved academic performance and improved high school graduation, it is important to measure and monitor the impact these programs have on student achievement, student civic engagement, and community responses/changes that result from the efforts. While engaging universities and professional researchers in studying these programs, it would be important to include participants in the process, especially in their ability to tell the stories of the program implementation and impact. Certainly, the American Evaluation Association has materials and resources to assist in student-led research and evaluation. Even the Dropout Prevention Network has such materials (Shumer, 2008) on youth-led study. Constructing a research/evaluation agenda as the programs develop is necessary to assess the process and impacts of the effort and to provide guidance/feedback into how to make changes to improve the overall projects. Including research/evaluation plans will be

critical to monitoring and assessing the various programs to determine what elements/processes make for the best efforts and how to measure/monitor the results so that the programs can be as successful as possible.

### ***Recommendations for School Districts***

When students return to the school setting, they will need lots of emotional support as well as guidance. In order to foster a supportive school climate, we encourage school administrators to do the following:

- Focus on social emotional learning (SEL) and mental health (MH) of students when they return to the school setting. Engage teachers, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses in planning in order to create a supportive school climate that invites students to re-enter the learning environment and to discuss and share their experiences during the Covid-19 shutdown. *Place a priority first on SEL and then on academic assessment and instruction.*
- Create a Service-Learning Focus Group of teachers, counselors, curriculum and special education specialists, parents, community representatives, and other stakeholders to discuss, plan for, implement, and evaluate community-based internship/apprenticeship opportunities related to the Covid-19 experience.
- Invite speakers into classrooms who are directly related to the Covid-19 Pandemic to discuss the many impacts of the pandemic on health, employment, families, children, and mental health. Encourage an integrated approach to these discussions and engage teachers from across the curriculum to strengthen a holistic approach to understanding Covid-19 and its impacts on our society.
- Invite parents to provide support and connections to students as they return and engage in the school setting. Set up safe spaces where students can talk with school counselors, nurses, and other professionals; include interested parents who would like to contribute to the re-entry experience for students. Many parents have occupations that bring an understanding and expertise to this re-entry for students.
- Engage community resource people—mental health counselors, youth leaders, faith-based representatives, merchants, and others---in conversations with students in order to create connections to the community and ways to engage the in volunteer, internships, apprenticeships, and service-learning opportunities.

The Covid-19 Pandemic is a life-altering experience, and everyone has been impacted by the sudden changes in routines, social isolation, anxiety about the virus, unpredictable futures,

and changes in family dynamics. With collaboration and creative problem solving, school districts can embrace returning students, address their social-emotional needs, and help restore a sense of predictability and hopefulness as students resume their routines. Engaging students in real-world learning experiences in their communities and promoting a service-learning attitude as a new normalcy is established, will enhance and facilitate their return to school.

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Dr. Robert Shumer has been involved in education for 50 years. He has taught from middle school through graduate school and conducted research in many areas, from service-learning, to teacher education, to character education, to career and technical education, to civic engagement, to participatory evaluation. He served as the founding director of the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at the University of Minnesota and internal evaluator for the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education (NRCCTE). He also served as Director of Field Studies at UCLA and Vice Chair of the International Association for Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement. He has conducted numerous evaluation studies, including a five-year study of AmeriCorps in Minnesota, a three year study of service learning in both Pennsylvania and Minnesota, and a six year study of teacher education in New Jersey. He has published more than 85 articles, book chapters, and even a few books on service-learning, youth-led participatory evaluation, career and technical education, teacher education, and community-based learning. He has also taught courses and consulted in many countries around the world, including Mexico, Germany, England, Ireland, Morocco, Canada, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and China. Dr. Shumer received his master's in educational psychology from California State University, Northridge, and his Ph.D in Education from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

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