Louisiana's Promise:
Drop Out Prevention
Focus Groups Findings Report

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Project Details:

Project Name	:	Louisiana's Promise: Drop Out Prevention Focus Groups		
Client	:			
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Project Sponsor	:	Cecil Picard Child Development Center	225-763-3506	CPCDC
Executive Sponsor	:	Education's Next Horizon	225-383-3844	ENH

Executive Summary:

Louisiana's Promise is an extension of the work of Colin Powell's America's Promise Alliance organization to develop community-wide solutions to the dropout problem in our country. The Five Promises are those developmental resources — wrap-around supports— that young people need for success in life: Caring Adults, Safe Places, A Healthy Start, Effective Education, and Opportunities to Help Others. Research shows that less than one-third of America's young people have experienced enough of these to be successful. Education's Next Horizon supports the efforts of Louisiana's Promise as a part of the national America's Promise Alliance. The belief is that the success of our nation's young people is grounded in experiencing these key wraparound supports, the Five Promises (Caring Adults, Safe Places, A Healthy Start, An Effective Education, and Opportunities to Help Others) – in all aspects of their daily lives and are central to young people thriving in life, graduating from high school and bring prepared for college and the working world.[1]

The goal of Louisiana's Promise and its supporting collaborators is to decrease the drop out rate in the state of Louisiana. The objective of the Louisiana's Promise Summit is to assist in the development of Community Leadership Teams, educate those teams on the foundation principles of dropout prevention, provide them with the opportunity to discuss issues as it relates to their respective communities, and arm them with "toolkits" to assist them in addressing their self identified chief principal(s). This action based initiative is geared at increasing knowledge, local awareness, and efforts on Drop Out Prevention. It promotes behavior that leads to increased efforts among community based organizations, law enforcement and educators; and creates a dynamic and effective format that promotes action to combat the rate of drop outs among the Louisiana population. A community-oriented approach, it will allow better identification and understanding of the elements needed to increase the number of students returning to our educational systems and is positioned to support the development of the mechanisms to satisfy those needs. Strategies for attaining these goals include the establishment of a Community Based Organization outreach initiatives, development of key messages using mass media and print materials, and the dissemination of Drop Out Prevention materials.

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Five focus groups were conducted among the Drop Out population in Louisiana regarding their knowledge, perceptions and attitudes about drop out prevention and risk factors associated with dropping out; indicators and causes; and preventative methods and preferences. It is the intent of this study to give a voice to the target group and to contribute to the development of solutions which will help more young people graduate from high school ready for college, work and life.

Introduction:

This focus group study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of Drop Out behavior, their decision to return to the educational system, and the reasons that govern their behavior. The key themes will be used to help guide the decisions of the Louisiana's Promise drop out prevention efforts. This study relies on reasons behind various aspects of the targeted group and has attempted to investigate the why and how of decision making as well as the what, where, and when associated with this population's behavior. Hence, the need is for smaller but focused samples rather than large random samples.

Five focus groups were conducted for this study. Four groups were selected from a major metropolitan area within Louisiana and one rural community. Of the four groups selected from the major metropolitan area, three consisted of students who recently (1 week to 1 month) reentered the educational system after dropping out and one group of students who were in the final stages of or recently completed (1 week to 1 month) their high school equivalency exam.

The final group was comprised of rural area students who were participants in an alternative school as a final attempt to complete their high school diploma. These students were accepted as a part of a selection process aimed at students who indicated their desire to drop out of the regular education system.

Methodology:

Focus Group Instrument Development
Focus group discussion questions (Appendix A) were developed by the focus group consultant and recommendations of members of the Cecil Picard Child Development Center. These questions were then reviewed by selected Education Next Horizon staff members and affiliates.

The participant consent / information form was administered before commencing the focus group discussion. The questions did not require the participants to provide written responses.

Site Selection
Site Selection was determined by the host organization's expression of their interest to participate in this study. All interviews were conducted at the respective sites in locations identified by each organization's point of contact.

Participant Recruitment

Recruitment was conducted by Lisa Batiste-Evans, educational consultant. The identified sites were contacted and asked to give a list of the potential focus group participants. In a large group setting, the potential participants were given an overview of the national and state program's goals and objectives, desired outcomes and the possible usefulness of the information gathered, as well as a brief personal background of Ms. Batiste-Evans. Of the 75 potential participants from the metropolitan area, 51 students volunteered for participation. 15 students from the rural area participated, of the 27 identified. Each group was informed that the session was being tape recorded (audio - only for use by moderator for later transcription), given a brief overview of the goals and objectives, provided the consent form for signature, and given an opportunity to ask any questions before starting the focus group.

Focus Groups

Five focus groups were conducted at the indicated sites October 6, 2008 to October 16, 2008. The focus groups were held for 70 to 90 minutes each and were digitally recorded (audio only) and later transcribed.

Date	Location	Participants	Number
October 6	Metropolitan Area	Group 1	12
October 7	Metropolitan Area	Group 2	12
October 8	Metropolitan Area	Group 3	15
October 9	Metropolitan Area	Group 4	12
October 16	Rural Area	Group 5	15
Total			**66**

These focus groups relied on information gathered through in depth interviews. Participants were asked about their attitude towards the drop out rate and to share their personal experience. Questions were asked in an interactive group setting where participants are free to talk with other group members allowing the researcher to gain access to various perspectives that were included in the target group.

Assumptions:

The Client's Rights

- To retain a moderator who is an experienced and competent professional in focus group research.
- To know who will conduct the groups and who will be writing the report before signing the contract with the research company.
- To agree to all recruitment specifications and to review a copy of the recruitment screening questionnaire before participants are asked to come to the groups.
- To be provided with a formal, written report of the groups on or before the date agreed upon.
- To have full groups of qualified participants who arrive on time at the facility, understanding that there will be some exceptions.

The Moderator's Rights

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- To be treated as a partner in the research project rather than a vendor of goods or services or an adjunct staff member.
- To be paid promptly by the client organization according to contractual agreements.
- To receive feedback from the client about the discussion guide well in advance of the actual focus groups to permit sufficient time for final preparations.
- To review any stimuli to be used in the groups (i.e., concepts, products, advertising, etc.) at least 48 hours before the sessions to permit an adequate review of the materials and appropriate amendments to the guide and to understand that there will be some exceptions.

The Facilities' Rights

- To be given written, detailed instructions by the moderator relative to recruiting specifications for the groups.
- To be advised immediately when reservations for space being held are to be canceled.
- To be treated as a partner in the research project process rather than just a vendor of goods and services.
- To be treated with respect before, during and after the focus group sessions.
- To be respected for knowledge of the area in which they live.
- To be given adequate time to recruit groups, and not be pressured into unrealistic situations due to disorganization by clients or moderators.
- To have their facilities treated with the same respect with which moderators and clients would treat their own offices or homes.

The Respondent's Rights

- To be told the general content of the discussion to preclude them participating in a subject about which they would not feel comfortable.
- To be told about video or audio taping of sessions and the presence of people observing the sessions from behind the one-way mirror.
- To be treated with dignity and respect by the personnel at the facility and those conducting the research in the room.
- To have the right to withdraw or not answer any question at any time.
- To be assured of confidentiality; that is, that their names, addresses, phone numbers or personal information will not be released to clients or anyone else without their permission.

Key Findings:

The discussion was somewhat loosely structured and the moderator encouraged the free flow of ideas, although questions had been prepared prior. These questions served to initiate open-ended discussions. The moderator used straight questioning, moderated projective techniques (fixed and free association and story-telling), and focused on non-verbal responses and level of engagement of each participant.

Taxonomy for quantifying adjectives in small to moderate sized groups (N=10 - 15)	
Descriptor	**Number of occurrences**
Hardly any	1
A couple/Very Few	2
Few/Some	3
Several/A Minority	4
Majority	6
Many/Most	7
A consensus	8
Nearly all	9
All/Everyone	10

Discussion Questions Results		
Why did you come back to school?		**Number of Occurrences**
	Desire to go to college: *"It wouldn't make sense for me not to come back because I want to go to college"*	**4**
	Children: *"Because my daughter….I didn't want my daughter to ask me about her school work and I didn't know what or how to help her."*	**3**
	Better Life: *"We want a better life….need an education to have a better life."*	**9**

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	"Something you need, not just want, because in most…"	
	Prove that they can achieve: *"To show people you can do something with yourself."*	**6**
	A sense of belonging: *"It makes you feel that you are a part of something."*	**6**
	Increase Income: *"To make more money."*	**9**
	Family pressure: *"To make my mother stop bothering me about school."*	**2**
Reasons why students drop out		
	Family problems: *"Some people have to take care of their family…mother ill and stop to take care of parent and younger siblings needed to stay in school…"* *"Lack of a father figure, and looking up to the wrong person"*	**3**
	Working while in school or having children: *"…too much pressure"*	**2**
	Peer Pressure: *"Following the crowd"*	**2**
	Drugs: *"…some people who smoke weed, makes you tired and don't feel like waking up in the morning."*	**2**
	Grades:	**1**
	Don't Know: *"Do it just to do it…"*	**2**
Did the influences/reason change over time?		
	Yes:	**8**

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	"I got tired seeing all my friends get their high school diploma and I didn't have mine" *"Tired of seeing my mother cry"*	
	No: *"...negative talk ...mother said I was a bad influence"*	**3**
When 1st seriously thought about dropping out		
	6th grade	**2**
	7th grade	**2**
	8th grade	**3**
	9th grade	**8**
	10th grade	**2**
Were they good reasons?		
	Yes	**1**
	No	**9**
How did your mindset change when you returned to school after thinking about dropping out?		
	Diminished interest in learning: *"Really found that my attention to what was happening was even less and every thing became boring."* *"It wasn't interesting anymore."* *"I started acting stupid in class."*	**9**
	No Change: *"Looked at it as the same, I had legitimate reason to leave."* *"I was still having problems in school as far as my attitude and temper. I kept getting suspended and expelled from different schools and it just made me want to quit even more."*	**2**

How much did the organizations in your community influence you to return to school?		
	Influenced: *"Most only wanted the kids that could play sports or had other stuff. It wasn't for kids like me"* *"Where I'm from they don't care "* *"… a couple of old folks "* *"The girl I dropped out with she went back and bragging about it. I didn't know if she was trying to make me feel bad or trying to make me go back. I stopped hanging with her. When she dropped out again, we started hanging out again…that was crazy!"*	**10**
	No Influence:	**0**
What can prevent students from dropping out?		
Teachers:		
	Respect: *"Try harder to get to know your students before you get to yelling at them. Some of them are there just to get a pay check."* *"Because a teacher told me they didn't like me as one too many times"*	**8**
	More Interesting Course Work: *"Make the class work more interesting, by doing more group work. They may get it more, because they see and interact with others who also may not understand….it'll make it more interesting."*	**9**
	Increased awareness of students as individuals: *"…more understanding"* *"…take in consideration that you may have*	**7**

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	the weight of the world on your shoulders" "…see life from your point of view." "Paid more attention to students."	
	Attendance: "Stay in their classrooms"	**4**
	More Personable: "Be more open with some of their experiences…try to relate you us, instead of rejecting you when you're failing."	**6**
	Encouragement: "Encourage students based on their current ability" "Not giving up on students" "Showing sincere interest in student's learning"	**8**
	Ethics: "Stop letting students get away with too much even if they have a legitimate issue" "Stop giving undeserved grades."	**4**
Principal:		
	Respect: "Trying to figure out problems instead of attacking students" Always approaching students with negative mindsets and never pointing out any positive behavior"	**4**
	Communication: "Do more counseling"	**3**
	Encouragement: "Continuing to support students who are struggling"	**7**
Community:		
	Respect: "Stop labeling us"	**6**

	"I dress like a lil' dude and they label me as a gang banger or something like that!" *"Talk to me and stop yelling"*	
	Encouragement *"Encourage me, instead of talking about me not being in school"* *"pull me on the side and ask me (caringly) …'baby why you not in school'. …maybe that's what I wanted deep down inside"*	**8**
	Support: *"Support me when I was selling candy for school"* *" Have community service projects to help students get more invested in their community"* *"Have leaders that interact with children about education"*	**5**
Family		
	More time with family: *"Spend less time working [even when working is necessary]"*	**4**
	Encouragement: *"What encouraged me was my Daddy…he on drugs and working on a university campus and I used to skip school to chill with him. He used to say 'stay in school, because you don't want to be like me'. I decided I can't be like him…he dropped out…I couldn't take that route."*	**7**
What did you think it would be like dropping out? Before you made the actual decision.		
	Family member would take care of them: *"I thought my mom was going to give me money so I could chill with my friends"*	**8**
	Increased ability to create income:	**6**

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	"Thought that there would be more time to make money"	
	Freedom: *"I'd be home all the time chilling "* *"I could do whatever I wanted to"* *"I thought it was legit…(right thing to do)"* *"Free to go out anytime I wanted to"* *"Thought I would be watching TV all day"*	**10**
	Popular with Peers: *"Famous…"* *"Thought when I would go back I would be the star and everybody would ask where I've been"*	**5**
	Difficult: *"Thought it was going to be hard"*	**2**
How is your mind set different now?		
	No financial support from family: *"Family shouldn't take care of me"*	**6**
	Realization of life's difficulties: *"I didn't know how hard life was without an education"*	**9**
	Maturity: *"Came to my attention that it was time to grow up"*	**7**
	Lack of Income: *"I was broke all the time*	**6**
	Bored / Lack of things to do: *"Because everything get old "*	**8**
	No Change: *"Still the same… that my mother is still trying to beat me"*	**1**
What programs/activities what have mad you		

stay in school?		
	Non Athletic: *"Beta Club or Debate Team "* *"A group of people focused on positive things that didn't require a high GPA"*	**6**
	Athletic: *"Basketball team, football, swim team, dance"*	**8**
	Nothing:	**3**
Everything considered, was dropping out a good idea?		
	No: *"… easier to get it while you are in school, but while you're doing it you don't think about that then."* *"It would have been better being in school with people my age. You know, going to prom, senior skip day, spirit day…"*	**9**
	Yes: *"…because I couldn't take the negative attitudes of the teachers and principal. Once they label you, that's it!"*	**2**
What are your thoughts about school K-3?		
	Positive Experience: *"Loved school….they paid attention to you "* *"It was fun, we did things in groups, and teachers made you feel good about learning"*	**7**
	Negative Experience: *"3rd grade I started depressed and started taking it out on other kids. I had a lot of things going on at home"*	**2**
	Neutral:	**2**
4th and above?		

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	Positive Experience: "I was pretty much an A/B student until 10th grade."	**1**
	Negative Experience: *"I was still being put in the corner"* *"Puberty hit and all I could think about was girls"* *"School became less of a focus and more of life's other situations became more important in our lives?"* *"Less tolerance from Teachers"*	**8**
How does your family feel about your returning to school?		
	Positive: *"Family is still saying negative things"* *"Father trying to get in touch with me, but I am not interested in talking "* *"Some are happy and say I should have been doing it, but some are indifferent"*	**6**
	Negative: *"Father really negative "* *"Mother doesn't care"*	**2**
	Neutral: *"Doesn't matter"*	**1**
How do their thoughts and interactions affect your decision to stay in school?		
	Has an affect: *"It's my motivation for them to be negative…it wasn't at first, but now I'm using it to motivate me"*	**8**

	"My mom has stopped crying about it. She really proud of me, because she talks about it to everyone"	
	No Affect: *"I don't deal with them, because I am doing what I do for me and my daughter"*	**2**
Compare GED to High School Diploma		
	Equal: *"I have to know the same things to pass my test"*	**8**
	Less than/Easier: *"Employers feel a GED isn't as good as a high school diploma"*	**4**
	Better than / more difficult: *"GED is harder! We have to know the math that most college students have to know. Everyone who graduates from high school doesn't know the math."*	**3**
Future Goals		
	College: *"I want to major in nursing"* *"Maybe computers or something. I can take a computer apart and put it together without directions"* *"I'd though about writing or English, because I want to be a Rapper. But, maybe music."*	**7**
	Skills Training: *"I'm going to ABC for welding"* *"Mechanic school"* *"My step mom has a daycare she's waiting for me to take over"*	**8**
	Get a job: *"I got a job waiting for me"*	**6**

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	"My job wanted to promote me, but I needed to have a GED or high school diploma"	
	Don't know: *"I'm still thinking about it...either college or a trade"*	**4**
Retained more than once		
1		**9**
2		**7**
3		**6**
4		**2**
5		**1**

Conclusions:

The focus groups that were conducted afforded insight to the knowledge, perceptions and attitudes about drop out prevention and risk factors associated with dropping out; indicators and causes; and preventative methods and preferences. Within the limitations of this study, these groups were able to give opinions of drop out prevention assisting in building the foundation for the Louisiana Promise drop out prevention campaign. Participant's opinions provided valuable information and insight into a group that is producing a staggering growth rate locally and nationally.

The participants, though initially a little apprehensive about sharing their personal experiences, revealed their true desire to discuss the issues that affect them personally as well as those of their peers. Participants were eager to find out more about Louisiana's Promise. Several of the participants expressed their desire to get involved in the effort and requested additional information about the upcoming summit. They were also very interested in this researcher's desire to work in this area of education; and many indicated their desire to assist in other projects discussed during the question and answer session after completion of their focus groups.

Finally, several students, while discussing their involvement with younger children in their communities had an in depth conversation about their role with respect to those children. They discovered their role from the view of these children in their community could be very impactful. Most made declarations of change and increased responsibility during those conversations. Their zeal should be a necessary part of Community Leadership Teams being developed to address drop out prevention.

Key Theme Overview:

The findings represent common themes that were heard across all five of the group discussions. ***Encouragement*** is the most prominent of the three themes found within this focus group study. Nearly all participants identified the need to have encouragement as a part of peer, educational professional, and community

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interactions. Moreover, encouragement was strongly related to the notion of mutual respect and understanding of the students as individuals.

Collaboration, as a function of belonging and ownership was another key theme among these groups. Working in partnership with peers, educators and community organizations to develop learning communities/relationships where an exchange of knowledge, opinions and ideas foster increased learning and learning ability was a chief pre-emptive method of drop out prevention.

Finally, **World View** is the broadest of the three themes and is shaped from the reoccurring feedback identifying _maturity and expectations of others_ as contributing factors in participant's decision to drop out of school _AND_ their return to the educational system. Though intertwined in varying degrees and complexities, _maturity and the expectations of others_ participated greatly in participants' belief that a success or failure would be followed by a similar outcome _OR,_ as found in most cases prior to dropping out, the belief that a success or failure would be followed by a dissimilar outcome. None of the participants desired to be failures. But, the framework of ideas and beliefs through which they interpret the world and their ability to be successful thereof, is greatly influenced by the perceived expectations of others, namely educators, family and individuals within their community.

Focus Group Questions Response Summary

Why do students dropout of school?

- Do you think these are good reasons to leave school?
- What were the reasons that played the greatest influence in your decision?
  - How long had they been an influence in your life?
  - Did the influences change over time? If so, how?

Summary:
Participants offered various reasons for dropping out. However, the majority of the participants were unable to articulate one or two specific reasons, but offered a number of contributing factors. Across the five focus groups, the non verbal communication was one of the most profound of all responses received. Participants were visibly uncomfortable, showed significant decreased eye contact (looking down at table or their feet), and the majority of the participants moved to "arms crossed" positioning. Insight to their body language began to unfold with question probes. Nearly all of the students agreed their underlying reasons for dropping out of school were not, upon reflection, good reasons to discontinue their education. Moreover, there was a large consensus of participants who indentified external factors that influenced their behavior, and all identified varying external factors as the primary influence in returning to complete their high school education. Specifically, family problems, working and/or having children, peer pressure and drugs were among the reasons named.

How old were you the first time you seriously thought of dropping out of school?

- Who did you tell your thoughts to?
- What were the circumstances that prompted your thoughts?
- Did this change the way you dealt with school? If so, how?
- How could your thoughts of dropping out been changed or redirected?
  - Who would have been the greatest influence in making this change?
- What are other ways your thoughts of dropping out could have been changed?

Summary:
Nearly all participants indicated ninth grade was the first time seriously contemplating dropping out of school, but most admitted to considering dropping out as early as fourth grade. Though an assortment of reasons were cited, an overwhelming number of participants pointed to what they perceived as an austere demeanor of educational professionals, stark difference in behavioral expectations and the misalignment of student maturation to anticipated student academic responsibility post third and fourth grades. Additionally, they discussed how these factors was the bed of their growing desire to drop out of school. Moreover, participants declared the lack of organized ongoing support outside of school as a contributing factor to educators' inability to identify warning signs of drop out

behavior. To that end, nearly all participants coped with the demands of school with a severely diminished interest in learning. With further questioning, participants directed their responses to the lack of community influence, educational professional's inability to recognize the impact of (perceived) negative actions, in addition to their family's failure to address personal circumstances contributing to their decision making. When asked about other ways their thoughts about dropping out could have been detoured, several stated lack of maturity as an important factor in their failure to make different decisions.

What are signs that a teacher, parent, friend, guardian or someone in the community might notice?

Summary:
In all five of the focus groups, this question received a negligible response. Using nonverbal expression as indicators, the majority of participants responded by sitting back in their chairs and shaking their heads (left to right) while hunching their shoulders. Many of them mumbled "I don't know" and a few articulated behaviors such as isolation, unruliness, poor grades and skipping class, but none of the groups clearly identified specific behavior(s) as clear indicators for drop out behavior. Conversely, nearly all participants agreed more intimate knowledge of individual students' needs would greatly increase educator's ability to identify and respond to drop out indicators.

What needs to change to prevent students from leaving school?

- What can the school do?
  - How would they accomplish and when should they start?
- What can the teachers do?
  - How would they accomplish and when should they start?
- What can the principals do?
  - How would they accomplish and when should they start?
- What can families and friends do?
  - How would they accomplish and when should they start?
- What can be done in the community?
  - How would they accomplish and when should they start?
- What programs might make a difference?
  - At what age group should they start?

Summary:
Encouragement was the number one response of nearly all focus group participants, with the exception of a second place showing to their desire for more interesting course work from teachers. Participants cited their wish to have support structures for struggling students which allow school programs to work in concert with community programs. They expressed desire to be in a learning environment whose aim is to empower students so that they might be able to benchmark and monitor their learning ability. Prevention was the central theme of this question and a large consensus of participants directed their proposed prevention strategies toward

increased respect given to students from education professionals. Specific instances of tone, body language and implied negative expectations from teachers, community leaders, principals and family were named as contributing factors to the feelings of disrespect and hopelessness that lead to their desire to drop out of school. Finally, many participants expressed their need for group peer interaction in the form of school based programs that do not require minimum GPA standards and is geared towards group learning and community service.

Do most students who have dropped out try to complete their education?

> - If they don't try then why not?
> - If they do try, what are the major influences that can encourage their desire?
> - If they do try, what are the major obstacles they face?
>   - What might help those who want to finish their education?

Summary:
Again, this question received a large number of nonverbal responses. Yet, nearly all the participants agreed peer pressure, lack of family/community influence, involvement and support; as well as increasing need for income (working more than one job) are the major obstacles. Views expressed regarding encouragement as well as assisting those who want to finish their education worked hand in hand with the removal of the aforementioned major obstacles. Participants largely agreed the removal of one or a combination of the obstacles, would markedly improve the number of students who returned to complete their high school education.

Were you surprised at "life as a dropout"?

> - What was most disappointing?
>   - How did you cope?
> - What was "not so bad"?
> - How does your current life align with what you thought life would be like?
>   - Do you think education will change that? If so, how?

Summary:
Nearly all participants agreed the realization of life's difficulties was most surprising. And though the vast majority anticipated not having to be concerned with financial responsibilities, most were taken aback when their families did not provide the expected financial support. All determined dropping out would afford them freedom to make their own choices and become their own authority, but none agreed that this assumption aligned with life as it is presently. Many admitted being bored and their increased maturity was central to their decision to return to school.

Everything considered, is dropping out of school a good idea? Explain.

Summary:
No was the resounding answer received with only one or two exceptions. Participants agreed that staying in school would have produced better life results.

If you had it to do over, would you still leave school?

Summary:
Again, a resounding 'no' among nearly all focus group participants. Participants discussed missed opportunities to take part in social and academic activities with their peers. Of the opportunities discussed prom, senior skip day, spirit day, sporting events, and school academic fair competitions were most popular. Most participants, especially males, body language changed drastically during this segment. Whether leaning in, sitting straight up or distracted by small side conversations, all participants eagerly contributed to this question. Although, less popular in occurrences, several participants named teachers and counselors as contributing part to their remaining in school.

What did you like most about school?

Summary:
All groups did not answer this question. However, of the 3 groups that addressed the question the central theme was aimed at social interactions post fourth grade. Academic references were negative in nature, therefore did not address the question posed. Participants attempted to discuss various learning experiences during K-3 years as a part of the discussion, but it failed to develop as a result of the continued discussion of post 4th grade negative experiences. Nevertheless, group work, learning games and individualized attention were mentioned by the large majority.

What did you like least about school?

Summary:
Most participants listed things such disdain for select authority figures, lack of respect afforded to students, lack of sustainable and systemic system of encouragement, the over abundance of pessimism, and their inability to understand the work load.

Compare your thoughts of teachers/school K-3rd grade as opposed to 6th to drop out date.
      -How is it different?
           • What were the major factors that contributed to the difference?

-How was it the same?
- What were the major factors that contributed to the similarity?

-How did your views impact your decision to drop out?

Summary:

"Teachers in K-3rd grade made learning fun!" and *"…we played a lot of learning games."* Nearly all participants felt their was a significant difference, but a large consensus of participants stated small mixed groups would allay a great deal of fear and hopelessness associated with less than stellar individual academic performance. One participant stated, *"I never could understand why 'not knowing' wasn't just as important as knowing, isn't that the only way we can say we learned something?"* Another stated, *"I hate it when they make you feel dumb for not knowing something. I would have stayed home if I know it all".* Several explained their desire to perform was markedly decreased due to their perceptions of the being 'outliers' to the learning process, thereby fertilizing their thoughts of dropping out.

What do the members of your family think about your returning to school?
- How does/did their thoughts affect your decision to continue with your educational goals?

Summary:

Motivating factors were identified as 'positive influences' if participants indicated the responses from family promoted their desire to return to school. Having said that, many of their family member's comments and behaviors were negative. Furthermore, the rationale offered for viewing these negative responses as 'positive influences' was divergent from their non-verbal communication when answering this question. In fact, several participants pushed away school related materials (books, book bags, binders, etc) located in their near vicinity.

How has your view on education changed/stayed the same?
-What influence did that have on your decision to return to school?

Summary:

With one or two exceptions, participants agreed their view on education changed since dropping out. A majority agreed maturity played the greatest part in their ability to recognize the importance of education. As a result, participants believed education to be central to accomplishing their long term goals. Their long term goals included obtaining employment, advancement in current job, entering a skill's based learning environment, and to attend a two or four year college. When discussing their view on the importance of gaining an education many stated, *"…life is really hard without an education".*

Did community programs or organizations affect your decision to return to school? If so, how?

Summary:
All participants indicated that community organizations/programs were influential. However, overall the responses were negative in nature. Participants labeled structured organizations and individuals as 'community', therefore their responses address these groups collectively. On the whole, participants expressed their feelings of indifference from both groups and the lack desire to take formal action in addressing the drop out problem in their community. It is this negative perception that prompted such responses as, *"I wanted them to see I could do it, because I know none of them believed I could."*

Have you previously been enrolled in an alternative program?

Summary:
Less than one third of the participants were enrolled in alternative programs previously. Of the one third who previously attended, nearly all likened these programs to jails and prison. One participant stated *"It was a prep school for jail not a way to continue my education".*

How do you perceive or compare the validity of the GED to a high school diploma or exit exam?

Summary:
The large majority of students perceive the GED to be equal to a high school diploma. Participants articulated their belief in having to *"know the same things to pass my test"* as reasoning for their belief. Conversely, those who found the GED to be more difficult perceived the GED required a greater knowledge base in certain subject areas, namely mathematics. Finally, of the participants who thought the GED to be of less validity, the majority shaped their decision on the idea most employers view the GED as a less substantive.

How many of you have been retained? How many times?

Summary:
Nearly all participants were retained at least once and a significant number of participants were retained two to three times.

Recommendations:

America's Promise Alliance Five Promises name developmental resources for young people to be successful in life: Caring Adults, Safe Places, A Healthy Start, Effective Education, and Opportunities to Help Others. This study, in effect, reinforces the need for these broad umbrella principles, which hold the details of their implementation and success within the state and local community efforts. State efforts to build Community Leadership Teams, aimed educating themselves about Drop Out Prevention and taking action within their communities will increase the probability of having a true systemic change in the ongoing battle of Drop Out Prevention.

Appendix A: List of Focus Group Questions

Why do students dropout of school?

- Do you think these are good reasons to leave school?
- What were the reasons that played the greatest influence in your
    decision?
    - How long had they been an influence in your life?
    - Did the influences change over time? If so, how?

How old were you the first time you seriously thought of dropping out of school?

- Who did you tell your thoughts to?
- What were the circumstances that prompted your thoughts?
- Did this change the way you dealt with school? If so, how?
- How could your thoughts of dropping out been changed or redirected?
    - Who would have been the greatest influence in making this change?
- What are other ways your thoughts of dropping out could have been changed?

What are signs that a teacher, parent, friend, guardian or someone in the community might notice?

What needs to change to prevent students from leaving school?

- What can the school do?
    - How would they accomplish and when should they start?
- What can the teachers do?
    - How would they accomplish and when should they start?
- What can the principals do?
    - How would they accomplish and when should they start?
- What can families and friends do?
    - How would they accomplish and when should they start?
- What can be done in the community?
    - How would they accomplish and when should they start?
- What programs might make a difference?
    - At what age group should they start?

Do most students who have dropped out try to complete their education?

- If they don't try then why not?
- If they do try, what are the major influences that can encourage their desire?
- If they do try, what are the major obstacles they face?
    - What might help those who want to finish their education?

Were you surprised at "life as a dropout"?

- What was most disappointing?

- How did you cope?
- What was "not so bad"?
- How does your current life align with what you thought life would be like?
    - Do you think education will change that? If so, how?

Everything considered, is dropping out of school a good idea? Explain.

If you had it to do over, would you still leave school?

What did you like most about school?

What did you like least about school?

Compare your thoughts of teachers/school K-3rd grade as opposed to 6th to drop out date.
-How is it different?
- What were the major factors that contributed to the difference?
-How was it the same?
- What were the major factors that contributed to the similarity?
-How did your views impact your decision to drop out?

What do the members of your family think about your returning to school?
- How does/did their thoughts affect your decision to continue with your educational goals?

How has your view on education changed/stayed the same?
-What influence did that have on your decision to return to school?

Did community programs or organizations affect your decision to return to school? If so, how?

Have you previously been enrolled in an alternative program?

How do you perceive or compare the validity of the GED to a high school diploma or exit exam?

How many of you have been retained? How many times?