

Motivating Students to Graduate

with the

Straight A's of Life



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each day approximately 8,300 students drop out of high school^[1]. That's enough students to fill Wrigley Field every week.

These students started life as most kids – happy, energetic, and curious. They had high expectations. But year after year they become more disengaged with school. When they finally drop out of high school altogether, those hopes are dashed.

Students who drop out of high school are more likely to

- commit crime
- live in poverty
- have health problems

In fact, each student that drops out of high school costs society approximately \$ 292,000^[2]. **Wouldn't it be great if these students could graduate and become productive members of society?**

“Research has identified a student's attitude towards the school is the single most important factor in combating truancy.”^[3] Although the disengagement process starts gradually, and usually takes years before culminating in dropping out^[4], re-engaging a student can be done quickly if the student has a significant, paradigm-shifting experience. A fresh paradigm about life and school, and the renewed energy it brings, can provide the needed momentum to propel a student forward and achieve that all-important milestone of graduating from high school.

This paper discusses a revolutionary way to re-engage students in school - and life - through a unique program called the School of Life.

[1] <http://www.statisticbrain.com/high-school-dropout-statistics/>

[2] Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, J.J., Jr., & Morison, K.B. (2006). The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts: A report by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. <http://www.saanys.org/uploads/content/TheSilentEpidemic-ExecSum.pdf>

[3] Gullatt, D. E., & Lemoine, D. A. (1997). Assistance for the school administrator concerned about student truancy. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED409653) p18.

[4] Curran Neild, 2010, The Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University

INTRODUCTION

The growing concern with the high-school dropout rates has spawned many studies and suggestions - from Tracking Programs to Alternative Schools to Mentoring. Most of these programs are founded on good principles, but most are also expensive to administer; and many are not effective as long-term solutions for the students themselves.

What is needed is a cost-effective program that changes the student from the inside out. Teens who take responsibility for their own lives – even when they live in less-than-optimal circumstances – are **not victims, but victors**.

They have hope, confidence and empowerment because they understand they're valuable individuals who have control over themselves.

The School of Life program builds a foundation of principles the students use to govern their decisions and actions.

Adam Nilssen, a student who graduated the program over 2 years ago, said, "The School of Life is like a base of knowledge. The bottom of the building has to be strongest, the most well-built. It supports the rest of the building. If you can teach students good morals, how to be a good person at a young age, later on in life they will do just that. They will continue to do that without even realizing they were taught."

Nilssen was not on track to graduate. After attending the School of Life program, he graduated with his class, received a scholarship to a local university, and is now pursuing his bachelor's degree in education.

If I hadn't taken the school of life, my life would probably be a different story right now... I was not on track to graduate. But I was able to graduate with my class because the program motivated me to catch up on credits. My counselors were amazed that I actually pulled it all off. They were very proud of me."

-Adam

"It costs significantly less to put a student through the School of Life program than it does to put a student through other programs out there. And the results are significantly greater."

-Erik Sorenson, corporate sponsor for School of Life Foundation.

THE SCHOOL OF LIFE DIFFERENCE

The School of Life Foundation aims to disrupt troublesome high school dropout rates throughout the United States. The program incorporates certified trainers, a workbook for each student, and is free to the school and the students.

There is also an Education Advisory Board which provides guidance, as well as an outside viewpoint. The Board consists of educators, business owners, parents and students.

The School of Life method is to treat teens as the capable individuals they are. When they come to this realization for themselves then capability becomes confidence, and ultimately competence.

Leading Out

Justin Keate caught this vision when he heard Jack Rolfe, School of Life founder, give a speech. Keate is the Vice Principal of Desert Hills High School and wanted a positive way to help students with truancy points.

At Desert Hills High School, "Restitution Points" are given each time a student is absent or late for class. Typically, to wipe away one restitution point the student must spend one hour in a restitution class (a sort of detention or study hall) after school. These hours are made up on a 1 for 1 basis (one hour of restitution class wipes out one restitution point). On top of the time spent, the students have to pay for the restitution class. Keate thought there must be a way to help these students learn something, rather than just sit in a classroom.

Desert Hills High School co-partnered with the School of Life Foundation and developed an incentivized model for taking care of these restitution points. The hours were 2 for 1 – so if a student had 16 hours of restitution to make up, it was wiped clean by attending 8 hours of class. On top of double credit for the hours spent, the class was free to students, adding additional incentive. Furthermore, the School of Life Foundation provided the trainers and all materials – all at no cost to the high school.

"Those were typically my more at-risk kids for not graduating. Those are the kids that actually have lower grades because they were missing a lot of school. We invited the kids to go and they just grabbed a hold of it. It was a great fit for the kids."

- Justin Keate
Vice Principal, Desert Hills High School

The School of Life Method:

- No cost to schools
- No cost to students
- Certified trainers
- Character education
- 8 hours of class instruction
- Highly interactive
- Take home workbook
- Proven method
- Education Advisory Board

"Who knew that being late for school and getting restitution would result in changing my perspective on life and people? I found myself through this program. I'm so thankful that I had this opportunity to do this and I will always remember the stories and experiences."

- Cody

The program quickly became a critical part of the culture at Desert Hills High School. It became a positive behavior intervention for students. It turned the students around and stuck with them past graduation.

"Even though we weren't talking about grades much at all in the School of Life Class, a nice byproduct is that everyone who chose to do the program, their grades were going up," said Keate.

By tracking GPA, Keate was able to see exactly when a student entered the program as grades significantly changed.

STATISTICS SHOW THE CHANGE

Statistical analysis of the School of Life class from the past three years shows that this program positively affects students' lives.

In the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years, only one high school (Desert Hills) kept statistics on students' GPA before and after attending the class - with an overall 16% increase in GPA.

For the 2013-2014 school year, five traditional high schools and two alternative high schools kept track of GPA. They also tracked graduation rates with phenomenal results. Student surveys were added as well – and they show improvement in attitudes and homework completion.

Statistical Overview

The data were collected through a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Each high school tracked classroom performance and GPA before and after the program, as well as the number of students officially "off track" to graduate both before and after the program, and ultimately the graduation rates of those who participated. Students also responded to surveys before and after taking the course.

"I'm a numbers guy, and the numbers bear out that what the School of Life does is making a difference."

*-John Baggaley,
Statistician & Data Research Analyst*

"I cannot thank you enough for introducing me to the School of Life program. We can all see how much that has changed me for the better."

-Charlotte

"There was a 16% total average increase in overall GPA. That's huge for a class that doesn't even talk about grades. All they talk about is improving their attitude, being more grateful, and learning to get out of their own way."

*-Justin Keate,
Vice Principal, Desert Hills High School*

In the 2013-2014 school year, there were 401 students who took the opening survey for the School of Life course. Of that group, 290 (72.3%) completed the closing survey as well. The numbers for the closing survey were affected by some students who did not finish the course, as well as some issues in the administration of the survey at the participating schools. It is estimated that 355 students completed the coursework. The graduation and GPA data are based on the students who took the class and remained at their school.

Graduation

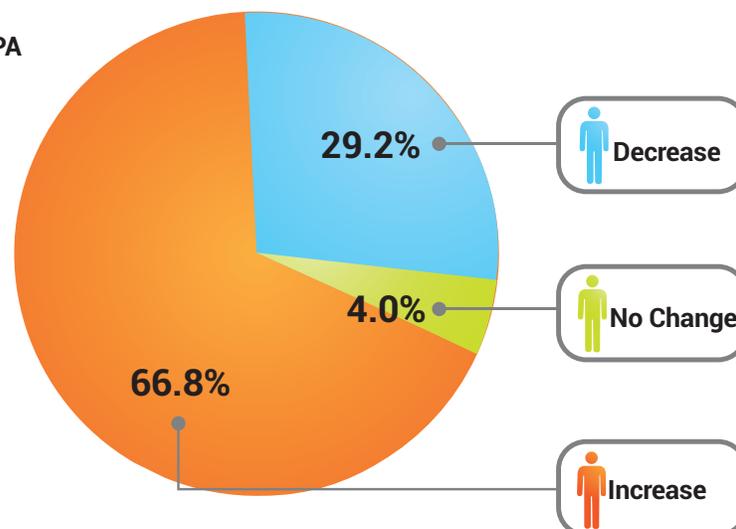
For all high school seniors who took the School of Life course, progress toward graduation was monitored. Out of 47 students from the five traditional high schools who were reported “Not on track to graduate” with their class, 44 graduated on time (93.6%). The alternative schools were also able to graduate a number of students. The adult high school (for students 18 and above), had 9 students graduate and all of the remaining students who took the course are continuing toward their graduation. The alternative high school (for students 9th-12th grades), had 16 seniors take the course, 8 of whom graduated (50%).

GPA

At the end of the school year, each school sent a list of the academic performance of students who took the School of Life course. The schools reported the GPA of each student prior to enrolling in the School of Life course, and their GPA after completing the course. The average GPA for these students rose from 2.31 to 2.63, an increase of nearly 14%.

Of these students, two-thirds increased their GPA after taking the School of Life course, while the other one-third remained the same or decreased.

Figure 1: Change in GPA



Homework:

Besides graduation rates and GPA tracking, students were surveyed on how often they turned in assigned homework on time.

Table 1 – Homework Turn-In Rates

	Top Category Before	Top Category After	Top Category Change	Top 2 Categories Before	Top 2 Categories After	Top 2 Categories Change
Overall	4.99%	17.59%	12.60%	53.12%	69.31%	16.19%
Male	3.48%	16.78%	13.30%	47.26%	67.83%	20.57%
Female	6.63%	18.31%	11.68%	58.67%	71.83%	13.16%
Caucasian	4.52%	18.45%	13.93%	54.30%	72.02%	17.73%
Minority	5.56%	16.39%	10.84%	51.67%	65.57%	13.91%

Before taking the course, only 5% responded that they always turned in their work on time, and 48.2% responded they usually turned in their work on time. The total for these top 2 categories was 53.1%.

After taking the course, 17.6% of students responded that they always turned in their work on time, a 12.6% increase; and the combined number for the top 2 categories was 69.3%, an increase of 16.2%.

Character:

Along with tracking scholastics, the surveys gathered information on character and quality of life for each of the students who participated in the School of Life course. The top category represents the highest quality answer possible for a given topic. Figure 2 shows the percent changes from before taking the School of Life course and after taking the course.

Figure 2 – Survey Responses in Top Category

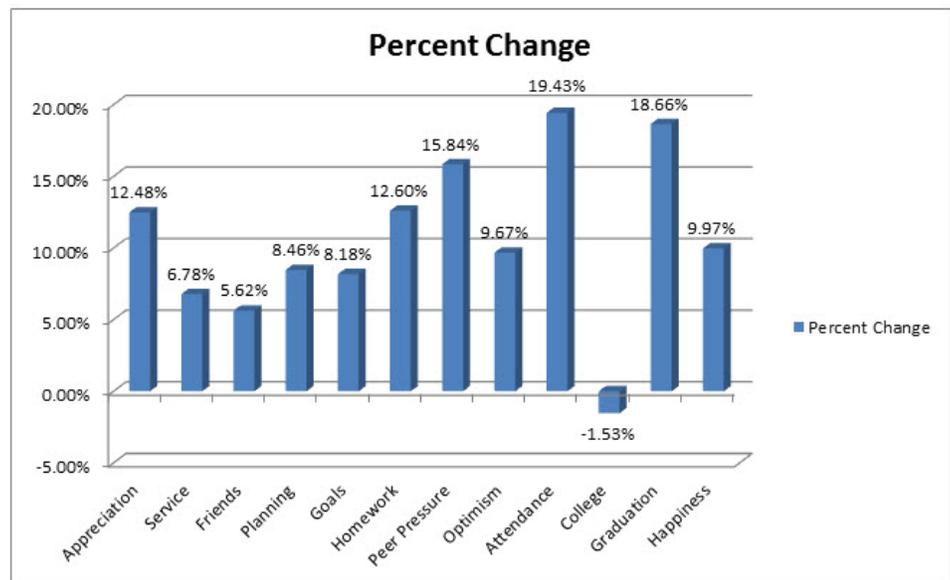


Table 2 – Movement to Top 2 Categories by Topic

Topic	Overall	Male	Female	Caucasian	Minority
Appreciation	4.09%	7.85%	1.00%	3.81%	4.26%
Service	8.55%	9.81%	6.78%	11.05%	4.48%
Friends	15.26%	11.21%	18.22%	18.39%	10.95%
Planning	25.40%	21.94%	28.59%	25.01%	25.60%
Homework	16.19%	20.57%	13.16%	17.73%	13.91%
Peer Pressure	9.40%	11.75%	7.03%	8.05%	10.65%
Optimism	17.92%	10.31%	24.04%	20.15%	14.54%
Attendance	11.69%	20.22%	4.71%	14.96%	7.68%
Happiness	9.97%	7.91%	12.48%	11.16%	9.21%

While table 2 gives complete percentages in the top categories, table 3 presents the percentage of individual students who either moved up or down at least 1 category in their respective topics. These data come from a subset of the total group due to some minor matching issues between the pre class survey and post class survey.

Table 3

Topic	Increase	Decrease	No Change
Appreciation	27.87%	6.56%	65.57%
Service	26.98%	9.52%	63.49%
Friends	36.51%	19.05%	44.44%
Planning	57.14%	11.11%	31.75%
Goals	8.18%	0.00%	91.82%
Homework	33.33%	9.52%	57.14%
Peer Pressure	47.62%	14.29%	38.10%
Optimism	57.14%	6.35%	36.51%
Attendance	42.86%	0.00%	57.14%
Happiness	68.25%	11.11%	20.63%

Statistical Conclusion:

The statistical analysis reveals firm support to show that this program is making a change. As John Baggaley, statistician said, "I'm a numbers guy, and the numbers bear out that what the School of Life does is making a difference."

HISTORY OF THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

Jack Rolfe began the School of Life Foundation in 2007 as a way to help students “school” their toughest opponents - themselves.

Rolfe, a former physical therapist and basketball coach, compiled truths he had learned from his own life experiences into the book, *Learn to “School” Your Toughest Opponent.*

“Our mission is to teach these kids life skills,” Rolfe said. “We want to help increase the high school graduation rate.”

Jack shared the program through public speaking, donating the book to various youth organizations such as the Big Brother/Big Sister program and others.

In 2011, The School of Life Foundation partnered with Desert Hills High School and presented the program as a different choice to the traditional way restitution points were addressed.

The program was so successful that in 2013, the School of Life program was offered as an alternative to regular restitution in all the high schools in Washington County, Utah.

In 2014, the program is expanding into Northern Utah, Nevada, Oklahoma, and Michigan.

UNIQUE MODEL

The School of Life program consists of four, two-hour classes, taught by two paid professional trainers (usually one male and one female). These Certified School of Life Trainers (CSOLT) are key to the success of the program. The course can be modified for each particular school, but is usually taught once a week after school.



Our mission is to teach these kids life skills. We want to help increase the high school graduation-rate.”

- Jack Rolfe
School of Life Founder



We are seeking to help the students have 'ah ha' moments about these 10 principles and how - if they will align with them, and utilize them in their lives - their lives will be better.

Empowering students to take ownership of their own lives is the very core of what the School of Life is all about”

- Kip Kint,
Director of Training Services

The program is FREE. The school provides a classroom where trainers can show audio and video. They choose the students to participate, and agree to provide pre and post data on GPA and graduation info (if applicable), as their "payment" for participation.

The program doesn't cost students money either. The students sign a Win-Win Agreement and agree to complete the course, do the homework, present a final project, and fill out two short online surveys (one before the course and another after the course.)

Professional Trainers Crucial

Most other programs utilize volunteers. At first glance, this might seem the best way to cost-effectively administer a program. Volunteers are usually passionate and dedicated to helping students.

However, few volunteers have the aptitude and skill necessary to read students' reactions, assess their level of engagement, and adjust their training so that students are absorbed in learning - especially students who usually don't want to attend classes.

As trainers are the crux of this program, they are carefully chosen. The application process includes submission of two videos, including one showing the trainer leading a live class, as well as a series of interviews. Trainers are selected because they have the ability to connect with their audience, assess reactions, and draw students in.

Trainers are oriented and go through an unpaid training and observation phase, assisting more experienced trainers in actual classroom settings to make sure they are a good fit for the program.

Training is based on teaching the "The A's," which are the 10 principles found in the book *Learn to "School" Your Toughest Opponent*. This includes understanding the subtleties and application of the principles in life. Trainers are well-versed in the hidden elements of teaching these principles, resulting in "Ah ha" moments for the students.

"It's a great fit for schools. I've never seen any other program that's been able to reach unreachable kids in such a short time. It's been phenomenal to watch it happen."

*-Justin Keate, Vice Principal,
Desert Hills High School*

Certified, professional trainers are uniquely able to:

- ✓ Assess engagement levels
- ✓ Maintain students' interest
- ✓ Adjust training for each student
- ✓ Vary teaching methods
- ✓ Recognize and accommodate different learning styles
- ✓ Adapt program to the students' needs
- ✓ Utilize technology effectively to enhance learning
- ✓ Genuinely care about the success of the students
- ✓ Help each student align the principles taught with his or her own situation

The goal is to help students grasp, apply, and internalize the principles, so classes aren't just sitting and listening – time passes quickly as students interact with instructors and each other. There is game playing, video watching, humorous stories, inspirational stories, and lots of discussion.

Kip Kint, Director of Training Services, said, "You see some students come in, lean back in their chairs, arms folded, and their expressions say, 'I dare you to teach me something.' And within 15 to 20 minutes you're pulling them in and they're engaged."

Although grades aren't discussed, when students are empowered and grasp the principles, their desire to succeed propels them to get better grades

Curriculum

The principles taught in *Learn to "School" Your Toughest Opponent* are presented as 10 "A's," and students are encouraged to 'Achieve Straight A's in The School of Life.'

Each step in the workbook is an "A," such as "Appreciate" (teaches gratitude), "Assist" (focuses on service to others), and "Aim" (setting goals). Students are each given their own workbook to keep, and are encouraged to refer to it as their roadmap to Straight A's in life.

"The helicopter view is that all of the 10 A's are principles," said Kint. "A principle by definition is a natural law or fundamental truth. When we apply them – and align with them – we are empowered in our lives."

"It was the whole program combined together that helped me," said Adam Nilssen. "The way they set it up. Not any one specific 'A,' but all of it working to help you be a better person. It was all so rewarding if you actually apply yourself."

I think one of the reasons this program has stuck with me is because the instructors actually care about me and not just about the program."
- Adam



Business and Community Involvement

High school students who drop out aren't just a school problem – they're a community problem.

For a program to provide long-lasting results and be cost-effective, community and business involvement is necessary. Businesses and concerned citizens donate money and time to help the School of Life Foundation function.

Erik Sorenson said, "The amazing thing is the School of Life Foundation has been able to make more of a difference with a smaller program than many other national programs are making."

Sorenson, owner of Sorenson Advertising, is a corporate sponsor of the School of Life Foundation. His philosophy on giving is to be a donor for the sole reason of helping the students and the program grow and flourish.

Being a sponsor adds an extra layer of meaning to work. Sorenson employees know that though they may not be giving directly, they are giving just by working hard at their jobs. They know that some of the funds from their company go to support the School of Life Foundation.

"It gives me and my employees a sense of 'it's not just about coming to work every day and working for the almighty dollar,'" said Sorenson. "Ultimately it's about blessing the lives of other people and making a difference in somebody else's life."

Over the years, Sorenson has been involved in several foundations that do a lot of good. He said, "I've never found an organization like the School of Life Foundation that truly does what they say they're going to do. In other organizations, a lot of the funds don't necessarily go where you would hope they go. Every dollar that is given to the School of Life Foundation goes further than any dollar you would give anywhere else."

Every dollar that is given to the School of Life Foundation goes further than any dollar you would give anywhere else."

-Erik Sorenson

It gave me motivation to get going on all my college and after high school goals that I want to achieve. I honestly was sad when it was over."

-Madison

Sorenson has gone through the School of Life Foundation inside and out. He even sat in on training sessions in a classroom. He was impressed with how quickly the program changed lives, so he approached Jack Rolfe about becoming a donor.

As a business owner, Sorenson wants to see his money used wisely. He feels the money donated to the School of Life Foundation goes further and makes more of an impact than anywhere else.

Lindsey Christensen also has experience with student improvement programs. She said, "The School of Life is teaching character-building attributes quickly. It gets them excited. It's a phenomenal program that's done quickly and efficiently instead of being mindless and activity-page oriented."

FUTURE VISION

The School of Life Foundation would like to grow to be present in every high school in the nation, as well as have a program in middle and elementary schools.

To help them accomplish these goals, they have established an advisory board

Advisory Board

Lindsey Christensen is the Chair of the Educational Advisory Board. The Advisory Board is made up of business professionals who act as a sounding board and give assistance as needed. It also contains students and educators from around the country.

The Advisory Board's main purpose is to assist the School of Life Foundation in expanding. They give an outside view of what the School of Life is trying to accomplish.

The School of Life program changed my perspective on how I should live my life. I know that being happy and positive towards me and other people is the only way I can truly be happy. I'm thankful for the opportunity to be a part of this class and will encourage people to participate in it in the future."

-Kenzie

Future Goals:

- ✓ **Expand into every high school nation-wide**
- ✓ **Grow a program in middle schools**
- ✓ **Develop a course for elementary schools starting in fourth grade**
- ✓ **Advisory Board in every State**
- ✓ **Regional & National Advisory Boards**

When single-mindedly pursuing a goal, there is a tendency to become closed-minded and view the world with blinders. The Advisory Board helps the Foundation step back and look at the whole picture. They provide clarity, insight, and different perspectives.

The members of the Advisory Board also help the School of Life Foundation to customize the program for local needs.

This structure will allow for local support so the program can meet the needs of each small market, as well as grow nationally.

Focus on Graduation and Character Education

The School of Life is currently targeting high school students – especially seniors – to focus on helping them graduate. However, this program could help students throughout their formative years if it was offered starting in fourth grade.

Many students don't get character education in their homes. Either they're in a home where these principles aren't taught, or they've distanced themselves from a painful home life and can't perceive their life differently.

Fourth grade is a perfect time to catch these students and help them see themselves differently and gain the confidence that they can have a wonderful, productive life.

It's never too early – and it's never too late – to begin using the principles taught through the School of Life program. Besides teens, this program gives adults hope. It helps them achieve their goals – whether getting their GED, diploma, or attending college.

"It doesn't matter where you're from or what lifestyle you live, the A's are 100% always true." Christensen said, "If you are living those A's you will succeed. If you're not successful, it probably means you're not keeping one of the A's."



"I believe the program appeals to everybody because the A's never change. If you live the A's your life will be a success."

*-Lindsey Christensen,
Chair of the Educational Advisory Board*

"By the time I was half-way through the book, it wasn't that I had to read it – I actually wanted to keep reading. ... Now I don't look at everyday like 'what do I have to do today,' but now I look at everyday like 'what can I do today?'"

-Tawni

CONCLUSION

The School of Life Foundation wants to make a positive, lasting change in youth. After all, youth are our future – our future business owners, our community leaders, our future teachers.

As Adam Nilssen said, “Before the School of Life program I didn't really care about graduating. They were able to give me so much more confidence in myself. They helped so I wanted to succeed. I wanted to do the best I could, so they were a factor in my graduating.”

You can help a youth, like Adam, gain the confidence to face his or her future. A future filled with hope, self-determination, and graduation. A future bright, happy, and productive.

**GET INVOLVED – EITHER FINANCIALLY OR AS A TRAINER.
YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN A STUDENT'S LIFE.**

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