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Improving Dropout in Utah Schools: School of Life Foundation

Hannah Michael Wright, Leanne Hawken, Justin Keate, and Jack Rolfe
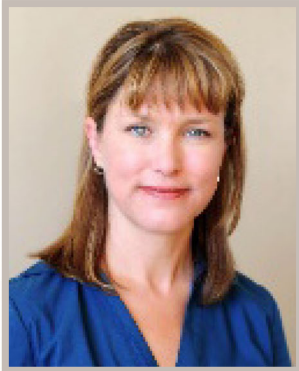
While dropout rates have been declining (Freeman et al., 2015) since the 1990's call for educational reform, the overall dropout rate in the U.S is 6.2% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). Many factors contribute to student's decision to drop out of school including: school climate and student discipline (Bohanon & Wu, 2014). While the overall dropout rate is 6.2% it should be noted that students with minority identities and disabilities are more likely to dropout than their white peers; Caucasian at 4.6%, black 6.5% and Hispanic 9.2% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Students who find themselves unable to meet the growing demands of school and receive traditional discipline approaches are also at an increased risk for dropping out (Morrissey, Bohanon, & Fenning, 2010). While there has been a declining trend in dropout rates (National Center for Educational

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Statistics, 2018), the impact that dropping out has on society and the student's future trajectory can be devastating (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). With numerous negative consequences such as living in poverty, an increased likelihood of being in prison, and negative employment outcome, (Christle, et al., 2007) it is essential that dropout interventions are effective at targeting the reasons why student's dropout.

Dropout Interventions

While there are a number of existing dropout prevention programs (e.g., Reconnecting Youth, Check and Connect, PRE-PaRE), there is a paucity of evidence to support the effectiveness of these programs (Freeman et al., 2015). The commonly studied interventions aim to teach students skills to prevent – dropping out (Alvarez & Anderson-Ketchmark, 2010; Cheney et al., 2010; Cho, Hallfors, & Sanchez, 2005; Maynard, Kjellstrand, & Thompson, 2014; McDaniel, Houchins, & Robinson, 2016; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998); however, these interventions do not always fit within a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). This article details the creation and implementation of a dropout prevention

program School of Life Foundation (SOLF) intervention which fits within a PBIS framework and shows promising results in teaching skills to reduce dropout rates.

School of Life

The School of Life Foundation (SOLF) intervention is aimed at decreasing student dropout through a prevention curriculum. This intervention focusses on students who are seen as at-risk for dropping out of school. Some of the common factors that go into determining risk are: tardies, low academics, and behavioral issues. This intervention has been implemented in Utah schools as an alternative to traditional discipline. By providing students with an alternative to school detention and suspension, and instead by teaching key life skills, they are more likely to stay in school. SOLF has had a positive impact on a number of students in Utah schools (Hawken et al., 2018) and serves as a cost efficient intervention. This article will describe the basic implementation of the SOLF intervention and the preliminary research supporting the intervention.

Setting the Stage for SOLF

One of the hallmarks of this intervention is the trainer/student interaction. This interaction is vital to the integrity of the intervention. The SOLF trainers are members of the student's community, such as teachers or other educators which allow the students to make meaningful connections with the program. Prior to the intervention being implemented, the trainers, two per group, one male and one female, undergo 14 hours of training on how to implement the intervention. This training is comprised of both observing and partaking in a SOLF class as well as classroom instruction. The classroom instruction is centered on implementation fidelity and requires that the trainers practice presenting materials as well as review the standardized script of content.

Once trainers have received adequate instruction on how to implement SOLF, they are assigned to schools, and students are chosen to participate in the intervention. Each school creates a list of criteria to determine if a student is at risk for dropping out. The flexibility in allowing each school to determine risk criteria allows the intervention to serve the unique community of the school. Prior to participation students are required to sign an agreement indicating their dedication to participate in the intervention. Additionally, students fill out a survey to gauge their current views and abilities.

SOLF Curriculum

The key components of SOLF are nine A's that serve to guide lessons and the intervention: 1) Appreciate, 2) Assist, 3) Attitude, 4) Aim, 5) Align, 6) Action, 7) Associate, 8) Avoid, and 9) Adapt. These A's are the foundation upon which students can successfully navigate school and avoid dropping out. SOLF is delivered after school over four sessions, each lasting two hours. These sessions each follow a similar format and consist of: a check in, lesson and discussion, and closing comments and support. SOLF serves as an efficient intervention due to the highly scripted nature of the lessons. This allows the trainers to focus their energy on interacting with the students and engaging them in discussion rather than generating content. Each lesson is delivered through PowerPoint and includes a mix of videos and didactic instruction. Throughout the lessons the trainers encourage participation in the form of asking questions and challenge the students to apply the A's to their own lives. Three A's are covered in each session.

School Connectedness			Motivation		
Assist	*Aim/ Attitude*	*Avoid/ Associate*	*Align*	*Action*	*Adapt/Appreciate*
Had to take care of or financially support my family	Did not like school, Thought it would be easier to get a GED or other alternative high school credential	My friends had dropped out of school	Got behind in school work or got poor grades	Was suspended or expelled	Could not work and go to school at the same time, Did not need to complete high school for what I wanted to do, Wanted to gain early admission to school that provides occupational training or a college

Week One

Week One of SOLF covers Appreciate, Assist, and Attitude as well as orients students to the intervention. Expectations are established for communication as well as participation. Students are then provided with a copy of the SOLF handbook, "*Learn to School Your Toughest Component,*" which provides reading and homework assignments that follow the lessons. Appreciate covers being grateful for one's support system and opportunities with the corresponding homework of writing a letter to someone in their lives. Assist emphasizes the importance of helping others and includesa corresponding homework assignment to assist someone during the week. Attitude introduces students to the power of positive attitude in shaping their mood and emotions. For their homework students engage in a daily exercise of looking in the mirror and adjusting their attitude.

A	Concept	Homework
Appreciate	Being grateful	Writing a letter
Assist	Helping others	Help another person
Attitude	Positive thinking	Mirror exercise

Week Two

Week Two of the intervention opens with a review of the previously assigned homework and reminder of the A's covered. For week two Aim, Align, and Action are explored and discussed. Aim introduces students to goal setting, in the form of SMART (specific, measureable, appropriate, realistic and timely) goals. Students are taught how to create effective goals and given the homework of creating one short-term goal to be accomplished within the week. Align exposes students to organizational skills and the importance of organization for future success. Students explore a number of organizational systems in class and are given the homework of organizing a space in their life. Finally, Action is discussed as making the choice to achieve something and avoid procrastination. Students are given the assignment to complete one thing that they have been avoiding.

Trainers undergo training		
Students selected for intervention		
Week 1: Students introduced to program, lecture		
Appreciate	Assist	Attitude
Week 2: Check in and lecture		
Aim	Align	Action
Week 3: Check in and lecture		
Associate	Avoid	Adapt
Week 4: Personal presentation & certificates		

Overview of the A's

The A's that are covered in the intervention are aimed at providing students with the skills necessary to stay in school. These A's encompass factors that can be linked to students being at risk for dropping out. The chart below lists some of the most common reasons student drop out of high school and how those align with the A's. While the A's cannot capture all the possible reasons that students have for dropping out, they do span a wide variety of circumstances. Additionally, these A's map on to two constructs shown to impact drop out prevention: school connectedness and motivation. School connectedness has shown to have strong implications for lat-er success and preventing dropping out (Biag, 2016; Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004), with students demonstrating more connectedness having higher grades and more engagement (Niehaus, Rudasill, & Rakes, 2012). Additionally, there has been an observed link between motivation and students' decisions to dropout (Khalkhali, Sharifi, & Nikyar, 2013) with students who drop out demonstrating lower levels of motivation (Vallerand et al., 1997). Taken together, the A's are an effective framework that address the major reasons why students choose to dropout in addition to targeting two key factors in dropout prevention.

A	Concept	Homework
Aim	Goal setting	SMART goals
Align	Organization	Organize space
Action	Making choices	Take action on a task that has been avoided

Week Three

Week three, similar toWeek Two, starts with a review of the assigned homework before moving into the new A's. Week Three incorporates the final A's: Associate, Avoid, and Adapt. Associate encourages students to make friends and connection with others in their community and emphasizes the importance of friendship. Homework for this A is to meet one new person over the next week. Avoid, in conjunction with Associate, emphasizes abstaining from people, places, and things that might harm them or keep them from their goals. Following this A, students are to reflect on their support system and how it aligns with their current goals. The final A covered, Adapt, emphasizes the importance of being flexible in accepting challenges and changes in life. The corresponding homework requires the students to convert a challenge into an opportunity and share their experience with someone in their support system. Additional homework for Week Three includes the students preparing for their final presentation (discussed below).

A	Concept	Homework
Associate	Make connections	Meet someone new
Avoid	Avoid harmful things	Reflection
Adapt	Flexibility	Convert a challenge

Week Four

The final week of SOLF is aimed at reflecting on what has been taught. For this reflection students are required to prepare a short presentation explaining which A has impacted them the most. Students are encouraged to use a media platform such as a song, poem, or visual art form that is unique to them Following the presentations students complete a closing survey, mirroring the one they took prior to the class, and receive a certificate of completion.

Outcomes

Outcomes for SOLF have been evaluated using the data collected from the opening and closing survey as well as data provided by the administrators to the SOLF research team (Hawken et al., 2018). This survey spans all the A's and requires students to reflect on their growth. Currently, results have demonstrated a significant reduction in tardies and absences. Additionally, students who participated in SOLF had significant increases in motivation and school connectedness following the intervention. The final finding, and perhaps the most relevant, shows that 85% of students who were off track to graduate ended the year by graduating or advancing grade levels.

Conclusion

High school dropout is a phenomenon that impacts the United States as well as Utah specifically. The consequences for students who dropout can be both detrimental and severe. These consequences demonstrate

the need for efficient and effective dropout prevention curriculum. Given the need to address dropout in Utah high schools, the School of Life Foundation intervention should be considered as a viable way to increase students' motivation and school connectedness. Additionally, this intervention aims to increase students' skills in a number of areas which increases their ability to be successful and complete high school.

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Hannah Wright is a doctoral candidate at the University of Utah. She can be reached at Hannah.Wright@utah.edu. Correspondence regarding this manuscript may be sent to Hannah Wright, 1721 Campus Center Drive, Room 3220, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112. Email address: Hannah.Wright@utah.edu Phone Number: 801-581-7148; Fax Number: 801-581-5566.