

Groping for why

Parents, teachers, students evaluate drop-out problem

By Tracy Wilkerson

Johnny's parents receive a phone call for the high school counselor asking them to come in for a parent/teacher conference concerning their son's schoolwork.

At the conference, Johnny's parents become quite defensive and make several comments. 'Johnny's poor grades are not his fault, they are yours. You are the teacher; why aren't you teaching him anything? That's what you're being paid to do. I can't make him do his schoolwork. If I come down hard on him, he will quit trying or run away. I have tried.' Johnny's mother blames his father for not being strict enough with him, and they finally comment, 'Johnny hates the subject you teach, he thinks you pick on him. I can't make him like you or want to do his work.'

At parent/teacher conferences, teachers hear these comments very often. Some

parents accept responsibility for the children, others do not.

Teachers view student failures from a different perspective than parents. Following are some reasons teachers give for school failure and dropout. 1) Bad study habits. 2) Low reading levels. For example, some students have text books written at the ninth grade level when they are only reading at the fourth or fifth grade level. 3) Students don't take time to study for tests or take notes. Some expect teachers to spoon feed them. 4) Students are not responsible or disciplined.

Students offer still another viewpoint of failure. Freshmen, in particular, have given the following specific reasons. 1) 'High school expects too much from us.' 2) 'We have a lot more pressure than in grade school.' 3) 'Our homework loads are much bigger.' 4) 'We have so much

responsibility.' 5) 'The teachers are stricter than in grade school. They set work due dates and mean them.'

All these groups—parents, teachers, and students offer excuses and reasons for student failure, but who is at fault for the inefficiencies? Do parents excuse their children too much? Do high school teachers not teach at the student level? Do grade school teachers not prepare students adequately for high school? Or is it the fault of the students themselves, for not being motivated?

Finding out whose fault it is does not solve the problem. And besides giving reasons and excuses for failures, parents, teachers and students made the following suggestions.

Teachers offered two solutions. 1) When students come into high school as freshmen they should be offered classes at their particular level in each subject. 2) A voucher system, as suggested by Mr.

Brian Montgomery, VHS general science and math teacher, would give students the option of attending high school right out of eighth grade, or waiting up to five years until they are ready, emotionally and responsibly, to complete high school.

Mr. Randy Aultman, has suggested that the curriculum be revised so that freshmen are not bombarded with five required classes their first year. Mr. Aultman feels that adjusting the load of classes required for graduation, so that it is more in line with what is expected of sophomores, juniors, and seniors, would help.

These are all good suggestions, but who will take action to get something done?

Unless something is done soon, the Johnny's of Vernonia will be passed on through high school and continue on through life with very little chance of succeeding at a level that will contribute to their well-being or ours.

Principals view dropout problem from different angles

By Brooke Crowston

Mr. Aultman, VHS principal, has strong feelings about VHS dropouts and the reasons why there are so many. He feels that the breakdown starts in the home, where kids need the love, attention, and guardianship of their parents to motivate them to do well in school. 'Too many children are unsupervised in the home,' says Aultman.

As the kids enter kindergarten and leave home and its atmosphere, teachers take the reins of their basic training and discipline for the next nine years of their life. The teachers, therefore, are often times required to take the role of part-time mother or father. Mr. Aultman feels that during the junior high years, the kids need to develop more self-discipline for their high school career, rather than rely so heavily on the teachers.

Mr. Aultman concluded that the fault for dropouts does not lie solely with the parents, but must be shared by the schools. 'VHS, at this time, does not meet the needs of all the students,' says Aultman. He feels that the administration needs to broaden the high school curriculum to meet the needs of college-bound students, vocational and

trade-oriented students, and those students who need special education.

Opposed!

That is grade school principal Mr. Steve Farrell's feelings on failing students at the grade school level. He says that if a child fails a class once, taking it over won't make him or her work any harder.

When asked how grade school teachers deal with failing students, Mr. Farrell replied, 'We send referrals home a few weeks before the term is over, or whenever needed, to make the parents aware of the problem. Other than that, there's not a lot we can do.'

Mr. Farrell says that parents assume the responsibility through grade school, but when their children enter high school, they (the parents) give up.

Mr. Farrell feels that high school teachers need to be more aware of individual differences in students entering high school. An example he gave was that 'Teachers shouldn't teach just ninth grade level spelling. They should teach whatever level the kids are at. If the child needs special education in grade school, obviously he is not ready for regular classes in high school.'

Tardiness, absenteeism worst problems for employers

Why is there a lack of interest, tardiness and absenteeism in school and on the job? This is what teachers, administrators, and employers are asking. They've taken polls, asked questions, set up new programs to prevent it, but nothing seems to help.

In a poll taken by the *Journal*, asking former students why they dropped out, the most reasons stated for leaving school were teachers: 19.3 percent, dislike of school in general: 15.3 percent, lack of credits necessary for graduation: 13.6 percent, dislike of a specific school: 13.1 percent, boredom or lack of interest: 11.7 percent, a desire for an alternative education program: 11.2 percent.

In a report in *Education USA* on how dropping out, tardiness and absenteeism showed up later on the job, Mr. Thomas Murphy, chairman of the board at General Motors, remarked, 'We discovered very early that many of the problems we were having with young employees were the same as those the

schools were experiencing. If a student fails to follow instructions in school, is frequently late, or often absent, you can expect those bad habits to carry over to the job.'



Lisa Rudiger, Larry Rider, Terry Newton, Geography topic: Freshmen give their

Bruce Carter discuss World views on "failure" in related story above.

Students need to take more responsibility, according to Ms. Colleen O'Neil

Johnny brings his report card home at the end of seventh grade. He has passed three subjects, barely, but has failed English.

The following September, he reports to school and is enrolled in eighth grade English. Why wasn't he held back to repeat the subject he failed? 'Because he won't learn any more or improve in school if he is held back,' is one reason offered by Ms. Colleen O'Neil, seventh and eighth grade English teacher. She added, 'If parents want their child to repeat a

subject, it is their decision to do so.

Ms. O'Neil feels, however, that the students need to face the consequences of failure. The responsibility for their failure must be placed on the students, not the teachers, parents, or the system.

In order to keep students who are failing from dropping out, teachers and administrators try to make school more attractive. According to Ms. O'Neil, teachers try to make students understand why they are there and why it is important that they gain the skills necessary for life beyond school.

Dropping out not a wise decision according to dropout, dropout's parent

'It's better to stay in school,' comments former VHS student, Theresa Olson.

Theresa feels that her grade school education did prepare her for high school, but after failing a class her freshman year, she began to get farther and farther behind.

'The teachers helped me,' recalled Theresa, 'but I just got bored sitting in school everyday.'

Theresa is now trying for her G.E.D. and has high hopes of passing.

One of the problems the student faced was the difficulty of regular classes. The child could not function in grade level English and math classes, but his tests scores were too high for admittance to the special education skill center.

Getting further and further behind, and losing motivation, the student became a potential dropout.

Not being able to deal with the strict disciplinary procedures and enforcement of school rules, her child dropped out.

The dropout's mother did lay all the blame on the school however. She felt that outside forces distracted her child from studying. 'A sixteen year old having a car cares more about the car than school.'