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Voices of the Dropout: A Study of Early School Leavers at one First Nations School

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Executive Summary

Voices of the Dropout is a case study of early school leavers at one First Nations school. Through statistical analysis, student/dropout questionnaires, and personal interviews, current and former students present their views of the challenges they faced in trying to complete high school.

This study begins with a brief review of the statistical literature with respect to the school completion rates in Canada, Saskatchewan, and First Nations. This literature review is followed by an analysis of the dropout and school completion rates at Thunder Hills School*. The analysis reveals that only 21.7% of Thunder Hills School students graduate high school at the 'typical' age of 18. Further analysis indicates that the dropout rate at Thunder Hills School is almost three times that of the dropout rate for high school students in the province of Saskatchewan.

In a survey of 57 students, *Voices of the Dropout* reveals that dropping out is not a singular event nor is it caused by a single factor. Rather many of our students are weavers. They come in and out of Thunder Hills School and other First Nations and provincial schools, and they come in and out of our community. They spend time in school, time at home, and, for a few, some time in the work force. The factors that push and pull a student out of school include education factors, family factors, and personal factors.

The personal interviews are woven together in a narrative style and are presented thematically. These short narratives are the most powerful aspect of this study as they present graphically how the goal to complete high school to "give my kids a better life" is thwarted by academic challenges, family responsibilities, drugs and alcohol, and crime. Students also share their views on how the school can be improved to reduce the dropout rate.

Voices of the Dropout concludes with recommendations provided by both the study participants and the researchers.

* The names in this report are fictional in order to preserve student confidentiality.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank a number of people and organizations for their contribution to and support for this study.

We would like to thank the students who participated in our study through questionnaires and personal interviews. Your sharing of stories and perspectives provides a better understanding of the challenges faced by youth in our community. Your voice will benefit greatly education staff, parents, and current students. Without your honesty and time this study could not be completed.

We would also like to thank the local education authority for having the courage to approve this study.

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Research Rationale and Objectives

Many school systems in Saskatchewan and Canada are concerned about the dropout rate in some of their schools. Certainly, First Nations schools are no different. Historically, the school completion rate of First Nations students has been very low, whether students have attended local, First Nations schools or provincial schools. School systems seem to be very aware of the rate of student attrition, but few studies provide the perspective of Aboriginal students who struggle with second language/dialect challenges, cultural dislocation, poor achievement, and social problems.

Voices of the Dropout seeks to combine both the statistical data and analysis and the stories of students to better understand why students at one school leave before graduating. This study will provide teachers at Thunder Hills School with a greater understanding of a complex issue. Its findings will also enable the school staff and education board to develop appropriate academic programs, supportive learning environments, and relevant counseling and guidance strategies to assist students at risk of dropping out. The study will also be of interest to interagency groups that provide support services to children, youth, and families in First Nations communities.

More specifically the objectives of this study are as follows:

- To identify the current dropout rate at Thunder Hills School
- To survey dropouts to identify the reasons why they first left school and what conditions might be required for them to return
- To collect the stories of 'dropouts', returnees, and 'successful' students regarding the factors that push and pull them out of school
- Through input from students and analysis of the study's findings, identify what services could be provided to keep high-risk students in school
- To make recommendations to Thunder Hills School staff and the local education authority regarding changes to academic and counseling programming
- With appropriate interagency groups, develop a plan of action to implement relevant programming changes in community services

Research Methodology

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Statistical data were gathered regarding the level of student attrition and school completion over a five year period. The primary sources for this data were the school registers and questionnaires. A variety of analyses were conducted with the data to gain a range of perspectives on school completion and early school leavers (dropouts).

QUESTIONNAIRES

Fifty-seven students who have been enrolled at the secondary level (Grades 10 to 12) at Thunder Hills School during the past five years were asked to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix A) identifying why they dropped out of school (or stayed in school), what they have been doing since they left Thunder Hills School, and their future plans.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Nine students were interviewed. The purpose of the interviews was to 'hear the stories' of two types of students: students who had dropped out of school at one point during their education, and students who had stayed in school continuously from year to year. The interviews enabled student-participants to share their experiences about both school factors and external factors that affect a student's decision to quit school. The stories are presented in such a manner that student voice will not be lost while maintaining anonymity.

Community and School Profile

Thunder Hills Reserve is located in north-central Saskatchewan. This Cree reserve is home to 900 people. The languages spoken are English and Cree. As the reserve is reasonably close to an urban area, community members have good access to urban services and amenities. Approximately 60% of the reserve population is unemployed. Thirty percent of reserve members are employed on the reserve and 5 to 10% are employed off the reserve. In the *Aboriginal Community Data Initiative*, the Community Well-Being (CWB) index combines indicators for income, education, labour force activity, and housing conditions into a single number out of a total of 100. The CWB index for Thunder Hills First Nation is 63 (Statistics Canada, 2003). The highest CWB index for Saskatchewan is 95, and the average for Saskatchewan First Nations is 59.

Thunder Hills First Nation has a good community infrastructure with the exception of roads. The community is served by a school, clinic, daycare, Head Start program, Band office, water and sewage plant, and gas bar/convenience store. Community services are provided in the areas of family counseling, drug and alcohol addictions counseling, social assistance, and child protection. Recreational facilities include a band hall, a school gymnasium, playgrounds, and an out-door ice rink. Close to Thunder Hills First Nation, families have access to beaches, fishing, golf and the entertainment offered by a small urban area. Annual celebrations include a winter festival, powwow, cultural camp and Treaty Day, as well as numerous school sponsored events.

Thunder Hills School is administered by Thunder Hills Education Authority, which is a registered non-profit corporation in the province of Saskatchewan. The Thunder Hills Education Authority was incorporated in 1995 and took over administration of school operations in August 1996. The Board is made up of six elected members. Two elders also sit on the Board. The sole function of the Education Authority is to administer Kindergarten to Grade 12 education on Thunder Hills Reserve.

Thunder Hills School operates out of a facility built in 1997. The school is modern with an excellent library, large gymnasium, specialized labs (computer, science, home economics and industrial arts), and a performing arts stage. The school has a professional staff of 18, a paraprofessional staff of 12, and a support staff of 9. Student enrollment is stable at 250 students, including a half-time nursery program for four year olds.

Thunder Hills School program follows Saskatchewan Learning curricula with relevant adaptations to meet individual learning abilities and reflect local culture/knowledge. Students with special needs, both behavioural and cognitive, are supported with programs at the elementary level and middle/secondary level. Cree language is taught to students in Kindergarten to Grade 5, and elders are utilized for special purposes in the school, e.g., counseling and cultural events.

The secondary level program was implemented at Thunder Hills School in 1997. The first students graduated in 2000. Over the years a number of students have transferred to urban high schools, but only three have graduated from these schools. Many of the students who transferred to urban schools and subsequently dropped out, returned to Thunder Hills School.

Three special projects currently operate out of the school, under the local board's authority. *The Community-School Partnerships Program* seeks to involve parents in their children's education through family literacy, parenting workshops, and volunteering in school activities. A second project, *Supporting At-Risk Kids*, facilitates the development of effective inter-agency collaboration to provide community-based services to children and families. A project scheduled for 2005–2006 implementation, the *Family First Wellness Program*, will provide recreational and educational programming for children and adults during the evenings.

Dropout Rates in Canada and Saskatchewan: A Statistical Summary

Although the current rate of school completion and the rate of early school leavers in Canada are a concern, the rates have actually been improving over the past half-century. Statistics Canada (2003) reports that fifty years ago less than half the population attained a Grade 9 education. By 2002, 45% of Canadians had completed some form of post-secondary education. Obviously, the job market has demanded more education during these years and students have stayed in school longer, some much longer. Approximately 77% of Canadian youth in 2000/01 graduated with a high school diploma. The typical age for graduating high school in most provinces is 18. In 2000, 61% (Statistics Canada, 2003) of students graduated at the typical age, compared to 55% in 1995. Graduation after the typical age fell during this same period from 21% to 17%.

The Canadian Centre for Adolescent Research (2000) provides a summary of significant data. The annual average dropout rate in Canadian schools is 18%, i.e., approximately 120,000 students nationally. “Almost 50% of all people who dropout,” the centre reports, “return to school by the age of 20” (p.1). The fact that many school leavers return to school is significant and is particularly relevant to this study. Statistics Canada (2003) concludes that “for many students, leaving school is a process, not a singular event” (p. 8).

Like the dropout rate for Canada, the Saskatchewan dropout rate has been improving over the past three decades. During the period from 1976 to 1991, the dropout rate in Saskatchewan decreased from 39% to 24% (Statistics Canada, 1995). For those students who do not complete school by age 18, there appears to be a persistence leading to graduation after more than the normal three years to complete secondary level courses. For instance, 72.4% of Saskatchewan students entering Grade 10 in 1995-1996 completed Grade 12 three years later. The school completion rate, however, increased to 79.2 % for this same Grade 10 cohort by 2001-2002 (Saskatchewan Learning, 2002).

The dropout rate in Saskatchewan in 1999, as reported by the Youth in Transitions Survey (using a 20-year-old cohort), was one of the lowest in Canada at 7.3% (HRDC, 2002 cited in Saskatchewan Learning, 2002). Saskatchewan Learning (2002) and Statistics Canada (2002) report that the school completion rate, as a percentage of 18-year-olds, in 2000-2001 was 79.6%.

School completion statistics for First Nations students, whether on or off the reserve, are relatively sparse. As well, some of the data that have been gathered lack clarity or do not include significant cohort data. The Assembly of First Nations reports that “about 70% of First Nations students on-reserve will never complete high school” (INAC, 2000 cited in AFN, 2005). Graduation rates recorded by the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) range from

28.9% to 32.1% annually. This rate of school completion, however, does not specify the cohort group, although one source indicated that the cohort group was Grade 12 enrollees. The Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN, 2002) reports that 78% of First Nations youth in Saskatchewan have less than a Grade 12 diploma.

Saskatchewan Learning (2002) reports that the school completion rate for students enrolled in Grade 10 in First Nations schools between 1992-1993 and 1998-1999 was 34%. A recent indicators report completed by Prince Albert Grand Council reports that between 1992-1993 and 2000-2001, 57% of the Grade 12 cohort had graduated and 37.2% of the Grade 10 cohort had graduated.

Defining the type of school completer and school leaver is not as easy as it once was. Many students leave high school a number of times and later return. For many students who do not return to high school, training or adult upgrading are chosen as more viable options for increasing their employability. The issues raised by the above summary are particularly pertinent to the Thunder Hills School study of dropouts.

Research Findings

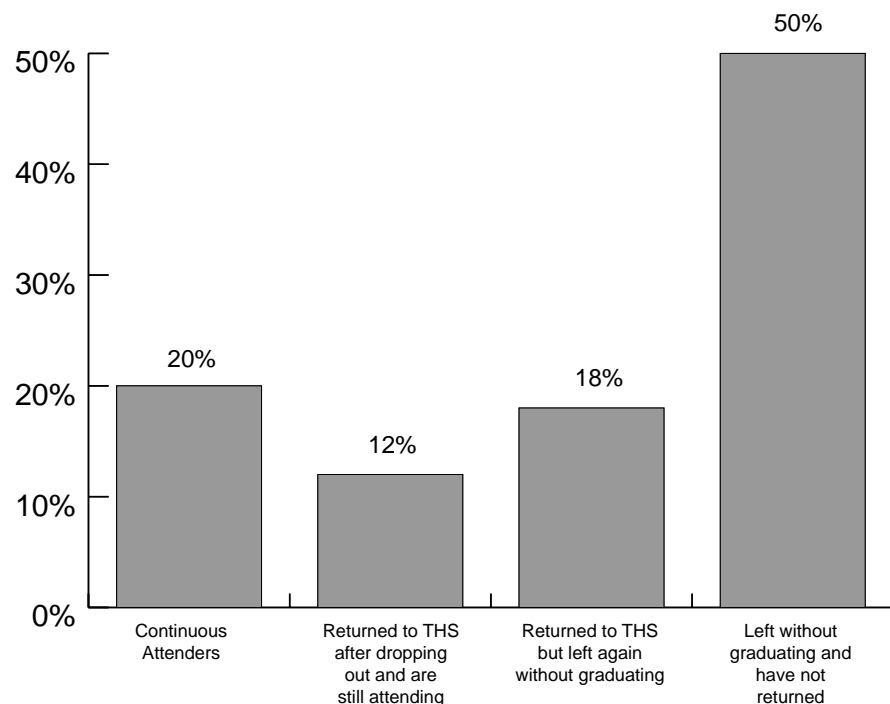
STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES AT THUNDER HILLS SCHOOL

Before reviewing the survey results and the stories of school dropouts, we reviewed the rates of school completion and dropout at Thunder Hills School. Our study looked at the enrollment and withdrawal rates of all students in Grade 9 to Grade 12 between 1998-1999 and 2002-2003, during which time 163 students were enrolled at Thunder Hills School.

PERSISTENCE IN STAYING IN SCHOOL

Chart 1 below provides school attendance figures with respect to students' persistence in continuing their studies from year to year. Although Thunder Hills School's rate of early school leavers is somewhat exaggerated, because it does not distinguish between early school leaving and transfers to other school systems, the statistics closely reflect reality, given the low graduation rate of Thunder Hills youth in other Band or provincial jurisdictions (about one per year).

Chart 1: Analysis of Secondary Level Enrollment 1998 to 2003 with Respect to Persistence



Only 20% of students attending Thunder Hills School between 1998 and 2003 can be considered continuous attenders, i.e., students who continue regular attendance at Thunder Hills School from year to year until they graduate. Most of our students are *weavers*. They literally come in and out of the school system more than once. Such students may be dropouts from our school or other schools, both First Nations and provincial. Many students will drop out and return many times. As a result, the majority of students registering in Grade 11 or 12 have been 'mature students', i.e., students who have been out of the school system for an extended period of time. This fact raises the question: How can Thunder Hills School better accommodate dropouts, given that the majority of students in Grade 11 and 12 are just that?

There is, however, a high level of persistence amongst some dropouts as can be seen by the age of most of our graduates, as described in Table 1.

STUDENTS' AGE AT GRADUATION

Most students do not complete Grade 12 at the 'typical' age of 18 at Thunder Hills School. The table below summarizes the age of Thunder Hills School students at the time of graduation between the years 2000 and 2005.

Table 1. Age at Graduation 2000 to 2005

Age	18	19	20	>21
Percentage of Grads	21.7%	4.4%	8.7%	65.2%

Only 21.7% of students graduate at the typical age of 18, which means they complete high school in the normal three year span. Fully 78.3% of the Grade 10 cohort did not complete high school at the typical age. The majority of students graduating from Grade 12 at Thunder Hills School are 19 years of age or older, with 73.9% of students graduating in their twenties. Of the number of students taking more than the typical three years to complete high school, only a small percentage would be continuous attenders who require more than three years to complete their secondary program. The majority of graduates, 65 to 70% of them, are students who have dropped out of school at least once before and returned to school at a later date. Many of our graduates have dropped out of school more than once.

Table 1 certainly indicates that our students are predominantly young adults especially when it comes to the year of graduation from grade 12. How should this fact influence programming, teaching strategies, support services, and counselling? Does the presence of adults in the school have other effects on the learning environment, school climate and student relations?

GRADE 12 ENROLLMENT PATTERNS

Table 2 presents an analysis of enrollment patterns in Grade 12 at Thunder Hills School. It shows the number of students enrolled in each year from 2000 to 2005, the number who left the school prior to graduation as transfers, dropouts, incompletes or others, and the number of graduates in comparison to the

total number of possible graduates. Both the figures for the transfers and incompletes are lower than expected, at 9.9% and 12.6% respectively. The most significant numbers relate to dropouts, with 40% of students who enrolled in Grade 12 dropping out. The table does not make a distinction between those students who were required to discontinue and those who made an independent decision to leave school. The number of students who were required to discontinue, however, would be quite small over the six year period, 2000 to 2005.

Table 2: Analysis of Grade 12 Enrollment at Thunder Hills School 2000 to 2005

Year	Total Enrolled	Transfers	Dropouts	Incomplete	Other	Total Possible Grads	Grads
2000	8		2	3		8	3
2001	7		3	3		7	1
2002	20	5	9	2		15	4
2003	5		0	1		5	4
2004	16	1	7		2	13	6
2005	15	1	8		1	13	5
Total	71	7	29	9	3	61	23
Percentage Totals		9.9%	40%	12.6%	4.2%		

RATE OF GRADE 12 COMPLETION

Table 3: School completion as a Percentage of Grade 12 Cohorts 1999 to 2005

Total Grade 12 Enrollment (possible grads)	Total Number of Graduates	Percentage of Cohort Graduating
61	23	37.7%

The rate of graduation among Grade 12 cohorts, which is 37.7%, matches fairly closely the national average for First Nations schools (INAC, 2002) in Canada.

The trend at Thunder Hills School is towards improving that rate, with the recent graduating classes for 2003 and 2004 attaining school completion rates of 80% and 46%, respectively. The number of adult students registering in 30-level classes may be one reason for the low number of students passing all required classes since most students may lack prerequisite skills. Again, the facts raise a question: What kind of bridging programs or support will increase the success rate?

COMPLETION RATE BY GRADE AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

Table 4: Secondary Level Grade Completion Rates 1998 to 2003

	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
Number of Students Enrolled	64	33	35
Number of Students Completing Grade	13	12	8
Percentage of Students Completing Grade	20.3%	36.4%	22.8%

Table 4 provides a number of insights. Of primary importance is the low level of grade completion, which inversely indicates a high level of failure and/or dropping out of school. While some of the school leavers will be transfers to other school systems, the majority are dropouts. It should also be noted that the enrollment in Grade 11 and 12 is boosted through the return of adult students.

The table indicates that Grade 10 is a watershed year with respect to grade completion. Many students, nearly 80%, drop out of school without completing Grade 10 or do not continue to Grade 11. Grade 10 must therefore be a year of significant intervention with respect to dropouts.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

From the variety of statistical perspectives offered above, one conclusion may be drawn very clearly — the high school dropout rate at Thunder Hills School is unacceptably high at about three times the rate for the general student population of Saskatchewan. The statistics prompts us to ask: Why are dropout rates at Thunder Hills School so high? The student survey results and stories that follow will provide some insight into that question.

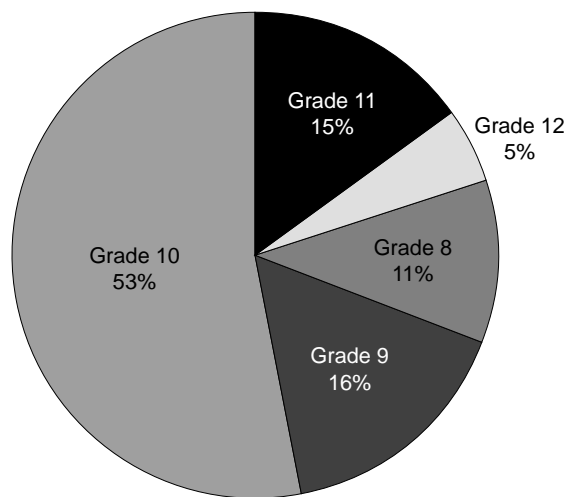
STUDENT PERSPECTIVES: SURVEY RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A total of 57 current and former students of Thunder Hills School responded to the research questionnaires. Questionnaires were distributed to both students who dropped out of school and those who did not. The central purpose of the questionnaire was to identify significant reasons for dropping out of school, and what motivated or would motivate a dropout to return to school.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST QUIT SCHOOL?

All respondents were asked what grade level they were in when they first quit school. Chart 2 shows a range of grade levels when students attending Thunder Hills School first quit, but the majority (54%) first dropped out of school in Grade 10.

Chart 2: Grade Level When Student First Quit School

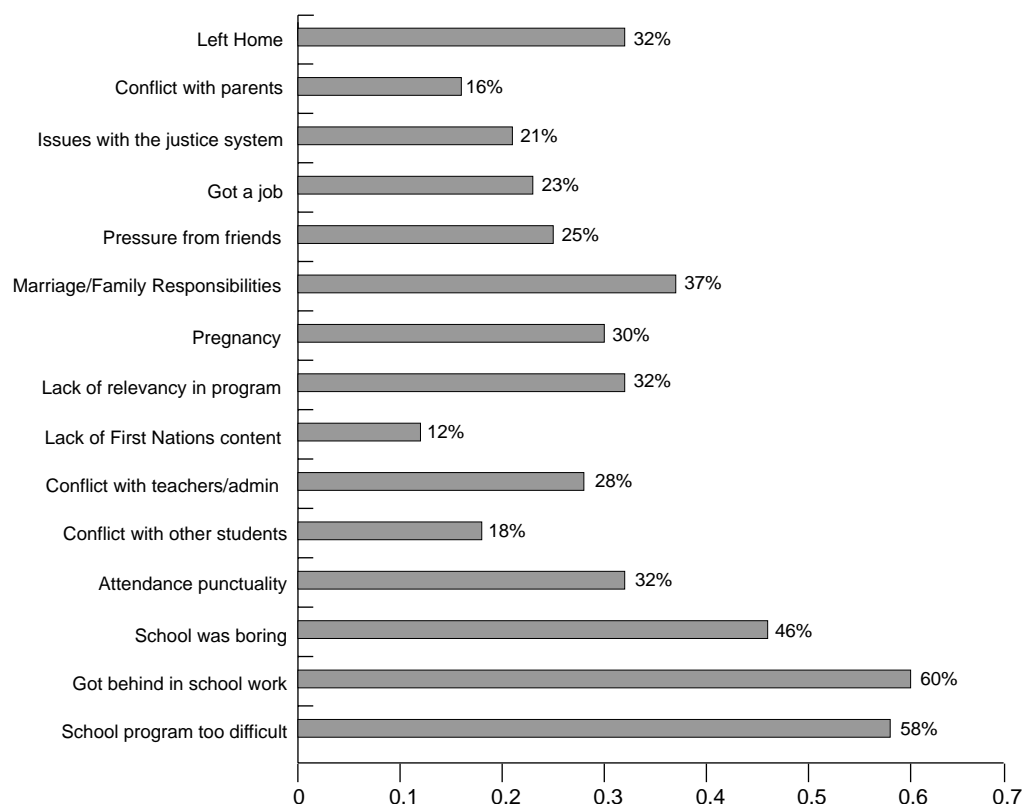


Grade 10 is a year of transition. Greater responsibility is placed on students to manage their attendance, assignments, and time. However, students may not be academically ready for the learning expectations of secondary school. Grade 10 must be considered a target year for intervention at Thunder Hills School. Nevertheless, while making Grade 10 a focal point for action, we must also be concerned about students (27%) who drop out in the middle years even before reaching secondary level.

WHY DID YOU QUIT SCHOOL?

The reasons for students leaving school before completing Grade 12 are varied and complex. Respondents usually identified more than one reason for quitting school. Chart 3 shows the rate of response for each reason as a percentage of all respondents who completed questionnaires.

Chart 3: Reasons for Quitting School



The reasons that students gave for quitting school may be divided into three significant categories: education factors; family factors; personal factors.

1. *Education Factors.* These factors appear to be the most prominent among the reasons that students identify for dropping out. Certainly the perceived difficulty of the secondary level program was identified as a reason for quitting school by 58% of respondents. The level of difficulty of the school program may have contributed to students getting behind in their work, which was a reason for quitting cited by 60% of respondents. Many respondents (46%) thought school was boring, and 36% viewed attendance issues as a factor contributing to their decision to quit school. Once again, these two reasons (boredom and attendance issues) could be linked to program difficulty. The school program's lack of relevance to future employment was also a significant factor at 32%.
2. *Family Factors.* Family factors are sometimes specific to a category of students (females). Although the response rates citing family factors as reasons for quitting school are lower than for education factors, family factors

may be as significant. Family responsibilities ranked quite high as a reason for leaving school, with 30% of students quitting because of pregnancy. Another 37% cited marriage or family responsibilities as the reason they left school before graduation.

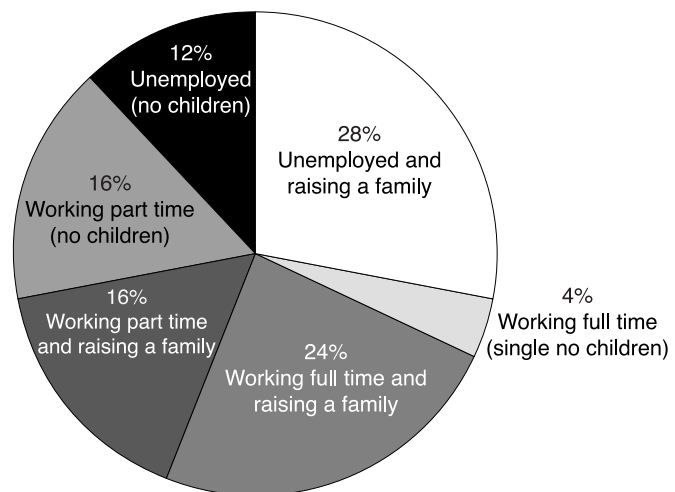
3. *Personal Factors.* Many of the personal factors contributing to quitting school could best be viewed as arising out of conflicts: conflicts with teachers, conflicts with peers, conflicts with parents, or conflicts with the justice system. Certainly conflict can influence educational performance and the level of comfort that students experience in the classroom and school. The most prominent personal factors for students dropping out were: leaving home (32%), conflicts with teachers/administration (28%), and issues with the justice system (21%).

As stated earlier, all respondents identified more than one reason for leaving school. While education factors may be prominent, success in school and the ability to persist may be highly influenced by family and personal factors. None of these factors influences a student in isolation. The decision to leave school would appear to be highly dependent on a combination of factors.

DID DROPOUTS WORK WHEN THEY WERE OUT OF SCHOOL?

Statistics Canada (2002) study indicates that many students quit school in order to work. Chart 3 indicates that 23% of students at Thunder Hills School quit school to get a job. The analysis below provides additional information about employment among dropouts.

Chart 4: What Dropouts Did After They Quit school

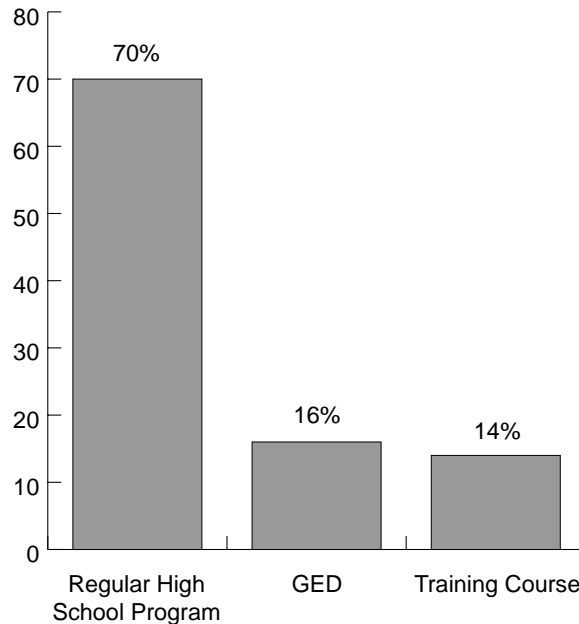


Only 28% of dropouts said they had full-time work while they were out of school. An astounding 72% were either unemployed or underemployed. As we will see in the student stories, unemployment is one reason given by dropouts for returning to school.

WHAT KIND OF EDUCATION PROGRAM DID DROPOUTS RETURN TO?

A significant number of dropouts have returned to school at one time or another. The chart below indicates what kind of program they enrolled in upon their return to the formal education system.

Chart 5: What Kind of Program did Dropouts Enroll in When They Returned to School?

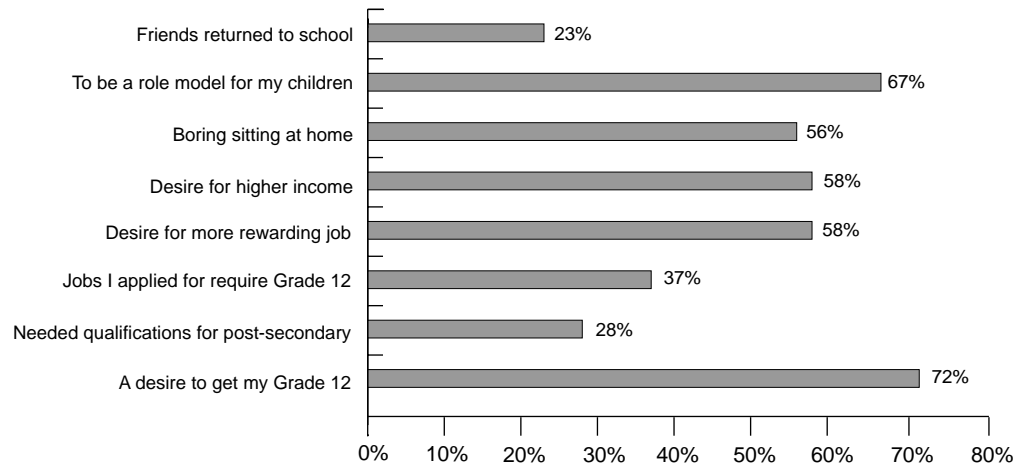


The 'regular' high school program was the choice of 70% of dropouts when they returned to formal education. The low enrollment in GED programs and other training courses may be related to the fact that such programs are usually accessed off-reserve in a nearby city. Of the students who returned to a high school, most (77%) returned to Thunder Hills School. The location and accessibility of the school may be a big selling point for potential returnees sitting at home reflecting on their options.

WHY DID DROPOUTS RETURN TO SCHOOL?

What brought our dropouts back to Thunder Hills School? Certainly, one compelling reason was a lack of employment opportunities. However, other reasons are revealed in Chart 6. A desire to get a Grade 12 diploma seems to be the strongest reason for dropouts returning to school, probably because it opens doors to opportunities that are also listed in the chart. Respondents placed a huge emphasis on being a role model for their children, with 68% of respondents indicating that this was a primary reason for returning to school.

Chart 6: Reasons Dropouts Returned to School

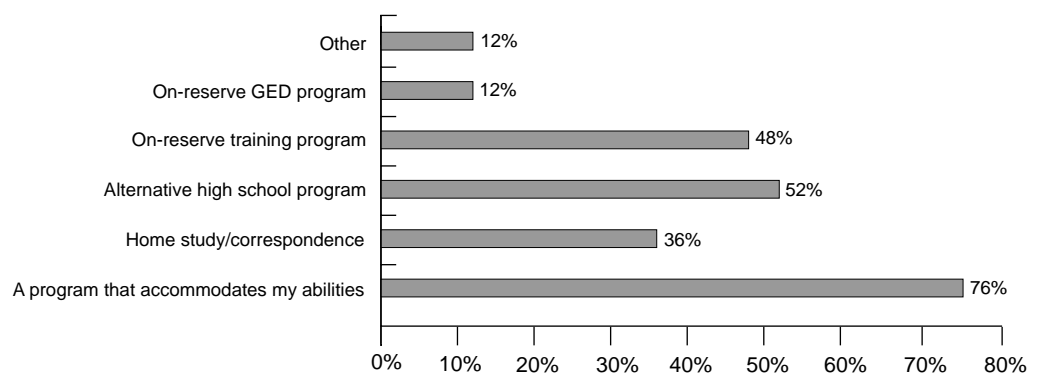


The low percentage of respondents citing the need for qualifications for post-secondary studies was surprising, given the desire for higher incomes and more rewarding jobs. Could it be that students do not understand the link between education achievement and income?

WHAT EDUCATION PROGRAMS WOULD BRING YOU BACK TO SCHOOL?

Some of the evidence collected indicates that many dropouts do eventually return to school, most to the 'regular' high school program, usually registering as an adult student with Saskatchewan Learning. For those dropouts who were not attending school, we asked what might entice them to return to school. Most (76%) indicated that a program must accommodate their abilities.

Chart 7: What Programs Would Bring You Back to School?



The percentage of respondents who chose "a program that accommodates my abilities" seems to indicate that many dropouts feel they do not have the level of skills to succeed in the core curriculum without support or some kind of transition program. Yet few respondents (12%) see a GED program as a desirable alternative. One may conclude that an alternative high school program and/or on-reserve training programs might meet the needs of many dropouts.

VOICES OF THE DROPOUT

Nine students were interviewed as part of this study. While these few students cannot represent all the reasons for students leaving Thunder Hills School before graduating, they add depth and authenticity to the statistics presented in the previous sections. The students' stories and anecdotes are presented here in three sections: Why Quit? Reasons for Returning to School, and How to Improve the School.

WHY QUIT?

I don't know [why students drop out]. It could be their teachers, their peers, it could be problems at home, alcohol and drugs and it could be just that they don't want to be here. I hear lots of kids say 'Oh school's so boring. I can't wait to go home.'...The majority of them don't want to be here. They want to be driving around listening to loud music, staying home and getting high or watching movies.

This introductory student comment captures much of what pushes and pulls students out of school. The students' stories that follow talk about why students quit school and are presented in four categories according to whether they relate primarily to education factors, family influences, personal factors, or community factors. Although the voice of students has been organized thematically, however, the factors that their stories present are highly integrated. The challenges that at-risk students encounter cross all boundaries, affecting not just school, but also family, community, and peer groups.

1. Education Factors

Education factors contributing to their quitting school were prominent in most students' stories. After all, we were talking to 'school' dropouts. An inability to cope with the academic program was a reason for some students dropping out. In a general way, one student summarized the academic challenges facing most of our students:

It's a big jump from Grade 9 to Grade 10. All of a sudden in Grade 10 you got to do all the credits. You need so many credits and everything. It's a little overwhelming and you're still young.

Echoing the same view, another student cited the workload as a factor contributing to school tensions: *Five classes—that comes down to being a lot of work and I fall behind.*

Multi-graded classes are quite common in smaller high schools. Some students at Thunder Hills School feel they are not getting the attention they require in such classrooms:

Too many grades are in one class, and I don't think that's fair because there is a lot of us in the class for the first time and it's really hard when [the teacher] is over there teaching grade 10 and then over there with Math 20 and then you've got Math A30 and B30 and it's hard. If you look at my

biology [a single course taught to one class] attendance, I'm pretty much there all the time. If you look at my math attendance, I always find an excuse to leave.

The link between learning and self-esteem was cited as a challenge by one student:

Every student out there has a different way of learning, a different way of being taught. What I think is why the students are leaving is not getting the attention they need and the teaching. Cause some students, they have a low self-esteem and they are given a question and they just can't get it. They give up right there. Why isn't there someone there to encourage them and to help them and explain it a little bit more.

Another student expressed the same sentiments:

Adapting to the students... the way they learn. A lot of students learn slower or faster than others and everyone is trying to do the same thing at the same time while some people are still stuck in the back.

Attendance at classes is an issue that seems significant with respect to dropping out. Certainly attendance seems to be a factor that leads to falling behind in course work and increasing student frustration. One of the students interviewed stated:

[Students quit because they are] just getting far behind on their work. I think that's one of the main problems. You miss a couple of days and you miss a few assignments. You come back to school and you try to do them all together.

Another student supported this view.

If you are not here on a regular basis then you shouldn't bother because you are just going to end up missing stuff and getting mad because you don't have it and you're not passing or whatever. Attendance is really important.

Boredom would seem to tie in with motivation, which a few students saw as an issue. One student stated: *Some [students] say it's boring, but I don't see how it's boring. Some people just don't like sitting there and actually doing work.*

Relationships in Thunder Hills School seem to push some students out of school. The significant relationships are those between students, and between students and teachers. One student began her interview by identifying student conflict as the primary reason why she first left school: *I was having problems at school with some girls right here on the reserve and I just decided to tell my mom that I wasn't going to be going back.* This student felt that there was little the school would or could do to resolve this conflict. She felt the school could have taken more severe actions toward the perpetrators.

We never really got punished, we just got sent home for the day and that was suppose to help. I don't know. They could have made punishments more, like suspend us for a week or detentions for like a month or something. I don't know.

By deciding to leave, she indicated her feeling that the school could do nothing to support her or end the conflict. Her strategy was to leave the site of the conflict until such time as she felt safe to return. She has now returned to school and states, *I like it this year.*

Relationships between male and female students are also a problem for some students. *They are concentrating too much on a girl or a boy friend, especially in school, it happened in school too,* one student said. Such relationships often lead to a girl getting pregnant. *I'm sick and tired of twelve year olds coming home pregnant,* one student shared.

Another student spoke of student-teacher relationships.

Students and teachers is a really big issue because some students don't like their teachers and some students just adore their teachers. They think they are just great and whatever. But the students that don't have a good relationship with their teachers, that kind of effects their grades and attendance. But you can't just bring in a teacher and if they [students] don't like her just send her away. I think student-teacher relationships are really important.

This same student thought student-teacher conflicts may also end up as conflicts between the parents and the school:

Most of the parents that [come] here [to the school] because of negative effects and its kind of tiring hearing about all this junk that happened and teachers not being appreciated and a student not liking the teaching and having problems. People [students are] fighting and beating up on each other and then the parents come in and take it out on the teacher.

Tensions also arise with some school rules. A variety of school rules seems to irk some students especially the older students:

I think it's unnecessary that a thirty-three year old Grade 12 student should have to carry around a stupid hall pass to use the bathroom. It's kind of degrading. We are going to use the bathroom whether you like it or not.

Another student shared a similar sentiment:

They have lots of rules at the school and most of the students don't follow them. It's like they don't want to listen to the rules because they think it's too much like a white man's school. They don't want to get those rules like the white man's school have. But they got to have these kind of rules...for safety.

2. Family Influences

A number of students felt family factors influenced a student's success in school in many ways. One student stated:

There is no motivation. If their parents are not doing anything and there is no motivation to go to school because you are gonna end up like us. Chances are those [children] are gonna turn out sitting at home doing the same thing. They are acting the way they are taught to act.

A couple of students felt that many students did not have strong influences from their families. One student stated, *My family didn't have a lot do with my graduating.* Another student shared the following: *What discourages them from coming back to school, I think, is their parents not sending them or them not having lunches or them having a drug problem or alcohol problem.*

One student saw family poverty and dependencies creating problems for kids:

That is a big factor because there is a lot of parents I see that I know today that drink every weekend. If they can they will drink during the week. There are some students that never have schooling. They come to school in dirty clothing. They are not properly dressed. They come to school hungry. It is a good thing for the young students they [school staff] have breakfast in the morning for them. That is a good thing that the school has for them.

A couple of students attributed their success at school to the positive influence of their family. One said:

I had a lot of pushing from home. I was living with my grandma. She's pretty much the reason I finished school and stayed in school. I think a lot of it has to do with what's coming from home.

The other noted that his parents got me up everyday and pushed me to get high marks. They made sure I sat down and did my home work.

3. Personal Factors

Personal factors are many and varied, and they label many of our students 'at-risk' for school failure and leaving school before the completion of Grade 12. Students struggle with many personal issues or circumstances that put great stress, not only on their school lives, but on their lives in the family and community as well. One student captured the depth of some student's challenges:

A lot of people on this reserve have all these problems and I think that is why none of them come to school because they are scared to get laughed at or scared to be called a drunk or a junky. They are just scared that somebody will say negative stuff about how they are dressed or if they smelt funny. Like I don't know. The school should help that way by sending out a guidance counsellor into the reserve to talk to the students who are too young not to be going to school or too young to be staying home and smoking cigarettes and smoking up or whatever.

Drug and alcohol issues figure large in our students' lives. Many students shared long and short opinions and anecdotes about these issues. One student, who sounds like a veteran, provided the following comments:

I don't really have any bad memories of school. Just that all the good times use to be me and a whole bunch of buddies. I use to get high all the time. Basically that's all we do at school. Go to school and pool all our money together. Go out and get high. Come back to school and try to do our work. Which usually we never get it done...I started getting high when I was pretty young. But it didn't progress until I hit high school and that is where I guess the main problem is. These young kids around here I see it a lot more than in a city school. Ya it just screws them all up. Take me for example, I was

15, Grade 9. When I hit high school my drug use became more and more to the point where I didn't care anymore. I shut everybody out except for the brothers I was hanging around with. I use to go do scores with and steal cars with or whatever eh.

Another student spoke of the peer pressure to conform and participate in the local drug culture:

Everyone wants to fit in. That's what I think. Somebody is going to go and get high or whatever and then everybody wants to go and be with them to get high and drink for that matter. They just want to fit in. And if they don't fit in then they are like the loser.

Drug use ends up having a negative effect on a student's education, according to some interviewees. The students get behind, one student stated, because they are high or coming to school half snapped. Another student admitted that I was an alcoholic and a drug user and I didn't care about anything.

Crime, which seems to have strong links to drug use, was also discussed separately by some students.

Well there is so much youth on this reserve that are into crime. Some of them come back to get out of holding centres or the judge orders them back. Maybe they just want to stop doing what they are doing and do something during the day and have the evenings to themselves.

Another student commented: *I was doing stuff. B and E's and breaches and assaults, charges. For about a month and then I kind of got out after that. Peer pressure also seems to be a factor in leading some students to criminal activity:*

I had a bunch of friends that led to a criminal lifestyle and that's what I thought. I do a B & E and collect yourself a couple of hundred bucks just like that. I thought that was how the world worked. I guess.

One girl who had been out of school from age 16 to 19 said she spent her time getting into trouble.

4. Community Factors

Community factors range from the positive to the negative. The day care is seen as one of the major contributors to keeping students in school. As one student stated, *I think there are students in this school who take their young children to the daycare and that kind of allows them to go to school.*

One student suggested that more recreational opportunities need to be available in the community:

It would be good if Thunder Hills School had a team like a soccer team or a baseball team traveling across the reserves. Well, in summer time say the outdoor sports baseball, soccer and maybe even basketball. For the winter would be hockey. Have a little Thunder Hills hockey team would be really good for the winters.

WHY RETURN TO SCHOOL?

A year ago I was a waitress making minimum wage. I had no education so on my education part of my resume it said grade 10. I don't have my Grade 10. I was lying. I was ashamed. I don't like that. I don't like lying. So I tried going to school all last year. But I was either too young, too old and I didn't have a baby sitter. I had to pay for it. I gave up and then I called the vice-principal and he told me that if I moved here that I could go to school and they can help me. So I took a chance and left everything just to come to school.

Many of the dropouts who were surveyed and all who were interviewed had returned to school at some point in the last few years. Most were looking for 'success' in life or work or both. Most commented on what led to their returning to school. Most responses were future-oriented, especially with respect to providing a better future for their children. One mother shared the following:

[I returned to school] for my boys I guess. I just want them to look up to me. I want to be doing something, taking care of my kids and giving them what they need and want. I don't want to be on welfare forever and I don't want to have to rely on the band for help. I am well enough to get an education and take care of myself.

Another mother shared a similar view. Her return to school was a response to having a baby.

I didn't want him to live my life. I don't want him to grow up on the system. I want money in the bank to get him shoes. I don't want to end up like most of these parents out here who are waiting for cheque day. [Coming back to school] has given me a second chance.

Another student's comments wove together job prospects, a better future for his children, and leaving poverty behind.

[I came back to school] to look for a job when I'm done graduating. . .it's best that you do finish your grade twelve so you can get better jobs, because some jobs you can only have your grade twelve. My kids. . .my kids make me look ahead. What I didn't grow up with. I was thinking of going into early childhood development or becoming a cop. To make life better for them and their children, because of what they didn't have. Cause I know that I'm doing it because I didn't have what I wanted when I was growing up. I was around alcohol when I was growing up, a lot of abuse, a lot of death in the family. It varies with different students. It's probably just to have a better life for their younger ones that they didn't have.

Other students expressed in briefer comments their reasons for returning to school. Many of these comments focus on the benefits, primarily economic, of returning to school.

I'm happy that I am here right now. Trying to get my grades so I can do better in life.

A few months ago they [the school] had that career day. That's one day when I started looking into the future.

[I returned to school] Cause I wanted to get somewhere in life.

I just want to not be at home doing nothing. Most of these people on this reserve have a lot of brains but they are too lazy to go to school. I don't know. It's just sickening. I know lots of them graduated and whatever and they are still at home collecting welfare and having a bunch of kids and relying on that for survival and its hard. I've been there, I am still there.

IMPROVING THE SCHOOL

Students shared many ideas about ways the school could improve to decrease the rate of school dropouts. We felt that to best present what the students are saying about dropping out, we should organize some of their words into general areas. The bold type used below presents questions and comments we feel naturally follow from their words. A list of possible recommendations follows.

Parenting Group

You talk about parenting classes...should be offered here because there are a few mothers here that are gonna be first time or they already are mothers.

A community outreach program was established at Thunder Hills School last fall. From this program, a parent's group has emerged. Parents have been involved and very helpful, especially with special events at the school.

- **How do we help keep this group going?**
- **Would a PATH session help these parents get a direction?**

Talking Circles

They [another school] have a healing circle and talking circle. They have lots of cultural stuff over there. They had one of these talking circles, students talk about what happened the night before.

- **Could elders come in and start talking circles with the students?**
- **Could elders lead talking circles with the teachers in place of some of our staff or wing meetings?**
- **How can teachers facilitate the student circles?**

Parent Visitations

They should have sit in days and invite the parents in any old time they feel like it.

- **Are teachers comfortable with 'any old time'?**

Life Skills

Life skills, money management, social.

Job training. Resumes nobody in my class knew how to write up a resume, even with a resume wizard.

- **If resumes are important, how do we assure that every student is skilled in making them?**

Culture and Language

[Cree culture] could be bigger. It could be a lot bigger. The program starts at nursery and ends at grade eight or something. They should carry that on into high school too.

Language frames every culture. Lots of controversy surrounds the question of how much Cree language should be in schools. Are we moving towards immersion?

Christmas or Easter, when they have those dinners and stuff they should get an elder or somebody to come in and say a couple words before we eat instead of just opening up the doors letting everybody in to eat. It would be more formal because when you just walk in and eat its kind of ...well for me its kind of like disrespect. The way I was brought up, I was brought up in a Christian home and every time you sit down and eat you say thank you for the food.

- **Our school contains people who favour both Traditional and Christian ways of worship. How can we make everyone welcome and comfortable?**
- **How can religious views help people come together and not keep them apart?**

Practical and Applied Arts

More hands on. For most of these students around here that is what I find that they're more into the hands on stuff, whether it be art or something like that instead of sitting behind a desk every day all day.

- **Can we engage the students in more hands on activities?**
- **Would students be more interested if our programming encompassed more hands on?**
- **Would academics suffer or benefit?**

Extracurricular Activities and Community Recreation

Extracurricular activities, cause it's fun to be part of a team.

- **How much extracurricular can the school do?**
- **Could community members supervise activities, if the school helped to set them up?**

Athletic abilities.

I think they should have more extracurricular because there is a lot of students out there today that are so into their drugs. You see these little toddlers, well maybe not toddlers but three and four year olds that are running around making fires in the bushes or whatever. They should be out there playing sports, playing soccer or doing some kind of activities instead of having them sit at home and be bored.

More organized activities would benefit the young people of Thunder Hills Reserve. No one disputes this.

- **Who will be the people to put such activities in place and spend the time with the kids?**
- **Would an interagency approach help get things started?**

Conclusions and Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE SCHOOL ARISING FROM STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

- 1) Formal 'planning for the future' sessions might be done with individual students.
- 2) Depending on the amount of interest, we might offer more parenting classes.
- 3) We might ask elders if they could start talking circles with students who are interested.
- 4) We could initiate 'sit-in' days for parents to watch their children learning.
- 5) We could have teachers agree on how and when to teach resume-making.
- 6) We could state clearly that religious tolerance is the norm in our school.
- 7) We could offer more hands-on activities in our school day. We should continue the PAA courses and find ways to use the shop and home ec. rooms more.
- 8) We could find ways to help outside agencies offer more organized activities to children when they are out of school.
- 9) We should continue teaching respect for self and for others so violence is less and less a part of our school life.
- 10) We should try to find better ways to help young mothers and fathers continue their education.
- 11) We should keep trying to find ways to help students make gains in spite of poor attendance.
- 12) Reduce class load to a maximum of eight classes for capable students and lower for students who are struggling.
- 13) Given the high number of returnees, support mechanisms, both academic and social, need to be developed and implemented.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ARISING FROM THE RESEARCHERS' PERSPECTIVE

The dropout rate of Thunder Hills School is 2.8 times the Saskatchewan rate. The reasons for this high dropout rate are varied, but the most significant appear to be the following:

- The academic program is too difficult;
- Family responsibilities take students out of school;
- There are conflict issues with students, teachers, or family; or
- There are problems with drugs and alcohol.

Although many dropouts do later return to school, the delay in achieving a Grade 12 certificate has implications for post-secondary study and employment opportunities.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Student retention must be the focal point for many decisions regarding secondary level programming, counseling and guidance, and interagency collaboration.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

The Thunder Hills Education Authority and school staff must review current methods of data collection and tracking students. Staff and board members need current and on-going information to measure the effectiveness of intervention and programming changes. They need to obtain precise information about school completion both in Thunder Hills School and by former students in other school systems.

Both our statistical analysis and the student survey indicate that Grade 10 is often the critical year in a Thunder Hills student's educational career. Most students drop out in the first year of high school. The majority of students coming into Grade 10 must be considered at risk of dropping out at some point during that school year. Grade 10 must be seen as the most appropriate year to provide significant intervention in the short term. In the medium- to long-term, the middle years level should also be seen as an area for important intervention.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

All Grade 9 and 10 students must be 'assessed' (including self-assessment) with respect to risk factors that may lead to their dropping out of school. These assessments will be used to guide individual academic and counseling programming. This study, *Voices of the Dropout*, should be used as a teaching/learning tool in secondary classes such as Career Education and Life Transitions.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Keep the lines of communication open through more student engagement. Communication is needed among peers, between students and staff, and between staff and parents. What needs to be communicated is: "We won't let you dropout." A little 'friendly harassment' may help.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Thunder Hills Education Authority and school staff should investigate the need for and value of a high school transitions program for both Grade 9 students without the prerequisite skills for Grade 10 and mature students who are returning to school.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

Thunder Hills teachers should investigate ways to remove obstacles to educational success, particularly for Grade 10 students. Areas that may be examined for obstacles include: course load, course selection, length of classes, homework support, implementation of a store-front program, regular student feedback, and a review of the success rate of e-learning with respect to retention in grade 12.

RECOMMENDATION 7:

Accessible and supportive counseling, guidance, and life skills programs, both in-school and community-based, need to be provided to deal with the academic, family and personal factors that lead students to drop out.

RECOMMENDATION 8:

Interagency collaboration needs to be established to support the above recommendations and provide intervention and prevention programs for youth and families in the community.

Many dropouts eventually return to school, most returning to the 'regular' high school program as mature students. In fact, mature students make up almost 80% of our Grade 11-12 enrollment. As well, some students have shown an interest in returning to school outside the K-12 system, either in GED or vocation training programs. The rate of participation in such programs may increase if they are more accessible in the community.

RECOMMENDATION 9:

The school should promote its high school program in the community to encourage more mature students to return to school.

RECOMMENDATION 10:

The school must investigate strategies to support mature students returning to school.

RECOMMENDATION 11:

The Thunder Hills Education Authority, working with the appropriate First Nations agencies, should facilitate more GED and vocational training courses in the community.

Most dropouts return to school to improve their employment opportunities and create a better life for their children. Most dropouts want to be good role models for their children. How can this sentiment be translated into focused and diligent studies when faced with the challenges of raising children in poverty?

Most dropouts are not without aspirations for a better life. What they lack are the strategies, support, and sometimes the motivation to pursue their goals. Coping with the many family and social issues would seem to be an insurmountable challenge for many dropouts.

RECOMMENDATION 12:

Career awareness and work exploration and experience may provide some incentive and focus for students.

RECOMMENDATION 13:

Young parents returning to school must be supported both in school and through community-based agencies.

RECOMMENDATION 14:

At least part of the curriculum must be geared to relevant and practical course offerings. Practical and applied arts must be explored at all grade levels.

Currently, First Nations education systems receive funding that is on par with the provincial average for education expenditures. Using average provincial per capita funding as the benchmark for First Nations education funding is flawed. First Nations must make the case to INAC for a funding formula that reflects the unique challenges of First Nations schools. Although INAC has recently provided funding that enables schools to engage parents in education and supports curriculum innovation, no changes to core funding have been made in ten years that would enable innovations in the very structure of our programs.

RECOMMENDATION 15:

The basic instruction rate currently used by INAC to determine education program funding must be based on the unique challenges faced by First Nations schools.

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Appendix A:

Research Questionnaire

THUNDER HILLS SCHOOL

THE VOICE OF FIRST NATIONS STUDENTS

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of the following questionnaire is to gather information about the problems and challenges faced by youth and young adults as they work their way through high school. The information you provide will be combined with that of other students and former students. The findings of this study will provide teachers and administrators with guidance in designing high school programs that meet the needs of learners at Thunder Hills School.

Remember, all the information you provide is strictly confidential. Nowhere will your name be attached to the findings of this study.

Age: _____
Last Grade Completed: _____ Year last grade was completed: _____
Name the school where your last grade was completed: _____
If the student has completed grade 12 by the age of 18, go to Questionnaire II.

Students who completed Grade 12 in more than 13 years or who did not complete Grade 12 will answer the following questions.

- 1) At what grade level did you first leave school (i.e. dropout)? _____
- 2) Think about the time when you left school. Identify the reason or reasons why you left school:
 - a) School program was too difficult _____
 - i) List the subject(s) that you found the most difficult? _____

 - b) Pregnancy _____

- c) Marriage _____
- d) Other family responsibilities _____
- e) I got a job _____
- f) Conflict with other students _____
- g) Conflict with teachers/administration _____
- h) School program was boring _____
- i) My First Nations' culture and history were not reflected in the curriculum _____
- j) I saw no connection between what I was learning and the skills I needed in the future _____
- k) Pressure from peers outside of school _____
- l) Issues with the justice system _____
- m) Conflicts with parents _____
- n) Left home _____
- o) Other (*please specify if possible*) _____

3. Considering your response(s) in question number 2, what could have been done to keep you in school? _____

If you have not returned to school since you left continue with questions 4, 5, 8, 9, 10. If you have returned to school please answer question 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.

4. If you have not returned to school since you first left, what have you been doing since you left school?
- a) Working full time (single) _____
 - b) Working full time and raising a family _____
 - c) Working part-time (single) _____
 - d) Working part-time and raising a family _____

- e) Unemployed (single) _____
- f) Unemployed and raising a family _____
- g) Other (Please specify): _____

5. If you have not returned to school since you first left, what would it take to get you back into school?

- a) A transition program _____
- b) Home study/correspondence _____
- c) Alternative high school program _____
- d) On reserve GED program _____
- e) On reserve training program _____
- f) Other (Please specify) _____

Please go to question 8.

6. If you have returned to school since you first left, what kind of program have you studied

- a) Regular high school program
 - i) Where: _____
 - ii) Completed program? _____
- b) GED
 - i) Where: _____
 - ii) Completed program? _____
- c) Training course (Please specify type): _____

 - i) Where? _____
 - ii) Completed program? _____

7. Why did you return to school?

- a) A desire to get my Grade 12 _____
- b) Need qualification for post-secondary _____

- c) Jobs applied for require Grade 12 _____
- d) Desire for a more rewarding job _____
- e) Desire for a higher income _____
- f) Boring sitting at home _____
- g) Role model for my children _____
- h) Friends returned to school _____
- i) Other (Please specify) _____

8. What are your plans for the next 3 to 5 years?

9. What grade level did your parents complete?

- a) Mother _____
- b) Father _____

10. Parental employment

- a) While you were attending school and living at home one of my parents was:
 - i) Employed full-time _____
 - ii) Employed part-time _____
 - iii) Unemployed _____

Thank you for participating in this study. Sharing your experiences in the school system will help Thunder Hills School design programs that better meet the needs of its students.

Appendix B:

Letter of Informed Consent

THUNDER HILLS SCHOOL

RESEARCH INTO HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Student/Parent,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our study. *Research Into High School Dropouts* is being done by two teachers at Thunder Hills School. This study is a school based research project being funded by a provincial education foundation called the McDowell Foundation. As you know many of our high school students at Thunder Hills School do not graduate. This study seeks to combine both the statistical data and the student stories about the factors that lead to students leaving school (i.e. dropping out) and/or returning to school at a later date. The findings of this research will be compiled in a final report which will be distributed to the Thunder Hills Education Authority, the Prince Albert Grand Council, and the McDowell Foundation. The report may also appear in publications and/or be presented at education conferences. This study has been approved by the Thunder Hills Education Authority.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The success rate of First Nations' students lags far behind non-aboriginal students, with only 30% of students who start kindergarten actually graduating from a high school program. The purpose of this study is to explore the students' stories about their high school experience. High school students at Thunder Hills School have a low rate of attendance and a high dropout rate. This study aims to provide understanding and analysis of this problem so that appropriate programs, both in school and out of school, can be developed to support high-risk students.

EXPECTATIONS OF PARTICIPANTS

Students and former students will be asked to participate in this study by providing information in a variety of ways: completing a questionnaire, participating in an interview, being part of a focus group. The interview and focus group sessions may be recorded in order to write accurate interview transcripts.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

The risks of participating are low.

- The individual student's identity will not be revealed in the statistics or stories that appear in the final report.
- The student's school success will not be influenced by the information they share with researchers, nor will their information be shared with individual teachers except as a part of a composite report.
- The participant will be provided with written transcripts of the information that they share and he/she can delete or add information as they wish.
- The student may withdraw from the research at any time.

The benefits of this study, however, are significant for both students currently enrolled at Thunder Hills School and those students attending in the future. Knowing more about the pressure students experience during high school will enable the school and community agencies to better support students. By participating in this study, students will be able to provide insight into the problems they face and provide recommendations for changes.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The identity of the participant (i.e. student, parent or former student) will not be divulged in any way in the final report. All information received by the researcher will be kept confidential and anonymous. Confidentiality will be maintained as follows:

- The student's name will not appear on questionnaires, written transcripts or on audiotapes.
- The name of student participants will not appear in the final report.
- The name of the school and the community where it is located will be kept confidential.
- Any tapes and written records containing information from participants will be destroyed following the completion of the research.

CONSENT

I _____, agree to participate in the study

described above and by signing below acknowledge that the researchers have reviewed this consent form with me. I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time.

Signature

.....

I, _____, the parent/guardian of the student

_____, agree to his/her participation in the study

described above. I understand that I may withdraw my child from this study at any time.

Signature

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