

We can't give up on struggling students

JULY 17, 2015 | LISA HIGUERA



Lisa Higuera

In 8th grade, I did not understand terms like dropout or school push-out. I didn't know that there was a vocabulary or a movement to address what I saw in my middle school or high school: a lot of my friends did not graduate with me; life became too complicated for some of my peers and it appeared that school wasn't providing any solutions to help them in their life or education so they gave up.

I was a fortunate exception. As a first-generation immigrant, I spent the first few years of elementary school struggling to absorb English so I could learn. However, as soon as I could speak English, the Los Angeles Unified School District labeled me highly gifted. But while I attended a highly gifted magnet program in middle school, I watched my peers struggling with lack of support and punitive discipline, in spite of their intelligence and potential.

My good friend became pregnant in 7th grade and, without supports in school, she dropped out that year. Another classmate experienced trauma at home, had to move in with relatives in another city that same year, and also dropped out. He told me that school didn't feel like a good place for him and that life in the streets was better than school. As far as I knew, neither of my classmates' issues were addressed by our teachers, and we never saw them again.

I am now a graduate student at the University of Southern California. Working towards my master's in social work, I am learning that children who struggle with school should not be dismissed as lost causes; there is usually more to the matter and it often involves traumatic experiences. Students who suffer trauma are still children deserving of school support and their right to an education, and there are ways we can help them.

Education in Los Angeles has changed since I was in the K-12 system. In 2013, LAUSD passed the [School Climate Bill of Rights](#) and made a commitment to implement restorative justice in its schools by 2020. As a result, schools in the district today can use an effective strategy that assists struggling students, one that tackles behavioral and emotional problems that often push students like these out of school.

Known as Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, it focuses on creating a positive school climate through interventions that address student behavior, trauma and social emotional skill building. This way of intervening and supporting students deals with issues that affect learning and the educational experience by positively addressing the way students are treated.

Research [shows a strong connection](#) between investing in helping students feel connected to school and keeping them from dropping out. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports can provide schools with strategies that help children stay in school.

Besides my graduate studies at USC, for the past five years I worked with [Public Counsel](#), a legal aid organization that advocates for positive, research-based school climate strategies, like Positive

Behavior Interventions and Supports.

As part of the Education Rights team at Public Counsel, I helped advocate for students like those I knew in high school. By helping parents and students understand their options, the Education Rights team focuses on helping children access education, particularly when they are not getting the help they need in school or have been removed from school through disciplinary actions.

I worked with youth who reminded me of the students whose stories I've shared. Students struggle with complex trauma that impacts their behavior in school. As I saw in my middle and high schools, today the unaddressed trauma and resulting behavioral issues often lead to disproportionate discipline in schools, such as suspension and expulsion for students who struggle the most.

However, while these research-based, school-wide approaches have been shown to have remarkable success, not all school districts have access to technical assistance and support to implement these kinds of collaborative interventions.

GOING DEEPER

For more information about this legislation, see [Section 57 of AB 104](#)

To address this issue, Public Counsel and partners advocated for funding in this year's budget for statewide resources and trainings, grants and the creation of a network of trainers to help schools across the state implement strategies such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, restorative justice, trauma-informed practice and to help them build cultural competency skills. The great news is that California's governor has [approved \\$10 million](#) in the new state budget for this purpose.

It is impossible to go back in time and help the hundreds of students who dropped out from my middle school and high school, students who were supposed to graduate with me but did not. However, I see great potential for helping improve student outcomes from here on out. The governor's decision to fund this statewide effort is an important step toward implementing equitable, school-wide supports that address the needs of students holistically, in terms of

academics and well-being, and to reaching the students who struggle the most as a result of violence, trauma and mental health issues often beyond their control.

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► Paul

3 years ago

Can Ms. Higuera confirm whether her work "helping parents and students understand their options ... particularly when they are not getting the help they need in school" involved supporting lawyers hired by parents to attend IEP meetings? IEP "sharks" intimidate teachers into providing accommodations that might not be effective and that go beyond teachers' formal duties, certainly compromising personal time and possibly compromising service to other students. The presence of a lawyer makes an IEP meeting ...

[Read More](#)

► CarolineSF

3 years ago

Ms. Higuera says: "My good friend became pregnant in 7th grade and, without supports in school, she dropped out that year. Another classmate experienced trauma at home, had to move in with relatives in another city that same year, and also dropped out. He told me that school didn't feel like a good place for him and that life in the streets was better than school. As far as I knew, neither of my classmates' ...

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▶ **FloydThursby1941**

3 years ago

I agree with Caroline. If SFUSD didn't pay any psychologists/social workers/etc. and cut the bureaucracy, it could require every child starting at age 7 who tests anything but advanced or proficient to spend 5 hours of 1-on-1 time with a tutor. Focus on academics. Let other government agencies focus on other things. Provide free birth control for sure. Pregnancy is 100% preventable. I never worry for a second about ... [Read More](#)

▶ **Don**

3 years ago

Ms. Higuera is obviously well-meaning. The problem with her persuasive essay, beyond what Caroline described, is that it is too facile to conclude "we shouldn't give up", though that might fly in college. When we pay for more and more in-school social services we have get that money from somewhere in the education budget. Somebody has to get less so others can receive these additional services. A good case can be made ... [Read More](#)

▶ **FloydThursby1941**

3 years ago

In Europe they have tests and some are held back and some advance based on these. They are taken at 12 and 14. You can predict odds of prison or college based on 4th grade reading test scores very accurately. I believe, realistically, a few turn it around after age 10, but if you really want to be a successful college grad or raise one, you have to teach education-focused values ... [Read More](#)

▶ **Concerned parent**

3 years ago

Nice article and good intentions throughout. To really help those who are not making the grade, so to speak, do you agree with the following that is about to occur? 1. Looks like at some school districts the students will no longer need to take an exit exam and if, at some districts, students have a "D" grade, and got the right amount of credits, they will walk the stage for their diploma (see Ed source ... [Read More](#)