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Homelessness and Academic Success Among Females

Abstract

Adolescents go through many changes and issues normally and those that are homeless youth have the added stress of not having their immediate needs met, like shelter and food. They experience a lack of stability and losing one's home can be a very traumatic experience. Many homeless adolescents leave school for various reasons. Those who remain in school may face extra challenges in addition to keeping up with their academics.

Studies have been done to characterize students that do drop out and examine factors leading to that. This particular study will look at fifty females currently residing in a New York City private shelter for youth between the ages of 18-21. Demographics will be taken into account. A survey will be given to the young ladies to measure how many completed high school and how many did not. The survey was adapted from characteristics of drop outs that were mentioned in two researched articles. The participants will then have a check off list of things they may have experienced while in school. The goal is to find out which factors had the biggest impact on completing/not completing high school.

Homelessness is a growing problem in our country and the numbers are staggering in New York City. According to the New York City Department of Homeless Services, as of May 6, 2011, there were 36,756 individuals enrolled in emergency shelters. If we look at these numbers and keep in mind this does not include those living on the streets, it is clear how big of an issue homelessness is. Also staggering are the statistics from the Coalition for the Homeless, which state that nearly 1 in 20 New York City residents have experienced homelessness at some point and more than 1 in 4 children in New York City live in poverty. These are all chilling statistics but unfortunately this is our reality.

Adolescence is a time of change and also a time where school success can play a major role in one's future. When adolescents do not have stability, it can have a major impact on their academic success. Depending on the resiliency of the individual student, homelessness can have a negative effect on their achievement in school. We need to first define some terms. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, a "homeless child and youth" includes "children and youth who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence." This includes those who are staying in shelters. Homelessness can have a tremendous negative effect on students such as: difficulty with transitions, inability to form friendships, withdrawal and depression, anger. (Seifert, 2000) A dropout, according to Shannon and Bylsma(2003), is "a student who leaves school early for any reason, except death, before completing school with a regular diploma and does not transfer to another school." A March 2010 report from the New York City Department of Education states that although the dropout rate appears to be declining, the Class of 2009 had a dropout rate of 11.8%, with Hispanics having the highest rate. Perhaps because of the difficulty measuring homelessness, no information was given as to how many students may have been homeless.

There are laws in place protecting the educational rights of dislocated youth, the most important being the McKinney-Vento Act. In summary, the McKinney-Vento Act states that homeless youths have the right to attend the school in which they were enrolled prior to

becoming homeless.(Rafferty, 1995) The McKinney-Vento Act coincides with Title 1 Part A of the No Child Left behind legislation which states that "...automatic eligibility acknowledges that the experience of homelessness puts children at a significant risk of academic failure, regardless of their previous academic standing.(National Center for Homeless Education) The government does acknowledge that even an excellent student can succumb to the pressures of homelessness. Awareness of the laws is a major factor and the question is raised whether or not schools are complying with this regulation. How many of the families experiencing homelessness actually know these laws are in place for their children?

Students should be aware that leaving school early can have a long-lasting effect on their professional future. There are considerably fewer job opportunities out there for people who do not complete school. In the 2003 report by Shannon and Bylsma, it was shown that high school dropouts earned an annual income of \$18,900 compared to the \$25,900 that high school graduates earned. Many students believe that earning a GED is the same, but it has also been seen that GED earners also make less money than those with high school diplomas.(Shannon, Bylsma, 2003)

There are many reasons why students leave school early, even more so when discussing homeless youth. Some say they felt a lack of relevance in curriculum; others may have to work in order to help support their families. For some it is simply a lack of attendance for various reasons. (Stanley, Plucker 2008) Surveys and interviews have been done to identify the commonalities among students who drop out. Some of the characteristics of dropouts have been identified as students who have low socioeconomic status, those in minorities, speak English as a second language, have been held back, have disabilities and many more.(Shannon, Bylsma, 2003) These are some factors that go into identifying a student as being at-risk. Schools need to identify the students that fall into these categories to see if preventative services are necessary.

What services are schools offering to dissuade at-risk adolescents from leaving school early. Title 1 Part A of NCLB states that funds may be used in Title1 schools for non education related areas, such as housing information and violence prevention.(National Center for Homeless

Education) This may cause concern since there are not only at-risk students in Title 1 schools. As previously stated, awareness is again an issue. If the Title 1 schools are not directly offering this information, many times students and families will not know to take advantage of the services. The National Center for Homeless Education has made suggestions for additional services for homeless youth, such as counseling, credit recovery, and supplying the students with basic needs, such as clothing and food. Schools need to put some of these programs in place in order to retain these at-risk students and increase their completion rate.

In my research, there seems to be a lack of information as to what differences exist in homeless adolescents who drop out and those who complete school with a diploma. What other factors may have contributed to those who left school? Did the ones who complete have no other factors besides homelessness inhibiting them? The objective of this study is to examine this.

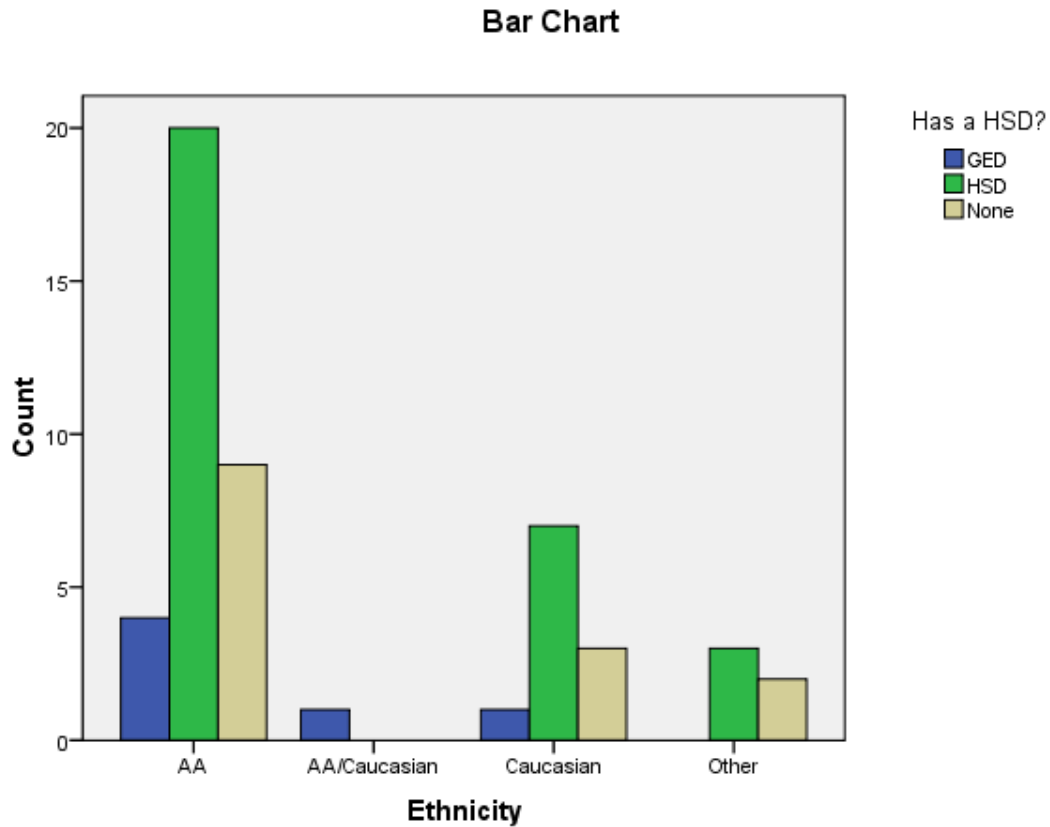
Methods

Participants in this study were fifty females between the ages of 18-21 currently residing in a New York City private homeless shelter. I examined how many of the fifty females finished high school with a diploma or obtained a GED or did neither. All groups were given the same survey. Those that completed school checked off any factors they experienced while in school. Those that dropped out checked off what factors led them to make the decision to leave school early. The survey was adapted from characteristics mentioned by Shannon and Bylsma(2003) and Curtis(1983) Items included things such as lack of shelter, family obligations, employment strains, etc. See Appendix A for survey. The goal was to see what characteristics or factors differ in those who did or did not complete school.

Results

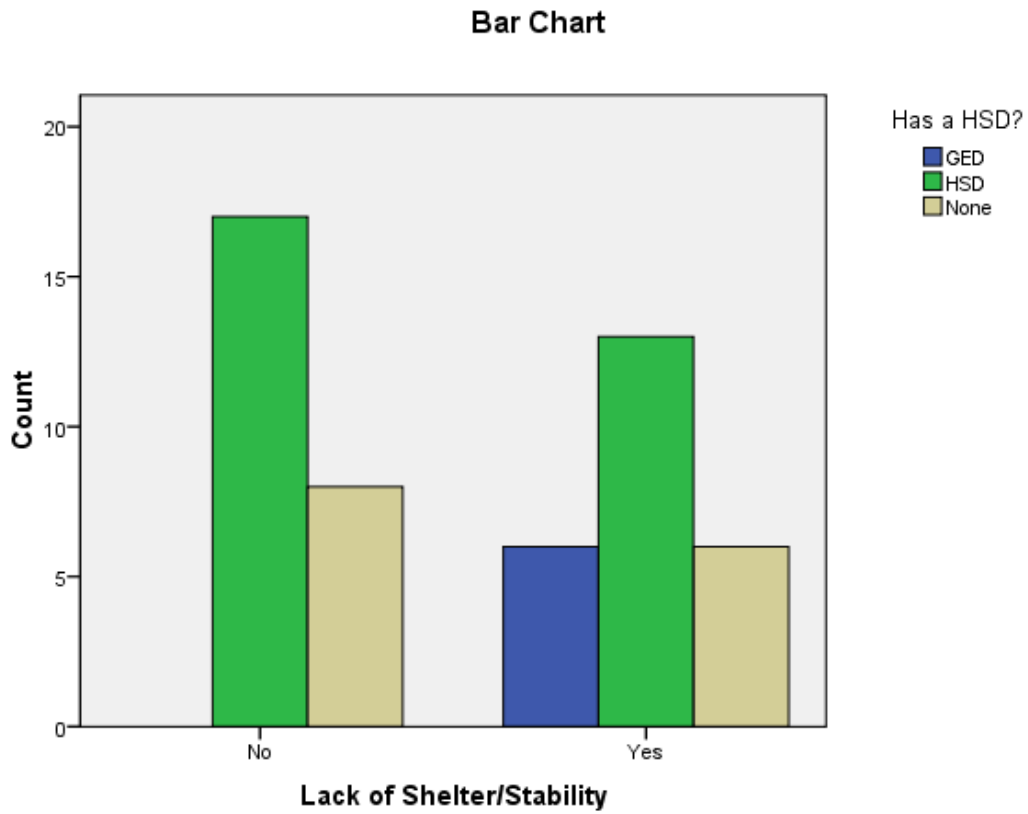
Of the fifty females surveyed, thirty have a high school diploma, while six have a GED and fourteen have neither. The demographics of these results are in Figure 1. There was no real significant relation between the degree obtained and ethnicity. Although the bars are of different heights, each individual ethnicity had a high school diploma as their highest degree.

Figure 1:



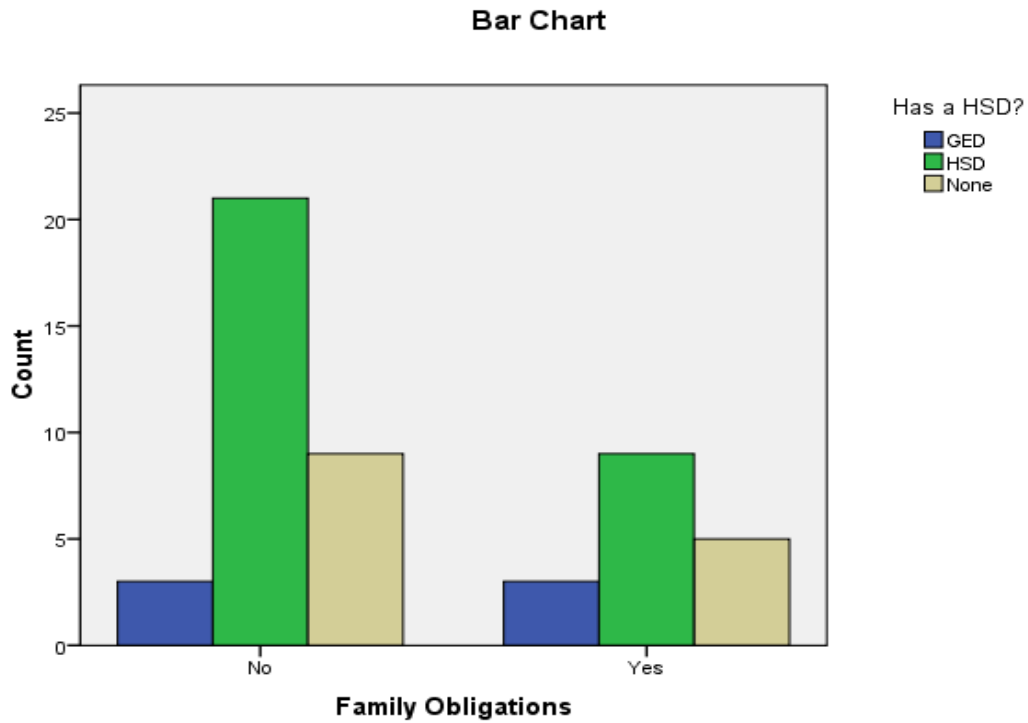
Lack of shelter was a significant factor that the participants chose. 50% of those surveyed said they had experienced this while in school. Figure 2 illustrates the distinction between those who experienced lack of shelter while in school but nevertheless completed versus those who left school because of this. Those who did not obtain a degree were more likely to indicate lack of shelter as a problem.

Figure 2:



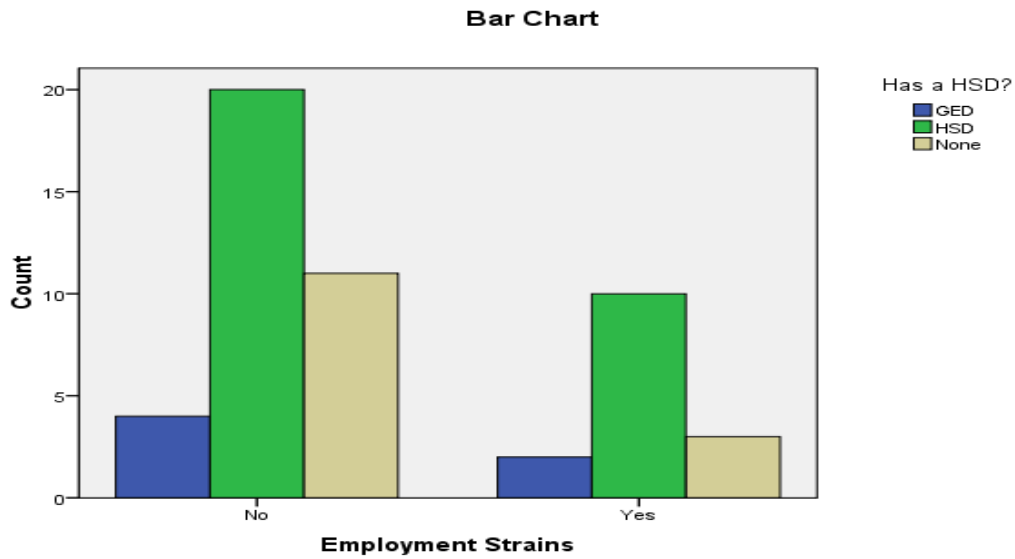
Another factor that was prominently chosen in the given survey was family obligations. This was explained as something like having responsibilities such as taking care of younger siblings. Interestingly enough, this factor was chosen more by participants who have a degree. Figure 3 shows the difference.

Figure 3:



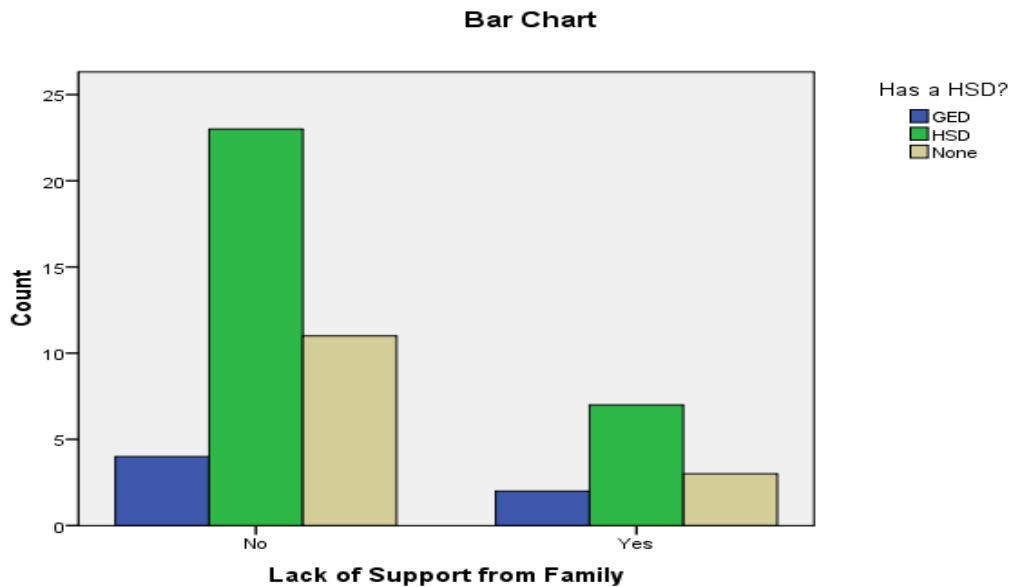
A significant number of participants also chose employment strains as something they experienced while in school. Again with these results, the participants who had a degree chose this more often than those who did not, as illustrated below.

Figure 4:



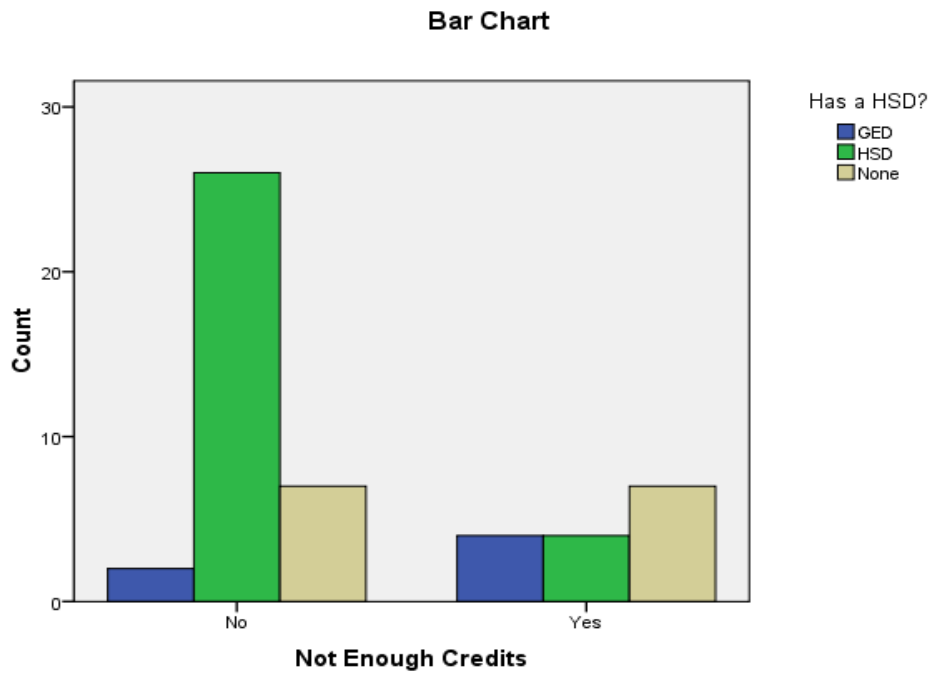
Another factor on the survey that received many responses was lack of support from home. The majority of those who chose this were able to overcome this factor and receive a degree anyway. The exact numbers are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5:



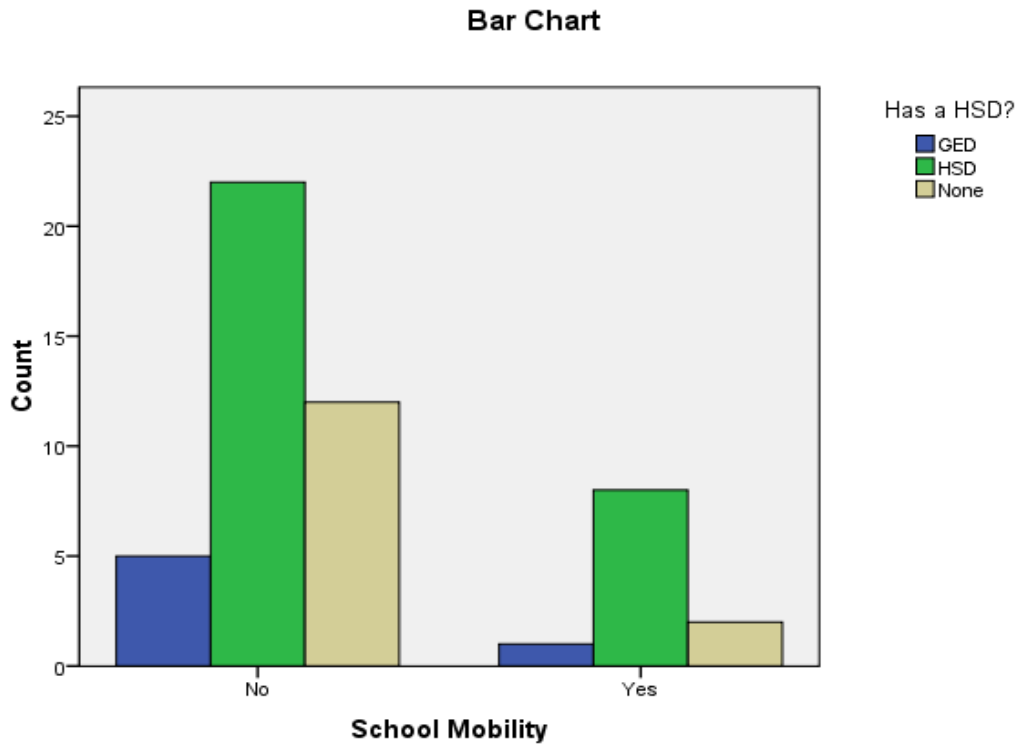
Not surprisingly, the "not enough credits to graduate" factor was more common among those who did not receive a degree, though some who have a degree did choose this. This is shown below in Figure 6.

Figure 6:



The last item that really received a significant response was school mobility. Almost all the participants still managed to receive a degree. See Figure 7.

Figure 7:



Other factors mentioned on the survey but really showed little to no significance were: did not get along well with teachers, lack of relevant curriculum, victim of bullying, drug/alcohol abuse, suspensions, social life was more important and language barriers.

Discussion

There were some limitations to this study; the first being that no males were interviewed so that limited the results. Also, the participants are currently living in a homeless shelter and sometimes are more critical due to their current situation. Something to also keep in mind is that a few participants willingly left their home so their point of view about school may differ from someone who has had no other option. Many participants chose "employment strains" as a factor but perhaps it should have been asked what kind of job they worked and how many hours because studies have shown that the type of employment or amount of hours may affect the dropout rate.

From my results, it is clear that some participants were more resilient than others. Many participants had more than two factors checked off but yet were still able to persevere and complete school. Perhaps it was the severity of the factors. For example, some may have pushed through poor grades while lack of shelter is not as easy to get through. Maybe the ones that did complete school had educational support from somewhere else.

Also worth mentioning is the fact that as the participants were taking the survey, I asked if any of them had heard of the McKinney-Vento Act that protects their rights. Not one participant said they ever heard of the law. This is the problem of awareness that I discussed in the introduction. A homeless liaison is supposed to be required in the schools as well as the contact person for information. The schools are not properly informing their students of their rights before they leave school, assuming they knew their situation, which is not always the case.

What are the implications for teachers? We may not be able to get these youth out of being homeless but perhaps we can help identify the ones that may be at-risk and refer them to preventative services. According to the state of Wisconsin's education site, some signs to look out for in the classroom include: poor attendance or frequent tardiness, aggression, chronic hunger and/or fatigue, lack of motivation, poor personal hygiene, inability to contact parents, and anxiety towards the end of the day. If teachers can help identify these students then maybe the school will know their situation early enough to intervene.

Teachers can also assist these children while they are in the classroom. The National Center for Homeless Education suggests not bringing attention to them in front of others, providing snacks and classroom supplies if necessary, giving them classroom jobs, coordinating a plan with the school counselor. They also suggest holding these students accountable for what they can control (such as behavior in class) rather than what they cannot control (such as not having supplies). Seifert and Stauffer also suggested not giving assignments where they may need to use something they do not have, like a television or radio.

The suggestions given can really work in a classroom in being able to identify and then assist youth in these situations. Teachers have to work with many students of different backgrounds and should be knowledgeable of each situation. Homeless students should be a priority as school may be the only stability they have.

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APPENDIX

SURVEY

Ethnicity:

African American Caucasian Hispanic Asian Native
American Pacific Islander Other

Do you have a high school diploma?

Yes No

If yes, did you complete it in four years?

Yes No If no, how many years?

If no, check off the reasons that led you to leave school early and put a star next to the one that was the main factor.

If yes, check off any things you may have experienced while in school

lack of shelter/stability

family obligations

employment strains

poor grades

school mobility

not enough credits

social life was more important

did not get along with teachers

lack of relevant curriculum

victim of bullying

lack of support from family

suspension/expulsion

language instruction was lacking

drug/alcohol abuse

_____other

Do you have a GED?

_____Yes

_____No

If yes, how old were you when you received it? _____

If no, do you have plans to obtain one?

_____Yes

_____No