

The Impact of Small Group Interventions on Retention and Credit Completion in Dropout Prevention Programs

By Michael Slavkin*

Dropout prevention schools working with dropout prevention education in the United States offer another option beyond traditional school classes for students who are at risk of not completing high school. Many students who enter into dropout prevention programs also need help with their social-emotional learning, and may benefit from participation in small grouped experiences offered by the school. The purpose of this research project was to determine if dropout prevention school students who participated in small group sessions designed around socioemotional learning lessons found them to be helpful. Specifically, the results of surveys from students and post-survey interviews demonstrated that students who participated in greater numbers of groups saw greater improvement in their social emotional growth, academic performance, and overall feelings of support while at school. Students were better able to share their experiences and close ties to faculty and staff at the school when compared to individuals who did not participate in groups. A discussion of the results and recommendations for future work by school counselors and interventions by teachers is included.

Introduction

Educational systems increasingly encounter the challenge of supporting at-risk students—youth vulnerable to academic failure due to a variety of social, emotional, or behavioral difficulties. A body of research has emerged highlighting effective interventions that aim to enhance motivation, engagement, and achievement among these students. This literature review explores the theoretical foundations and practical applications of various school-based and counseling interventions, including motivational interviewing, small group counseling, mentoring, and social-emotional learning programs. Emphasis is placed on interventions within dropout prevention education settings and strategies to mitigate dropout potential.

Annually, more than 500,000 students nationwide drop out of high school (National Center for Education Evaluation 2021). As a result of their inability to complete secondary education, these youths are at greater risk of unemployment, incarceration, and poor health than their peers who graduate. With the passage of Every Student Succeeds Act in 2002 (ESSA 2015), the United States Department of Education has sought to promote high school graduation by requiring states to use graduation rates as a performance measure in school and district accountability systems. States also require that school districts define their plans to help students transition from middle school to high school, while reducing dropout rates. It is the responsibility of all educators to work to reduce dropout rates and improve the retention and matriculation of all students through secondary education into higher

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education, the Armed Forces, or the workforce in as planned and prescribed a manner as possible (NCEE 2021).

An dropout prevention school is an educational facility that presents activities, materials, and curricula that fall outside what we know as traditional school offerings (Morrisette 2011). Students who attend these schools frequently are at risk for school failure in a traditional school setting for a variety of reasons. Dropout prevention learning interventions are not a new concept. Much of the previous literature examines specific intervention strategies that decrease dropout rates, improve social emotional learning (SEL), and encourage academic advancement. Often students are referred to dropout prevention schools in order to better address their academic, social, or behavioral problems. It is estimated that 20 percent of American students below the age of 18 years of age are dealing with a mental illness of some sort (Maras et al. 2015). While it is not always clear that students in dropout prevention and dropout prevention education have a mental illness, those referred oftentimes are found to be more predisposed to traumatic backgrounds, struggling with adverse childhood experiences. Furthermore, many of these students deal with the stress and trauma that comes from daily struggles (Slaten et al. 2015). These students are more often likely than students in traditional schools to be at risk for dropping out as well.

Dropout prevention schools are a beneficial way for students to get the credits they need to graduate; however, these students often need significantly more than just academic support in order to function well within dropout programs. Oftentimes, these individuals struggle within traditional schools due to the lack of individualized attention they received in classrooms. As such, dropout prevention school students need significant academic support, as well as social emotional support (Slaten et al. 2015). Dropout prevention schools and the dropout prevention programs they facilitate allow students to continue their education in a manner vastly different from the traditional facilitation of secondary schools. Individualized curriculum, planning that allows students to work in a self-paced style, and metrics that allow students to work slowly toward program progress is believed to encourage improved credit recovery (Morsette 2011).

Preventing school dropout is a national priority. The National Center for Educational Evaluation (2021) outlined multi-level strategies, from early warning systems to targeted mentoring and re-engagement programs. Finn and Rock (1997) found that academic success is closely linked to school engagement, even among highly at-risk populations. Weinstein, Villares, and Brigman (2021) demonstrated that the SSS small group intervention positively influenced dropout-related factors such as attendance, behavior, and academic performance. These interventions serve not only to improve short-term outcomes but also to build long-term educational resilience.

The current project examines the benefits of small group intervention activities for students enrolled at an dropout prevention school. Specifically, students were believed to benefit from attending group counseling sessions to improve their social emotional learning skills, improve their communication skills, and ensure their stability and retention in the dropout prevention program.

Theoretical Foundations: Motivation and Self-Regulation

Understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying at-risk behaviors is essential to designing effective interventions. Bandura's (1986) concept of self-efficacy and personal agency laid the groundwork for understanding how beliefs in one's capabilities influence goal-setting and perseverance. Similarly, Carver and Scheier (1981) introduced a control theory perspective, highlighting how self-monitoring and self-regulation affect behavior.

A widely used theoretical framework for understanding school dropout is Finn's (1989) participation-identification model, which has also been applied in dropout prevention research. This model suggests that academic and social processes are reciprocal and that student engagement consists of both affective and behavioral components. Identification with school represents an internal psychological state characterized by a sense of belonging and valuing school-related goals. In contrast, participation reflects the behavioral expression of that identification, demonstrated through commitment to school activities. According to the model, academic performance is a direct outcome of this behavioral engagement (Finn 1989). Furthermore, the model assumes that active involvement in learning activities and the broader school community are essential prerequisites for academic achievement (Finn & Rock 1997).

Dweck and Leggett's (1988) social-cognitive theory of motivation distinguishes between fixed and growth mindsets, impacting how students respond to challenges. Higgins (1996) extended this idea by emphasizing how self-knowledge and goals influence self-regulatory processes. Oyserman, Terry, and Bybee (2002) translated these theories into practice with a "possible selves" intervention that increased school involvement by helping students visualize a positive academic identity.

Small Group Sessions

A key strand in the literature addresses small group counseling and structured interventions and their implications for engagement with dropout prevention students. Steen and Kaffenberger (2007) demonstrated that integrating academic skills training within counseling sessions can significantly improve elementary students' performance. Similarly, the Student Success Skills (SSS) program—an evidence-based counseling intervention—has been shown to enhance academic achievement and reduce dropout risk (Webb & Brigman 2007, Webb, Lemberger, & Brigman 2008, Weinstein, Villares, & Brigman 2021). Group counseling was also shown to benefit at-risk high school students. Richard and Joyce (2019) reported that group counseling improved students' coping strategies and academic focus. Zyromski, Martin, and Mariani (2019) piloted the "True Goals" curriculum, showing promise in fostering goal-setting and social responsibility.

In-school small group counseling sessions have been found to be important in advancing the success of students in dropout and dropout prevention education programs. A study by Wisner and Norton (2013) found that teachers saw a significant improvement in the behavior and emotional strengths of students

following group counseling interventions. Further, Maras et al. (2015) performed research at an dropout prevention learning school that examined the use of social emotional learning groups into their academic program. Programs were implemented in a tiered system to ensure that those students who needed more emotional support and assistance received it. Researchers found that the students improved both academically and behaviorally. By providing tiered individualized support, students were able to improve credit recovery and were less likely to drop out (Maras et al. 2015).

School based small groups also may improve students' social emotional learning skills (Richard & Joyce 2019). Small groups may work in different ways to provide this support, such as through activity-oriented groups, self-concept building themes, and through discussion-oriented grouped experiences. During activity-oriented self-concept groups, group members learn how to work together and begin to trust one another. Self-concept building activities were facilitated to help students develop more positive and realistic self-concepts. During discussion-oriented groups, the group facilitator created open-ended conversations allowed members to talk freely and discuss personal problems. The results of the authors' work showed that activity-oriented self-concept improved the students' self-concepts, while open-ended discussion groups improved students' grades. The researchers concluded that any form of groups was better than no group at all (Richard & Joyce, 2019). Slaten et al. (2015) found that schools that used unique and culturally-relevant approaches in curriculum ensured students' SEL growth. By examining (1) the program's pedagogical practices, (2) relationships between students and teachers, (3) ensuring a strong community-based model, and (4) creating a supportive school environment; students thrived and advanced. The importance of using SEL in critical and conscious ways helps aid the students in meeting their academic and emotional needs (Slaten et al. 2015).

Pedagogically strong practices. To allow for educational goals to be impactful, teachers need to have the skills and competence. The role of professional development for teachers should be important to policy and decision-makers. A study done by Sasson et al. (2020) analyzed whether professional development had an effect on pedagogical practices and confirmed faculty members' teaching methodology (pedagogy) can impact the students they work with. The study stated teachers who are self-sufficient and have a positive relationship with the teaching profession itself are more impactful teachers. Additionally, the study found teachers who are better with one another also provide a better atmosphere for their students. These findings show the importance of creating training programs for teachers with an emphasis on the implementation of specific pedagogical practices (Sasson et al. 2020).

Relationships between students and teachers. A relationship between a teacher and a student can be impactful for students. A positive relationship between teacher and student can greatly impact a student's attitude in the classroom, which in turn can affect their grades and attendance. By having teachers relating to their students, being advocates, and being encouraging to students this allows the student to flourish in the learning environment. At dropout prevention schools the teacher student relationship can be developed into a true mentorship. Dropout prevention

schools usually have less students than traditional schools, which allows staff to get to know their students one on one. Dropout prevention education can foster a sense of belonging for students by interacting with more caring teachers. Learning takes time and effort, and dropout prevention schools are able to encourage their students more because they can build a strong relationship with them and the teachers can give more time to these students. Dropout prevention schools are geared for teachers and students to have a positive relationship (Hussain et al. 2013).

Supportive teacher-student relationships are instrumental in student success. Hussain et al. (n.d.) showed that positive teacher attitudes and responsiveness improve student motivation and classroom engagement. Gross and Francis (2017) emphasized the role of school-community partnerships, suggesting that inclusive schools thrive when educators, families, and community organizations collaborate consistently. Miller (2007) examined after-school programs and noted the importance of relational support, structure, and engagement in promoting positive outcomes. Strong interpersonal connections reinforce students' sense of belonging and resilience, which are crucial for success in dropout prevention education contexts (Morrisette 2011, Jones 2011).

Ensuring a strong community-based model. Community engagement in schools allows students to have an increased sense of community in comparison with their experiences at home schools. Community partnership allows schools to have support, engagement, and resources for staff and students. By working in the community, students can feel supported (Gross & Francis 2017). Partnerships in the community can also include after school programs for students. These after school programs can include after school care for kids, clubs, or enrichment activities for students. These programs allow students to have more support with community members. Miller's (2007) research study on after-school programming found that when staff, community members, and parents were engaged and have stronger relationships students have a positive relationship with homework completion, homework effort, and positive behavior.

Creating a supportive school environment. Schools that create a strong and supportive school environment emphasize the relationships between teachers, staff, students, and community partners. The effectiveness of individualized mentorship in dropout prevention schools has been shown to improve the students' academic performance while decreasing risky behaviors. Mentorship was found to have a positive impact on students and improved their overall learning experience (Grossman et al. 2012). Mentorship between students and older students, community members, and other faculty/staff allows students to have a reliable person they can go to for help. Mentorship also gives the student individualized attention not often found in traditional classrooms (Henry et al. 2020).

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL has emerged as a cornerstone of effective interventions. Maras et al. (2015) proposed a tiered response model integrating SEL into academic curricula, particularly benefiting students with emotional or behavioral needs. Slaten et al. (2015) highlighted how urban dropout prevention education settings require critically conscious SEL approaches that respect students' lived experiences. Caprara et al. (2014) found that promoting prosocial behavior through SEL led to improved classroom behavior and academic performance. These programs are

particularly effective when tailored to developmental stages and delivered collaboratively among school staff (Kamrath & Brooker 2017–2018). Dropout prevention schools often serve students expelled or chronically disengaged from traditional systems. Morrisette (2011) and Jones (2011) both emphasized the need to build authentic relationships and structure personalized learning experiences. Students in these settings often face socio-economic or emotional challenges that require holistic support. Joslyn, Vollmer, and Kronfli (2019) found that interdependent group contingencies effectively reduced classroom disruptions, promoting a collaborative and self-regulated learning environment. These findings reinforce the idea that behavior management must be part of broader emotional and academic support strategies.

Despite promising results, implementing interventions faces several barriers. Sasson, Kalir, and Malkinson (2020) discussed the challenges novice teachers face in adopting evidence-based pedagogical practices. Slaten et al. (2015) emphasized the need for culturally responsive SEL strategies in urban settings, underscoring that one-size-fits-all models are inadequate. Further, Bardhoshi et al. (2019) and Whitson and Quinby (2009) both emphasized the importance of rigorous evaluation methods in determining program efficacy. Without reliable assessment tools and fidelity checks, interventions risk being inconsistently applied and ineffective.

The purpose of this research study was to determine if dropout prevention school students who participated in small group counseling sessions at an dropout prevention school found them to be helpful. Specifically, the results of surveys from students and post-survey interviews demonstrated that students who participated in greater numbers of groups saw greater improvement in their social emotional growth, academic performance, and overall feelings of support while at school. Students were better able to share their experiences and close ties to faculty and staff at the school when compared to individuals who did not participate in groups.

The current study used a small-group, active learning paradigm with a series of small group activities within which students gained the ability to explore active communication skills, feelings education, perspective taking of others, and the development of intrinsic motivation. Teachers, parents, and community members were able to join into after-group meetings to further develop youth's skills. Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of the change process. To emphasize the impact of these skills on performance in school, groups also included past graduates returning to discuss the benefits of the school, curriculum, and socioemotional growth.

The program under review utilized a model first organized under the research of Oyserman, Terry, and Bybee (2002), which was an intervention model designed to explore possible selves as a precursor to motivation to perform in school. This social cognitive approach utilized basic social psychological theory and research on the nature of intrinsic motivation and developmental theory (Carver & Scheier 1981, Bandura 1986, Dweck & Leggett 1988). This small group program demonstrated that structured activities occurring in everyday settings can have great impact on who we think we are what is possible for us to achieve (Oyserman et al. 2002). Specifically, the goal of the present study was to develop a sequence of activities and grouped experiences that would provide students with knowledge, skills, and emotional outlets of what it means to construct possible selves that would be more

engaged in school, more emotionally and socially adept to handle peer pressures (Higgins 1996) and then give them practice in the skills needed to engage in and put effort into school (Finn & Rock 1997).

Methods

The current project focuses on the benefits of small group intervention activities for students enrolled at an dropout prevention school. Do such students benefit from attending group counseling sessions to improve their social emotional learning skills, improve their communication skills, and ensure their stability and retention in the dropout prevention program?

Participants. Participants consisted of 123 students enrolled at [The School], a dropout prevention program that runs 16 sites around the State of Indiana. Specifically, students at The Indianapolis School of Business & Entrepreneurship campus participated in the current study. The school is located at Diversity Church in a working-class area of downtown Indianapolis. Students are transported daily from their homes across the Indianapolis area. Students can begin to work with the Indianapolis campus starting during the 9th grade. Students at [The School] spend part of their week participating in a job training program, which consists of student-led micro businesses, work teams, and individual internships. Credit recovery through individualized curriculum is a cornerstone of their work.

Participants included those who worked with [The School] and with small intervention groups during the 2023-2025 academic school years, as well as those who did not work with small groups. Recruiting occurred by an announcement to students at [The School] asking if they would be willing to engage in small group experiences. No incentive was given to participate. Students were allowed to self-select into small group participation as well as study participation. Students were told the objectives of the study, as well as the requirement of consent for the study. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 20 years old, working towards credits toward their high school diploma. Participants ranged from having four high school credits complete to the 40 high school credits required to complete their program while participating in the study.

Participant demographics reflected a general balance in racial backgrounds, with 30 percent Caucasian, 30 percent African American, 30 percent Latinx, and 10 percent identified as “other.” Those surveyed represented the general racial background of the school students in general. Out of the 23 participants who completed the survey, 13 percent did not have any experience working in a social emotional learning small group during their 2023-2025 school years. Out of this 13 percent, 67 percent identified as male, and 33 percent identified as female. The remaining 20 students spent between one hour and five hours working within a small group led by a licensed mental health and school counselor, who facilitated a weekly one-hour group from August 2023 to May 2025. Social and emotional skills, feelings education, self-esteem, anxiety management, and transition planning were cornerstones of these group sessions. Out of these 123 students who participated, 45 percent identified as male,

while 55 percent identified as female. Again, these numbers generally parallel the gender makeup of the student population at the school.

Materials. The work of Jeffrey Jones (2011) regarding dropout prevention student narratives was instrumental in organizing the methods for the present study. Jones examines the concept of student engagement is critical in exploring the impact of dropout prevention learning methods in dropout prevention programs. Ethnographic observations and interviews were used to examine how the offerings of the dropout prevention learning environment interact with the processes of engagement. Jones emphasized the importance of youth voice in providing an account of the development of engagement in the context of an dropout prevention school setting. Specifically, the impact of supportive teacher relationships and a caring school community were paramount in ensuring the motivation and success of students. Findings suggest that affective engagement precedes school identification and behavioral commitments to learning. As such, the current study would further expound upon these narrative accounts by exploring what specific aspects of the affective relationship and social-emotional learning were critical in guiding student motivation and engagement.

The small group initiatives utilized in this program followed similar approaches that have been previously reviewed in the literature (Caprara et al. 2014, Henry et al. 2020, Jones 2011, Joslyn, Vollmer & Kronfli 2019, Miller 2007, Oyserman, Terry & Bybee 2002, Webb & Brigman 2007, Webb, Lemberger & Brigman, 2008). Based on the cited literature, the model drew on the core elements found in the referenced interventions, synthesizing them into a developmentally appropriate and evidence-based weekly format. The curriculum was designed to foster **self-awareness, social skills, motivation, behavior regulation, and academic engagement** for at-risk or dropout prevention education students. The curriculum would be repeated three times annually, and would modify activities for those students who participated in groups more than one 3-month quarter.

The twelve-week SEL group curriculum integrates key components from established small-group interventions in educational psychology and counseling. These components are supported by a rich literature base demonstrating the effectiveness of small-group formats for improving behavioral, emotional, and academic outcomes. Each weekly session was designed to last 45–60 minutes and was facilitated by a trained school counselor or mental health professional. The format includes group discussion, experiential learning activities, reflection, and goal-setting. The curriculum follows a sequenced, active, and focused structure aligned with CASEL's core competencies (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning).

Table 1. *Curriculum Outline of Socioemotional Learning Activities***Week 1: Group Orientation and Building Trust**

- **Goals:** Establish group norms, foster a sense of safety and belonging.
- **Literature Basis:** Webb & Brigman (2007) emphasize the importance of relationship-building in early sessions.
- **Activities:** Icebreakers, co-created group agreements, introduction to SEL.

Week 2: Understanding Emotions

- **Goals:** Increase emotional literacy and identification.
- **Literature Basis:** Caprara et al. (2014) link emotional awareness to prosocial behavior.
- **Activities:** Emotion charades, personal emotion journals, group discussion.

Week 3: Self-Awareness and Strengths Exploration

- **Goals:** Identify personal strengths and self-perceptions.
- **Literature Basis:** Oyserman et al. (2002) emphasize positive identity and "possible selves."
- **Activities:** Strengths inventory, "I am" statements, drawing future selves.

Week 4: Goal-Setting and Motivation

- **Goals:** Learn to set realistic, meaningful goals.
- **Literature Basis:** Oyserman et al. (2002); Henry et al. (2020) on motivational interviewing.
- **Activities:** SMART goal setting, obstacle mapping, visualization exercises.

Week 5: Managing Stress and Emotional Regulation

- **Goals:** Develop coping skills and emotion regulation strategies.
- **Literature Basis:** Webb, Lemberger, & Brigman (2008) stress cognitive and emotional self-management.
- **Activities:** Breathing techniques, "stress scenario" role-plays, coping toolbox creation.

Week 6: Communication and Listening Skills

- **Goals:** Improve interpersonal communication and empathy.
- **Literature Basis:** Caprara et al. (2014); Miller (2007) highlight social skill development.
- **Activities:** Active listening pairs, "I" message practice, empathy circle.

Week 7: Peer Conflict and Problem-Solving

- **Goals:** Navigate peer conflict constructively.
- **Literature Basis:** Joslyn et al. (2019) support group-based behavior modeling.
- **Activities:** Conflict scenarios, peer mediation role-play, solution circles.

Week 8: Perspective-Taking and Empathy

- **Goals:** Foster empathy and reduce impulsive behavior.
- **Literature Basis:** Caprara et al. (2014) associate empathy with improved classroom behavior.
- **Activities:** “Walk in their shoes” exercises, storytelling, gratitude letters.

Week 9: Building Positive Peer Relationships

- **Goals:** Strengthen cooperation and inclusiveness in the group.
- **Literature Basis:** Jones (2011) discusses belonging in dropout prevention learning contexts.
- **Activities:** Group games, compliment chain, inclusion mapping.

Week 10: Responsibility and Accountability

- **Goals:** Develop self-discipline and personal responsibility.
- **Literature Basis:** Webb & Brigman (2007) tie responsibility to academic engagement.
- **Activities:** Accountability chart, commitment contracts, reflection prompts.

Week 11: Academic Habits and School Engagement

- **Goals:** Link SEL skills to academic success.
- **Literature Basis:** Miller (2007); Webb, Lemberger, & Brigman (2008) connect SEL with academic improvement.
- **Activities:** Study skills relay, time management practice, academic goal check-in.

Week 12: Celebration, Reflection, and Closure

- **Goals:** Reflect on growth, celebrate successes, and plan future application.
- **Literature Basis:** Jones (2011) and Henry et al. (2020) support narrative closure in SEL work.
- **Activities:** Growth timeline, group affirmations, certificates of completion.

The sequential progression from self-awareness to self-management and then social skills aligned with both developmental psychology and empirical program frameworks (Webb et al. 2008). Weekly topics mirror those found in effective SEL programs, such as the Student Success Skills model, and address the internal (identity, motivation) and external (relationships, communication) needs of at-risk students (Oyserman et al. 2002, Henry et al. 2020). More importantly, the curriculum incorporates practices tailored to dropout prevention education environments, where students often benefit from relational interventions and trauma-informed strategies (Jones 2011, Joslyn et al. 2019). The use of small group settings fosters a safe space for vulnerable students to share, practice, and apply skills in a low-pressure environment (Caprara et al. 2014, Webb & Brigman 2007). Each session was designed to be interactive, culturally responsive, and relevant to students’ lived experiences. The ultimate goal is to equip participants with the emotional resilience, social tools, and academic self-belief necessary to thrive within and beyond school.

Procedure. This study was conducted as a between-subject experimental design. Following involvement in the SEL group process, participants filled out a survey created through Qualtrics. Students were given a private hyperlink to the survey to ensure only students at [The School] (Indianapolis) could complete the survey. All surveys took place on computers and smartphones. Participants were first asked for their written (digital) consent (see Figure 1), followed by a series of questions regarding their participation in the small group during their school year, along with demographic data. Participants were then asked a series of questions regarding student engagement, involving issues related to school identification, school participation, and school community for their 2023-2025 academic school year. A total of 35 survey questions were asked of all participants, regardless of if they participated in social emotional learning small groups (survey questions provided in the appendix). The first 35 survey questions surrounded the student's sense of belonging at their dropout prevention school, connections with peers, and teachers, and their growth across the past year due to their schooling. The questions specifically addressed students' experience in the social emotional small group and their relationship with the facilitator. The survey took approximately 10 minutes for students to complete. Results were recorded via Qualtrics and can be accessed by the experimenters.

Results

Each survey statement was rated on a Likert scale containing highly disagree (1.0), disagree (2.0), agree (3.0), and highly agree (4.0) resulting in a scale of 1.00 to 4.00. Qualtrics survey report used shows the minimum answer (1.0-4.0), maximum answer (1.0-4.0), mean of all answers, variance, and number of responses. Qualtrics also provided a percentage breakdown of each statement answer (highly disagree, disagree, agree, and highly agree). In general students reported that involvement in the socioemotional groups was of benefit and appreciated. Most students reported that they felt a strong sense of belonging at the dropout prevention school. In comparison with the environment, teachers, and curriculum at their traditional school, an overwhelming majority of students (94 percent) indicated that they felt more connected at the dropout prevention school environment. 87 percent of students reported feeling a strong sense of belonging, with similar numbers reporting they were more motivated to be involved, complete their work, felt connected with teachers, other students, and staff at the school. The importance of belonging cannot be overexpressed in examining the engagement of students in an dropout prevention school setting. Relationships were tantamount in developing a strong sense of purpose and motivation at the dropout prevention school.

Table 1. *Students' Sense of Belonging*

Question	Highly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Highly Agree	Total
I am happy I transitioned to [The School] from my previous high school.	0.00%	4.35%	34.78%	60.87%	123
Social factors influenced my decision to come to [The School].	13.64%	13.64%	50.00%	22.73%	122
My friends and family highly affected my decision to enroll at [The School].	0.00%	26.09%	43.48%	30.43%	123
I felt like I fit in well at my previous high school.	30.43%	21.74%	30.43%	17.39%	123
I feel a strong belonging to [The School].	8.70%	4.35%	47.83%	39.13%	123
My experience at [The School] has overall been positive.	0.00%	8.70%	43.48%	47.83%	123
I currently have decent grades and am on track to graduate.	4.35%	30.43%	43.48%	21.74%	123
I am extremely engaged in my classes at [The School].	8.70%	13.04%	56.52%	21.74%	123
I participate often in class at [The School].	4.35%	8.70%	47.83%	39.13%	123
I did not participate often at my previous high school.	13.04%	21.74%	26.09%	39.13%	123
Being a student at [The School] has changed how I think about myself as a person.	4.35%	30.43%	34.78%	30.43%	123
I have good relationships with my teachers here at [The School].	0.00%	13.04%	43.48%	43.48%	123
I had good relationships with teachers at my previous high school.	34.78%	17.39%	43.48%	4.35%	123
I feel supported by staff at [The School].	4.55%	9.09%	45.45%	40.91%	122
I felt supported at my previous high school.	39.13%	17.39%	43.48%	0.00%	123
I feel connected to peers and staff at [The School].	8.70%	17.39%	43.48%	30.43%	123
I felt connected to peers and staff at my previous high school.	34.78%	17.39%	34.78%	13.04%	123
Coming to [The School] changed who I hang out with on a normal basis.	26.09%	21.74%	34.78%	17.39%	123

[The School] supports me beyond my academic growth.	0.00%	8.70%	56.52%	34.78%	123
I value my experience at [The School].	4.35%	4.35%	47.83%	43.48%	123
I feel challenged by my classes at [The School].	0.00%	30.43%	34.78%	34.78%	123
I have grown personally because of my enrollment with [The School].	8.70%	4.35%	43.48%	43.48%	123
[The School] has a fun and safe school culture.	4.35%	0.00%	52.17%	43.48%	123
I feel highly connected to at least one teacher at [The School].	4.35%	8.70%	43.48%	43.48%	123
I feel highly connected to at least one other student at [The School].	9.09%	4.55%	59.09%	27.27%	122
I feel [The School] handles discipline fairly.	9.09%	9.09%	50.00%	31.82%	122
Attending [The School] makes me feel more in charge of my learning.	4.35%	17.39%	39.13%	39.13%	123
I had friends at [The School] before I enrolled.	19.05%	33.33%	28.57%	19.05%	121
I miss my previous high school and regret attending [The School].	56.52%	26.09%	17.39%	0.00%	123
The culture of my old high school was healthier than the culture at [The School].	65.22%	17.39%	17.39%	0.00%	123
I grew socially this past school year at [The School].	13.64%	22.73%	40.91%	22.73%	122
I grew academically this past school year at [The School].	9.09%	13.64%	36.36%	40.91%	122
I grew emotionally this past school year at [The School].	18.18%	27.27%	22.73%	31.82%	122
I believe the staff at [The School] wants me to succeed.	4.55%	0.00%	40.91%	54.55%	122
I believe my peers at [The School] are rooting for me.	9.09%	9.09%	50.00%	31.82%	122

It also should be noted that students began to examine the importance of their attitude and experiences throughout the course of the year in a dropout prevention school. Specifically, a majority of students reported growing socially, emotionally, and academically at their schools. Students expressed relationships with peers at the school helped them to interact both in school and out of school with different groups

of peers. Students seemed to grow in their understanding that their success was largely determined by “the company they keep.” Students reported that having a stronger sense of engagement, purpose, and ability to control their learning (and perhaps their school environment) ensured greater motivation to learn, motivation to complete credits, and work toward completion of their degrees.

Table 2. *Items Regarding Small Group Activities Performed in the Socioemotional Group*

Question	Highly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Highly Agree	Total
I enjoyed my time spent with the SEL group.	4.35%	4.35%	39.13%	52.17%	123
I felt supported by the SEL counselor.	4.35%	0.00%	39.13%	56.52%	123
I felt I could go to the SEL counselor with challenges or questions I had.	4.35%	8.70%	47.83%	39.13%	123
I was engaged with the SEL counselor during our time together.	4.35%	8.70%	52.17%	34.78%	123
I felt more connected with peers who attended the SEL group.	4.35%	17.39%	47.83%	30.43%	123
I felt a sense of belonging in the SEL group.	4.35%	8.70%	43.48%	43.48%	123
I grew emotionally from the SEL group.	4.35%	13.04%	52.17%	30.43%	123
I grew socially from the SEL group.	4.35%	17.39%	52.17%	26.09%	123
I would recommend coming to the SEL group with other peers.	4.35%	4.35%	43.48%	47.83%	123
My academics have been more successful because of the SEL group.	4.35%	13.04%	47.83%	34.78%	123
My social skills have been better because of the SEL group.	4.35%	13.04%	43.48%	39.13%	123
My emotional regulation has been better because of the SEL group.	4.35%	17.39%	39.13%	39.13%	123

Discussion

The results of the present study demonstrated that engagement in structured small group experiences play a part in assisting students in dropout prevention programming in improving their socioemotional learning experiences. Specifically, following engagement in small group activities, students shared a stronger sense of belonging at school and felt closer to peers. They shared a general sense that they

were closer socially with peers and with staff at the school. Moreover, they demonstrated stronger academic engagement and involvement in the curriculum, showing up more frequently and were less likely to be absent, which is a significant achievement for this group. Students who participated in SEL groups reported higher levels of emotional growth, indicating that they felt supported by teachers, school counselors, and administrators when compared to their prior traditional school experiences. Notably, students who attended a greater number of group sessions described more pronounced gains, suggesting a close relationship between group participation and positive developmental outcomes.

A central finding of this study is the importance of belonging. An overwhelming majority of students reported feeling more connected to the dropout prevention school than to their previous high schools. Feelings of school identification and participation align closely with Finn's participation-identification model (1989), which suggests that affective engagement precedes behavioral commitment within school settings. The data indicate that small group experiences may serve as a catalyst for academic engagement. Dropout engagement programs may consider involving students in initial, 6–8-week orientation groups that create social opportunities before actively trying to immerse students in rigorous academic challenges. Providing a structured, relational space for shared experiences strengthened students' emotional attachment to the school community. This strengthened identification likely contributes to improved participation, credit completion, and persistence.

Furthermore, it allowed students to practice communication skills and build trust amongst the SEL groups and with school staff. Students' reports of improved relationships with teachers and staff are equally significant. Many participants indicated that they felt highly connected to at least one adult at the school and believed that staff wanted them to succeed. These findings reinforce prior research highlighting the protective power of supportive adult relationships in alternative and dropout prevention settings. The small group format, facilitated by a licensed counselor, created opportunities for mentorship and individualized attention. In contrast to traditional school environments—where students previously reported weaker relational connections—the dropout prevention academy's small size and small group processes fostered meaningful bonds. The SEL groups deepened these bonds by creating consistent, psychologically safe spaces for dialogue.

The curriculum's structured progression—from self-awareness and emotional literacy to goal setting, communication skills, and academic habits—also appears to have contributed to measurable growth. Students reported improvements in emotional regulation, social skills, and academic performance. These findings align with prior SEL research demonstrating that emotional competence and self-regulation are foundational to academic success. The integration of “possible selves” theory into the curriculum further strengthened motivation by helping students visualize attainable academic identities and future goals. When students perceive themselves as capable learners with viable futures, engagement and persistence increase.

Another notable outcome involved the importance of connections through peer relationships. Students reported feeling more connected to peers who attended the SEL groups and expressed that peer dynamics positively influenced their involvement with school. Many described becoming more aware of “the company they keep” and how

peer associations shape academic behavior. These findings suggest that small group experiences not only support individual development but also reshape social networks in ways that reinforce positive norms. In dropout prevention settings—where students may have histories of disengagement or association with negative peer influences—this shift in peer culture is particularly impactful.

Despite these strengths, some limitations must be acknowledged. The study relied primarily on self-report survey data collected after participation, limiting causal inference. A pre–post design would provide stronger evidence of change over time. Although the racial distribution of participants reflected the school’s population, broader geographic and demographic diversity would enhance generalizability. Future research might also examine objective academic indicators, such as attendance records, credit completion rates, and graduation outcomes, to further substantiate perceived gains.

Even with these limitations, the implications for practice are significant. First, small group SEL interventions should be considered an essential component of dropout prevention programming. The findings suggest that relational interventions enhance academic outcomes by strengthening identification with school and improving self-regulatory skills. Second, schools should ensure consistency and continuity in group offerings, as greater participation appears linked to greater growth. Third, professional development for teachers and staff in SEL practices may extend the relational benefits beyond the group setting into classrooms and broader school culture.

In conclusion, this study reinforces the premise that dropout prevention education must address more than credit recovery. Students at risk of leaving school often require relational repair, emotional skill development, and opportunities to reconstruct their academic identities. The small group SEL model implemented in this program appears to meet these needs effectively. By fostering belonging, strengthening adult mentorship, reshaping peer norms, and enhancing emotional regulation, small group experiences function as a powerful lever for retention and credit completion. As dropout prevention programs continue to evolve, integrating structured, evidence-informed small group interventions may prove critical to supporting students not only in graduating, but in developing the resilience and self-belief necessary to thrive beyond high school.

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Appendix

Figure 1. *Informed Consent Form*

This study will examine students impact on their participation or lack of participation engaging in a small group with Dr. Michael Slavkin on Friday mornings. Participants will be asked to answer a series of questions about their participation in the small group throughout the school year. We will also collect demographic data from students. Students will be asked questions regarding student engagement, issues related to school identification, school community and school participation for their 2021-2022 school year. These answers will be recorded and analyzed. All identifies of students will be kept confidential. By clicking agree, you are allowing your data to be shared with the investigators of the study and consent to your data being analyzed.

- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Disagree

Figure 2. Demographic Questions

Your overall estimated number of high school credits completed after this semester:

- ☐ 0-10 credits
- ☐ 11-20 credits
- ☐ 21-30 credits
- ☐ 31-40 credits
- ☐ 41+ credits

Your estimated number of hours participating in Dr. Slavkins small group this school year:

- ☐ None
- ☐ 1-3 hours
- ☐ 3-7 hours
- ☐ 7-10 hours
- ☐ 10+ hours

What gender do you identify as?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary / third gender
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Please specify your ethnicity:

- ☐ Caucasian
- ☐ African American
- ☐ Latinx
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to say