

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

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

1 A dropout prevention school is an educational facility that presents  
2 activities, materials, and curricula that fall outside what we know as traditional  
3 school offerings (Morrissette, 2011). Students who attend these schools  
4 frequently are at risk of school failure in a traditional school setting for a variety  
5 of reasons. Dropout prevention learning interventions are not a new concept.  
6 Much of the previous literature examines specific intervention strategies that  
7 decrease dropout rates, improve social emotional learning (SEL), and encourage  
8 academic advancement. Often students are referred to dropout prevention  
9 schools in order to better address their academic, social, or behavioral problems.  
10 It is estimated that 20 percent of American students below the age of 18 years of  
11 age are dealing with a mental illness (Maras, Thompson, Lewis, Thornburg, &  
12 Hawks, 2015). While it is not always clear that students in dropout prevention  
13 and dropout prevention education have a mental illness, those referred  
14 oftentimes are found to be more predisposed to traumatic backgrounds,  
15 struggling with adverse childhood experiences. Furthermore, many of these  
16 students deal with the stress and trauma that comes from daily struggles (Slaten,  
17 Irby, Tate, & Rivera, 2015). These students are more often likely than students  
18 in traditional schools to be at risk of dropping out as well.

19 Dropout prevention schools are a beneficial way for students to get the  
20 credits they need to graduate; however, these students often need significantly  
21 more than just academic support in order to function well within dropout  
22 programs. Oftentimes, these individuals struggle within traditional schools due  
23 to the lack of individualized attention they receive in classrooms. As such,  
24 dropout prevention school students need significant academic support, as well  
25 as social emotional support (Slaten et al., 2015). Dropout prevention schools and  
26 the dropout prevention programs they facilitate allow students to continue their  
27 education in a manner vastly different from the traditional facilitation of  
28 secondary schools. Individualized curriculum, planning that allows students to  
29 work in a self-paced style, and metrics that allow students to work slowly toward  
30 program progress is believed to encourage improved credit recovery (Morsette,  
31 2011).

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

41 The current project examines the benefits of small group intervention  
42 activities for students enrolled at a dropout prevention school. Specifically,  
43 students were believed to benefit from attending group counseling sessions to  
44 improve their social emotional learning skills, improve their communication  
45 skills, and ensure their stability and retention in the dropout prevention program.  
46

## 1 **Theoretical Foundations: Motivation and Self-Regulation**

2  
3 Understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying at-risk behaviors  
4 is essential to designing effective interventions. Bandura's (1986) concept of  
5 self-efficacy and personal agency laid the groundwork for understanding how  
6 beliefs in one's capabilities influence goal setting and perseverance. Similarly,  
7 Carver and Scheier (1981) introduced a control theory perspective, highlighting  
8 how self-monitoring and self-regulation affect behavior.

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

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

## 28 29 30 **Small Group Sessions**

31  
32 A key strand in the literature addresses small group counseling and  
33 structured interventions and their implications for engagement with dropout  
34 prevention students. Steen and Kaffenberger (2007) demonstrated that  
35 integrating academic skills training within counseling sessions can significantly  
36 improve elementary students' performance. Similarly, the Student Success Skills  
37 (SSS) program—an evidence-based counseling intervention—was shown to  
38 enhance academic achievement and reduce dropout risk (Webb & Brigman,  
39 2007; Webb, Lemberger, & Brigman, 2008; Weinstein, Villares, & Brigman,  
40 2021). Group counseling was also shown to benefit at-risk high school students.  
41 Richard and Joyce (2019) reported that group counseling improved students'  
42 coping strategies and academic focus. Zyromski, Martin, and Mariani (2019)  
43 piloted the "True Goals" curriculum, showing promise in fostering goal-setting  
44 and social responsibility.

45 In-school small group counseling sessions were found to be important in  
46 advancing the success of students in dropout and dropout prevention education

1 programs. A study by Wisner and Norton (2013) found that teachers saw a  
2 significant improvement in the behavior and emotional strengths of students  
3 following group counseling interventions. Further, Maras et al. (2015) performed  
4 research at a dropout prevention learning school that examined the use of social  
5 emotional learning groups into their academic program. Programs were  
6 implemented in a tiered system to ensure that those students who needed more  
7 emotional support and assistance received it. Researchers found that the students  
8 improved both academically and behaviorally. By providing tiered  
9 individualized support, students were able to improve credit recovery and were  
10 less likely to drop out (Maras et al., 2015).

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

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

43 **Relationships between students and teachers.** A relationship between a  
44 teacher and a student can be impactful for students. A positive relationship  
45 between teacher and student can impact a student's attitude in the classroom,  
46 which in turn can affect their grades and attendance. By having teachers relating

1 to their students, being advocates, and being encouraging to students this allows  
2 the student to flourish in the learning environment. At dropout prevention  
3 schools the teacher/student relationship can be developed into a true mentorship.  
4 Dropout prevention schools usually have less students than traditional schools,  
5 which allows staff to get to know their students one on one. Dropout prevention  
6 education can foster a sense of belonging for students by interacting with more  
7 caring teachers. Learning takes time and effort, and dropout prevention schools  
8 can encourage their students more because they can build a strong relationship  
9 with them and the teachers can give more time to these students. Dropout  
10 prevention schools are geared for teachers and students to have a positive  
11 relationship (Hussain et al., 2013).

12 Supportive teacher-student relationships are instrumental in student success.  
13 Hussain et al. (n.d.) showed that positive teacher attitudes and responsiveness  
14 improve student motivation and classroom engagement. Gross and Francis  
15 (2017) emphasized the role of school–community partnerships, suggesting that  
16 inclusive schools thrive when educators, families, and community organizations  
17 collaborate consistently. Miller (2007) examined after-school programs and  
18 noted the importance of relational support, structure, and engagement in  
19 promoting positive outcomes. Strong interpersonal connections reinforce  
20 students’ sense of belonging and resilience, which are crucial for success in  
21 dropout prevention education contexts (Morrissette, 2011; Jones, 2011).

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

35 **Creating a supportive school environment.** Schools that create a strong  
36 and supportive school environment emphasize the relationships between  
37 teachers, staff, students, and community partners. The effectiveness of  
38 individualized mentorship in dropout prevention schools improved the students’  
39 academic performance while decreasing risky behaviors. Mentorship was found  
40 to have a positive impact on students and improved their overall learning  
41 experience (Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2012). Mentorship between  
42 students and older students, community members, and other faculty/staff allows  
43 students to have a reliable person they can go to for help. Mentorship also gives  
44 the student individualized attention not often found in traditional classrooms  
45 (Henry, Reinke, Herman, Thompson, & Lewis, 2020).

1       **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)**. SEL has emerged as a cornerstone  
2 of effective interventions. Maras et al. (2015) proposed a tiered response model  
3 integrating SEL into academic curricula, particularly benefiting students with  
4 emotional or behavioral needs. Slaten et al. (2015) highlighted how urban  
5 dropout prevention education settings require critically conscious SEL  
6 approaches that respect students' lived experiences. Caprara et al. (2014) found  
7 that promoting prosocial behavior through SEL led to improved classroom  
8 behavior and academic performance. These programs are particularly effective  
9 when tailored to developmental stages and delivered collaboratively among  
10 school staff (Kamrath & Brooker, 2017–2018). Dropout prevention schools  
11 often serve students expelled or chronically disengaged from traditional systems.  
12 Morrissette (2011) and Jones (2011) both emphasized the need to build authentic  
13 relationships and structure personalized learning experiences. Students in these  
14 settings often face socio-economic or emotional challenges that require holistic  
15 support. Joslyn, Vollmer, and Kronfli (2019) found that interdependent group  
16 contingencies effectively reduced classroom disruptions, promoting a  
17 collaborative and self-regulated learning environment. These findings reinforce  
18 the idea that behavior management must be part of broader emotional and  
19 academic support strategies.

20       Despite promising results, implementing interventions faces several  
21 barriers. Sasson, Kalir and Malkinson (2020) discussed the challenges novice  
22 teachers face in adopting evidence-based pedagogical practices. Slaten et al.  
23 (2015) emphasized the need for culturally responsive SEL strategies in urban  
24 settings, underscoring that one-size-fits-all models are inadequate. Further,  
25 Bardhoshi et al. (2019) and Whitson and Quinby (2009) both emphasized the  
26 importance of rigorous evaluation methods in determining program efficacy.  
27 Without reliable assessment tools and fidelity checks, interventions risk being  
28 inconsistently applied and ineffective.

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

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

1 The program under review utilized a model first organized under the  
2 research of Oyserman, Terry, and Bybee (2002), which was an intervention  
3 model designed to explore possible selves as a precursor to motivation to  
4 perform in school. This social cognitive approach utilized basic social  
5 psychological theory and research on the nature of intrinsic motivation and  
6 developmental theory (Carver and Scheier, 1981; Bandura, 1986; Dweck and  
7 Leggett, 1988). This small group program demonstrated that structured activities  
8 occurring in everyday settings can have great impact on who we think we are  
9 what is possible for us to achieve (Oyserman et al., 2002). Specifically, the goal  
10 of the present study was to develop a sequence of activities and grouped  
11 experiences that would provide students with knowledge, skills, and emotional  
12 outlets of what it means to construct possible selves that would be more engaged  
13 in school, more emotionally and socially adept to handle peer pressures (e.g.  
14 Higgins, 1996) and then give them practice in the skills needed to engage in and  
15 put effort into school (e.g. Finn and Rock, 1997).

## 16 17 18 **Methods**

19  
20 The current project focuses on the benefits of small group intervention  
21 activities for students enrolled at a dropout prevention school. Do such students  
22 benefit from attending group counseling sessions to improve their social  
23 emotional learning skills, improve their communication skills, and ensure their  
24 stability and retention in the dropout prevention program?

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

36 Participants included those who worked with [The School] and with small  
37 intervention groups during the 2023-2025 academic school years, as well as  
38 those who did not work with small groups. Recruiting occurred by an  
39 announcement to students at [The School] asking if they would be willing to  
40 engage in small group experiences. No incentive was given to participate.  
41 Students were allowed to self-select into small group participation as well as  
42 study participation. Students were told the objectives of the study, as well as the  
43 requirement of consent for the study. All participants were between the ages of  
44 18 and 20 years old, working towards credits toward their high school diploma.  
45 Participants ranged from having four high school credits complete to the 40 high

1 school credits required to complete their program while participating in the  
2 study.

3 Participant demographics reflected a general balance in racial backgrounds,  
4 with 30 percent Caucasian, 30 percent African American, 30 percent Latinx, and  
5 10 percent identified as “other.” Those surveyed represented the general racial  
6 background of the school students in general. Out of the 23 participants who  
7 completed the survey, 13 percent did not have any experience working in a social  
8 emotional learning small group during their 2023-2025 school years. Out of this  
9 13 percent, 67 percent identified as male, and 33 percent identified as female.  
10 The remaining 20 students spent between one hour and five hours working  
11 within a small group led by a licensed mental health and school counselor, who  
12 facilitated a weekly one-hour group from August 2023 to May 2025. Social and  
13 emotional skills, feelings education, self-esteem, anxiety management, and  
14 transition planning were cornerstones of these group sessions. Out of these 123  
15 students who participated, 45 percent identified as male, while 55 percent  
16 identified as female. Again, these numbers parallel the gender makeup of the  
17 student population at the school.

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

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

45 The twelve-week SEL group curriculum integrates key components from  
46 established small-group interventions in educational psychology and counseling.

1 These components are supported by a rich literature base demonstrating the  
 2 effectiveness of small-group formats for improving behavioral, emotional, and  
 3 academic outcomes. Each weekly session was designed to last 45–60 minutes  
 4 and was facilitated by a trained school counselor or mental health professional.  
 5 The format includes group discussion, experiential learning activities, reflection,  
 6 and goal-setting. The curriculum follows a sequenced, active, and focused  
 7 structure aligned with CASEL’s core competencies (Collaborative for  
 8 Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning).

9 The sequential progression from self-awareness to self-management and  
 10 then social skills aligned with both developmental psychology and empirical  
 11 program frameworks (Webb et al., 2008). Weekly topics mirror those found in  
 12 effective SEL programs, such as the Student Success Skills model, and address  
 13 the internal (identity, motivation) and external (relationships, communication)  
 14 needs of at-risk students (Oyserman et al., 2002; Henry et al., 2020). More  
 15 importantly, the curriculum incorporates practices tailored to dropout prevention  
 16 education environments, where students often benefit from relational  
 17 interventions and trauma-informed strategies (Jones, 2011; Joslyn et al., 2019).  
 18

19 **Table 1.** *Curriculum Outline of Socioemotional Learning Activities*

20  
 21 **Week 1: Group Orientation and Building Trust**

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

27  
 28 **Week 2: Understanding Emotions**

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

34  
 35 **Week 3: Self-Awareness and Strengths Exploration**

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

41  
 42 **Week 4: Goal-Setting and Motivation**

- 43 • **Goals:** Learn to set realistic, meaningful goals.
- 44 • **Literature Basis:** Oyserman et al. (2002); Henry et al. (2020) on  
 45 motivational interviewing.

- 1       • **Activities:** SMART goal setting, obstacle mapping, visualization  
2       exercises.  
3
- 4       **Week 5: Managing Stress and Emotional Regulation**
- 5       • **Goals:** Develop coping skills and emotion regulation strategies.  
6       • **Literature Basis:** Webb, Lemberger, & Brigman (2008) stress  
7       cognitive and emotional self-management.  
8       • **Activities:** Breathing techniques, “stress scenario” role-plays, coping  
9       toolbox creation.  
10
- 11       **Week 6: Communication and Listening Skills**
- 12       • **Goals:** Improve interpersonal communication and empathy.  
13       • **Literature Basis:** Caprara et al. (2014); Miller (2007) highlight social  
14       skill development.  
15       • **Activities:** Active listening pairs, "I" message practice, empathy circle.  
16
- 17       **Week 7: Peer Conflict and Problem-Solving**
- 18       • **Goals:** Navigate peer conflict constructively.  
19       • **Literature Basis:** Joslyn et al. (2019) support group-based behavior  
20       modeling.  
21       • **Activities:** Conflict scenarios, peer mediation role-play, solution  
22       circles.  
23
- 24       **Week 8: Perspective-Taking and Empathy**
- 25       • **Goals:** Foster empathy and reduce impulsive behavior.  
26       • **Literature Basis:** Caprara et al. (2014) associate empathy with  
27       improved classroom behavior.  
28       • **Activities:** “Walk in their shoes” exercises, storytelling, gratitude  
29       letters.  
30
- 31       **Week 9: Building Positive Peer Relationships**
- 32       • **Goals:** Strengthen cooperation and inclusiveness in the group.  
33       • **Literature Basis:** Jones (2011) discusses belonging in dropout  
34       prevention learning contexts.  
35       • **Activities:** Group games, compliment chain, inclusion mapping.  
36
- 37       **Week 10: Responsibility and Accountability**
- 38       • **Goals:** Develop self-discipline and personal responsibility.  
39       • **Literature Basis:** Webb & Brigman (2007) tie responsibility to  
40       academic engagement.  
41       • **Activities:** Accountability chart, commitment contracts, reflection  
42       prompts.  
43
- 44       **Week 11: Academic Habits and School Engagement**
- 45       • **Goals:** Link SEL skills to academic success.  
46       • **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 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 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 small social emotional group and their relationship with the facilitator. The survey took approximately 10 minutes for students to complete. Results were recorded via Qualtrics and were 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

1 answer (highly disagree, disagree, agree, and highly agree). In general students  
 2 reported that involvement in the socioemotional groups was of benefit and  
 3 appreciated. Most students reported that they felt a strong sense of belonging at  
 4 the dropout prevention school. In comparison with the environment, teachers,  
 5 and curriculum at their traditional school, an overwhelming majority of students  
 6 (94 percent) indicated that they felt more connected at the dropout prevention  
 7 school environment. 87 percent of students reported feeling a strong sense of  
 8 belonging, with similar numbers reporting they were more motivated to be  
 9 involved, complete their work, felt connected with teachers, other students, and  
 10 staff at the school. The importance of belonging cannot be overexpressed in  
 11 examining the engagement of students in a dropout prevention school setting.  
 12 Relationships were tantamount in developing a strong sense of purpose and  
 13 motivation at the dropout prevention school.  
 14  
 15

**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

2026-7271-AJPSY-PSY – 22 MAY 2026

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
<b>Question</b>	<b>Highly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Highly Agree</b>	<b>Total</b>
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

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15

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

1  
2  
3

### Discussion

4  
5 The results of the present study provide compelling evidence that structured  
6 small group socioemotional learning (SEL) experiences play a meaningful role  
7 in promoting student engagement, belonging, and academic progress within a  
8 dropout prevention academy. Students who participated in SEL groups reported  
9 higher levels of emotional growth, improved peer and staff relationships,  
10 stronger academic motivation, and greater overall feelings of support when  
11 compared to their prior traditional school experiences. Notably, students who  
12 attended a greater number of group sessions described more pronounced gains,  
13 suggesting a dose–response relationship between group participation and  
14 positive developmental outcomes.

15 A central finding of this study is the importance of belonging. An  
16 overwhelming majority of students reported feeling more connected to the  
17 dropout prevention school than to their previous high schools. Feelings of school  
18 identification and participation align closely with Finn’s participation–  
19 identification model (1989), which suggests that affective engagement precedes  
20 behavioral commitment. The data indicate that small group experiences may  
21 serve as a catalyst for this affective engagement. By providing a structured,  
22 relational space for sharing experiences, practicing communication skills, and  
23 building trust, the SEL groups appear to strengthen students’ emotional  
24 attachment to the school community. This strengthened identification likely  
25 contributes to improved participation, credit completion, and persistence.

26 Students’ reports of improved relationships with teachers and staff are  
27 equally significant.

28 Many participants indicated that they felt highly connected to at least one  
29 adult at the school and believed that staff wanted them to succeed. These findings  
30 reinforce prior research highlighting the protective power of supportive adult  
31 relationships in alternative and dropout prevention settings. The small group

1 format, facilitated by a licensed counselor, created opportunities for mentorship  
2 and individualized attention. In contrast to traditional school environments—  
3 where students previously reported weaker relational connections—the dropout  
4 prevention academy’s small size and intentional relational culture appear to  
5 foster meaningful bonds. The SEL groups likely deepened these bonds by  
6 creating consistent, psychologically safe spaces for dialogue.

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

17 Another notable outcome involves peer relationships. Students reported  
18 feeling more connected to peers who attended the SEL groups and expressed that  
19 peer dynamics positively influenced their engagement. Many described  
20 becoming more aware of “the company they keep” and how peer associations  
21 shape academic behavior. These findings suggest that small group experiences  
22 not only support individual development but also reshape social networks in  
23 ways that reinforce positive norms. In dropout prevention settings—where  
24 students may have histories of disengagement or association with negative peer  
25 influences—this shift in peer culture is particularly impactful.

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

34 Even with these limitations, the implications for practice are significant.  
35 First, small group SEL interventions should be considered an essential  
36 component—not a supplementary feature—of dropout prevention programming.  
37 The findings suggest that relational, emotionally focused interventions enhance  
38 academic outcomes by strengthening identification with school and improving  
39 self-regulatory skills. Second, schools should ensure consistency and continuity  
40 in group offerings, as greater participation appears linked to greater growth.  
41 Third, professional development for teachers and staff in SEL practices may  
42 extend the relational benefits beyond the group setting into classrooms and  
43 broader school culture.

44 In conclusion, this study reinforces the premise that dropout prevention  
45 education must address more than credit recovery. Students at risk of leaving  
46 school often require relational repair, emotional skill development, and

1 opportunities to reconstruct their academic identities. The small group SEL  
 2 model implemented in this program appears to meet these needs effectively. By  
 3 fostering belonging, strengthening adult mentorship, reshaping peer norms, and  
 4 enhancing emotional regulation, small group experiences function as a powerful  
 5 lever for retention and credit completion. As dropout prevention programs  
 6 continue to evolve, integrating structured, evidence-informed small group  
 7 interventions may prove critical to supporting students not only in graduating,  
 8 but in developing the resilience and self-belief necessary to thrive beyond high  
 9 school.

## 13 References

- 15 Bandura, A. (1986). From thought to action: mechanisms of personal agency. *New*  
 16 *Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 15, 1–17.
- 17 Bardhoshi, G., Cobb, N., & Erford, B.T. (2019). Determining evidence-based outcomes  
 18 in school-aged youth. *Professional School Counseling*, 22(1b), 1-10. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26774241>
- 20 Campbell, K. (2023). Advocating student within environment in application: The lived  
 21 experience of Sixth Grade students' participation in a small group intervention.  
 22 *Dissertation Abstracts*. 1-143.
- 23 Caprara, G.V., Kanacri, P.L., Gerbino, M., Zuffiano, A., Alessandri, G., Vecchio, G.,  
 24 Caprara, E., Pastorelli, C., & Bridglall, B. (2014). Positive effects of promoting  
 25 prosocial behavior in early adolescence: Evidence from a school based intervention.  
 26 *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 38(4), 386-396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025414531464>
- 28 Carver, C. and Scheier, M. (1981). *Attention and Self-regulation: A Control Therapy*  
 29 *Approach to Human Behavior*. Berlin, Germany: Springer-Verlag.
- 30 Dweck, C. and Leggett, E. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and  
 31 personality. *Psychological Review*, 95, 256–272. [doi:10.1037/0033-295X.95.2](https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.95.2)
- 32 Finn, J. D. and Rock, D. A. (1997). Academic success among students at risk for school  
 33 failure. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82, 221–234. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.82.2.221>
- 35 Gross, J., & Francis, G. (2017, December 5). *Strong School-Community Partnerships*  
 36 *in inclusive schools are " part of the fabric of the school...we count on them "*.  
 37 Academia.edu. Retrieved April 22, 2022, from [https://www.academia.edu/20858624/Strong\\_School\\_Community\\_Partnerships\\_in\\_Inclusive\\_Schools\\_Are\\_Part\\_of\\_the\\_Fabric\\_of\\_the\\_School\\_We\\_Count\\_on\\_Them](https://www.academia.edu/20858624/Strong_School_Community_Partnerships_in_Inclusive_Schools_Are_Part_of_the_Fabric_of_the_School_We_Count_on_Them)
- 40 Grossman, J. B., Chan, C. S., Schwartz, S. E., & Rhodes, J. E. (2012). The test of time  
 41 in school-based mentoring: The role of relationship duration and re-matching on  
 42 academic outcomes. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 49(1), 43-54.  
 43 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-011-9435-0>
- 44 Henry, L., Reinke, W. M., Herman, K. C., Thompson, A. M., & Lewis, C. G. (2020).  
 45 Motivational interviewing with at-risk students (MARS) mentoring: Addressing  
 46 the unique mental health needs of students in dropout prevention school  
 47 placements. *School Psychology Review*, 50(1), 62-74. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2020.1827679>

- 1 Higgins, E. T. (1996). The self-digest: Self-knowledge serving self-regulatory functions.  
2 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71, 1062–1083. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.71.6.1062>  
3
- 4 Hussain, N., Nawaz, B., Shaista Nasir, S., Kiani, N., & Hussain, M. (n.d.). Positive  
5 teacher-student relationship and teachers experience-A teacher's perspective.  
6 *Global Journal of Management and Business Research Interdisciplinary*, 13(3).  
7 Jones, J. N. (2011). Narratives of student engagement in a dropout prevention learning  
8 context. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 16(3), 219–  
9 236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2011.586299>
- 10 Joslyn, P. R., Vollmer, T. R., & Kronfli, F. R. (2019). Interdependent group  
11 contingencies reduce disruption in dropout prevention high school classrooms.  
12 *Journal of Behavioral Education*, 28(4), 423–434. [https://doi.org/10.1007/s10864-](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10864-019-09321-0)  
13 [019-09321-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10864-019-09321-0)
- 14 Kamrath, B., & Brooker, T. (2017-2018). Improved attitude and achievement.  
15 *Professional School Counseling*, 21(1), 60-69. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.5330/1096-](https://doi.org/10.5330/1096-2409-21.1)  
16 [2409-21.1](https://doi.org/10.5330/1096-2409-21.1).
- 17 Maras, M. A., Thompson, A. M., Lewis, C., Thornburg, K., & Hawks, J. (2015).  
18 Developing a tiered response model for social-emotional learning through  
19 interdisciplinary collaboration. *Journal of Educational & Psychological*  
20 *Consultation*, 25(2/3), 198–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2014.929954>
- 21 Miller, B. M. (2007). What counts in after school? findings from the Massachusetts  
22 Afterschool Research Study (MARS). *Journal of Youth Development*, 1(3), 98–  
23 114. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2007.378>
- 24 Morrisette, P. J. (2011). Exploring student experiences within the dropout prevention  
25 high school context. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 34(2), 169-188. [https://files.](https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ936749.pdf)  
26 [eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ936749.pdf](https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ936749.pdf)
- 27 National Center for Educational Evaluation (2021). *State and District Strategies to*  
28 *Reduce Dropouts*. Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, Department  
29 of Education. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/2025/01/2021004-pdf>
- 30 Oyserman, D., Terry, K., & Bybee, D. (2002). A possible selves intervention to enhance  
31 school involvement. *Journal of Adolescence*, 25(3). 313 [https://doi.org/10.1006/](https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.2002.0474)  
32 [jado.2002.0474](https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.2002.0474)
- 33 Richard, C. P., & Joyce C. (2019). Effects of group counseling on ninth-grade at-risk  
34 students. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 2(4), 423-434.
- 35 Sasson, I., Kalir, D., & Malkinson, N. (2020). The role of pedagogical practices in  
36 novice teachers' work. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 9(2), 457–469.  
37 <https://doi.org/10.12973/eu-jer.9.2.457>
- 38 Slaten, C. D., Irby, D. J., Tate, K., & Rivera, R. (2015). Towards a critically conscious  
39 approach to social and emotional learning in urba dropout prevention education:  
40 School staff members' perspectives. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling &*  
41 *Psychology*, 7(1), 41–62. <https://doi.org/10.33043/jsacp.7.1.41-62>
- 42 Steen, S., & Kaffenberger, C.J. (2007). Integrating academic interventions into small  
43 group counseling in elementary school. *Professional School Counseling*, 10(5),  
44 516-519.
- 45 Webb, L., & Brigman, G.A. (2007). Student Success Skills: A Structured Group  
46 Intervention for School Counselors. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*,  
47 32(2), 190-201. DOI: [10.1080/01933920701227257](https://doi.org/10.1080/01933920701227257).
- 48 Webb, L., Lemberger, M., & Brigman, G. (2008). Student Success Skills: A review of  
49 a school counselor intervention influenced by individual psychology. *The Journal*  
50 *of Individual Psychology*, 645(3), 339-352. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ922011>

1 Weinstein, J., Villares, E., Brigman, G. (2021). The effect of the Student Success Skills  
2 Small Group Intervention on factors associated with dropout potential. *The Journal*  
3 *for Specialists in Group Work*, 46(3), 256-271. [https://doi.org/10.1090/019339222](https://doi.org/10.1090/019339222021.194517S)  
4 [021.194517S](https://doi.org/10.1090/019339222021.194517S)  
5 Whitson, S.C., Quinby, R.F. (2009). Review of school counseling outcome research.  
6 *Psychology in the Schools*, 63(3), 267-272. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ832945>  
7 Zyromski, B., Martin, I., & Mariani, M. (2019). Evaluation of the True Goals school  
8 counseling curriculum: A pilot study. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*,  
9 44(3), 170-183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2019.1634781>  
10  
11  
12

ONLY FOR REVIEW

1 **Appendix**

2

3 **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

4

5 **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

6



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

1

ONLY FOR REVIEW