

## Six Reasons Youth Disengage

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After almost 15 years of consulting nonprofits, K-12 schools, and government agencies across the United States and Canada, last year I took a position coordinating a dropout prevention program in the Pacific Northwest. Hungry to examine a different support system for youth I wasn't familiar with, I chose this program because it supports young people ages 14 to 24 who are re-engaging in school, training, and the workforce.

Since then, I've had the privilege of partnering with dozens of agencies serving thousands of youth. Meeting young people of all ages, working with seasoned and new youth workers and agency leaders, and learning new insights into youth disengagement and dropout have highlighted my experience so far.

For all my years of consulting, I've focused on [youth engagement in communities](#) and [student voice in schools](#). I learned a lot through my research and practice, and from colleagues across the nation and around the world. However, I've had many new lessons in my current position, too.

So many people are working so diligently to engage youth in society, or re-engage them in culture-building activities, completing school, getting training, finding employment, recreation, or civic engagement activities. So why are youth still making the conscious choice to leave these programs? Here are six reasons youth disengage.

Six Reasons Youth Disengage:

- **Youth Are Taught To See Themselves As Failures.** Between parents who are too busy or too depressed to care, teachers who are too overwhelmed to focus on them, and lawmakers too beholden to give them the supports they need to succeed, many youth are actually taught to see themselves as failures. That comes from the culture surrounding them, including tv and music; schools they attended, including teachers and curriculum; and the social safety net that allows them fall to low, low heights.
- **Many Adults Have Given Up On Many Youth.** Driven by standardized testing, mandatory evaluations, prescribed youth programs, and byzantine policies, many youth workers, teachers, government officials, and others have given up on many of the youth they're supposed to serve. Instead of believing "youth are the future", they believe youth are merely numbers to achieve program goals, or ineffective contributors to the economy, civic society, and world around them.
- **Traditional Youth Activities Serve Traditionally Engaged Youth, And Fail Everyone Else.** Youth leadership, community service, and even traditional youth empowerment programs actually fail to serve *a lot* of young people today! Too reliant on youth complacency and obedience, these programs are failing to foster modern thinking, implement accurate strategies, and create successful cultures that engage disengaged youth. This is happening in epidemic proportions in many, many communities, especially affecting low-income youth and youth of color.
- **Most Adults Expect Youth To Change To Meet Today's Needs.** Rather than acknowledging that the economy is changing, the job market is realigning, and needs and wants are different now than ever before, most adults expect young people to change to meet today's needs in the economy. This is carryover thinking from an old education model, which sought to mold students into the types of learners teachers were capable of teaching. This is a disingenuous perspective, because the future economy depends on nimble thinking, transformative action, and creative realities.
- **Youth Engagement Isn't Really The Goal.** When most adults talk about youth engagement, they're actually talking about youth obedience. They want young people to comply with the expectations, values, perspectives, and realities of adults, and not their own. They couch their expectations by talking about activities being youth-led or youth-driven, but in reality, they only make programs for youth who comply with adult expectations or desires. In this way, they seek conformity, not engagement.
- **They Are Already Engaged.** Whether or not adults want to see it, youth are already engaged right now. They are 100% human, choosing where, how, when, and why they want to engage. Albeit, they might be engaged in things adults don't approve of, including sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll, or any of a plethora of other activities (smoking, video games, graffiti, basketball, driving, etc). This shows that youth engagement isn't limited to things adults approve of them doing; youth engagement isn't just compliance. Instead, its *any* sustained connection a young person has to the world around them. Adults need to learn that simply because youth aren't engaged how adults want to be doesn't automatically invalidate the things youth are engaged in. Instead, it challenges us to meet them where they're at, instead of insisting they come to where we want them to be.

These six reasons have sunk into my skin slowly, because I've done these things too, whether inadvertently or on purpose. However, I believe its our responsibility as ethical practitioners—youth workers, teachers, social workers, government officials, and community leaders—to respond to the need for authentic youth engagement. What steps can *you* take to ensure youth stay in schools and our community programs?