

Road Map
Project



CREATING PATHS FOR CHANGE:

Understanding Student
Disengagement and
Reengagement

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ABOUT THE ROAD MAP PROJECT



The **Road Map Project** is a collective impact initiative that began in 2010 to improve student achievement from cradle through college in seven King County, Washington school districts: Auburn, Federal Way, Highline, Kent, Renton, (South) Seattle, and Tukwila. Through multisector and community collaboration, we aim to increase equitable policies and practices in education systems to eliminate the opportunity and achievement gaps and for 70 percent of our students to earn a college degree or career credential by 2030.

ABOUT THE PARTNERS



seattleeducationaccess

Seattle Education Access, soon to be Northwest Education Access, helps low-income and marginalized young people earn degrees and certificates from local community and technical colleges, four-year colleges and universities, and apprenticeship programs.

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The **University of Washington School of Social Work** is committed to promoting social and economic justice for poor and oppressed populations and enhancing the quality of life for all through education, research and public service.

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The **Community Center for Education Results** was created to mobilize and staff the Road Map Project. CCER provides data, research, communications, programs, logistical and other support in service to the project.

roadmapproject.org/about-ccer

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Our most important job as adults is to **LISTEN TO YOUNG PEOPLE**

A message from the Seattle Education Access team

Our biggest, most heartfelt gratitude goes out to students we serve in the Road Map Project region. Students who have been failed by our systems. Students who have worked persistently to advocate for themselves to have their needs met. Students who battle oppressive forces within the education system and the world every day. Students who demonstrate resilience and make their voices heard. Students who have told us time and time again how to make our systems better for everyone.

To these students:

Thank you for sharing your stories with us.

Seattle Education Access provides one-on-one support to young people as they navigate education systems, with a focus on supporting high school completion and the transition into and through postsecondary pathways. The young people we serve navigate complex education barriers that are compounded by inequitable access to basic needs like housing, mental health services, and childcare. They do this while experiencing institutional racism and surviving generational and historical trauma.

Our most important job as adults is to listen to young people. By listening and seeking to understand how our systems, actions, and inactions impact their lives, is how we will create paths for change. Asking students to share their stories for this study means we at SEA will hold ourselves accountable for addressing what they tell us. We hope readers will do the same, and that as a result, this report will contribute to efforts to transform our institutions so that they become student-centered and accountable to all students and families.

We are also thankful for the support and commitment of the teachers and staff that foster meaningful relationships with young people every day, who understand the need to listen and to create holistic learning environments.

Thank you to the University of Washington School of Social Work and the Community Center for Education Results for supporting this study with integrity and honoring the experiences of young people.

Seattle Education Access staff





The need to honor

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

Completing high school is a significant social and economic milestone as well as a gateway to postsecondary education. South King County students are motivated to learn and aspire to obtain postsecondary education that will lead to rewarding careers. In fact, 96% of these young people affirmed this desire recently in a large-scale survey of nearly 7,000 high school students (Community Center for Education Results, 2019).

Despite students' motivations and aspirations, our systems often fail to support students in achieving their goals. Though graduation rates are on the rise, every year nearly 2,000 youth in South King County leave high school without earning a diploma. Disengagement is often described as a cumulative process that involves individual barriers as well as a breakdown in the educational environment or broader contexts that can foster school success. However, we often overlook hearing from youth themselves as a way to better understand school disengagement. These stories should be captured and included in a critical feedback loop for those responsible for our students' education.

This report aims to drive change by amplifying the experiences of students who have been failed by the systems created to serve them.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Road Map Project partners Community Center for Education Results (CCER), Seattle Education Access (SEA), and University of Washington School of Social Work (UW) analyzed administrative data on why young adults leave school before completing a high school diploma. SEA provides higher education navigation and support for youth disengaged from school in King County. Each young adult that seeks support from SEA is assigned an Education Advocate who works with them to identify and navigate a postsecondary plan and provide financial resources based on identified barriers. Education Advocates complete an intake assessment with students that collects basic information on demographics, education history and interests, and barriers to basic needs.

Initially, we analyzed about 339 short-answer responses from SEA's intake question: "Why did you leave the traditional academic pathway?" The most commonly cited reasons for disengaging include those below.

- *Negative school climate*
- *Academic struggles met with little support*
- *Immigration transitions and other unsupported school moves*
- *Scheduling and access barriers for students experiencing parenthood*
- *Lack of support for health and wellness concerns*

Additional reasons students cite are housing instability and family instability (see Appendix, Table 2).

METHODS AND STUDENT SAMPLE

Content analysis is a qualitative research methodology that organizes text into consistent categories.

Counternarrative storytelling stems from critical race theory and emphasizes telling the stories of people who are marginalized and oppressed in order to explore, critique, and counter harmful narratives about underserved groups. This framework informed our study's sampling design, interview questions, and analysis. We used open-ended questions in interviews asking young adults to share in detail why they left school before graduation, including their thoughts and challenges, plus opportunities that inspired them to reengage.

Interview sample

Fifteen young people ages 18-24 participated in interviews. Most were completing or had completed a diploma or high school equivalency through an Open Doors program and all were working with Seattle Education Access on a postsecondary plan. Thirteen identified as students of color (five Black or African American, four Latinx, two Asian or Asian American, two White or European American, and two Multiracial). Eight participants identified as women, 7 as men.

These short answer responses were documented by Education Advocates and may not capture the essence or full context of why students disengaged. Therefore, we also conducted 15 one-on-one interviews with young people ages 18-24 who were working with SEA. The goal was to push beyond administrative data and have youth speak for themselves to provide a more in-depth understanding of the barriers and supports young people encounter when they disengage from high school. Individual interviews used an approach called **counternarrative storytelling**. (See Methods and Student Sample box at bottom of the page.)

This report shares stories of why students left high school and identifies recommendations for how those working in our education systems can help all students navigate a path to success, regardless of the barriers they face.

Anitta worked with Seattle Education Access to earn a culinary arts certificate from South Seattle College, where this photo was taken.



What students say about **THE PATH TO DISENGAGEMENT**

The 15 young people we interviewed come from diverse educational and family backgrounds and provided rich descriptions of their experiences. While each story is unique, a combination of factors seemed to undermine most of their experiences in school. The reasons for disengaging that students shared cluster into three broad and interrelated areas: racial bias and negative school climate; insufficient academic supports; and a lack of access to services to address family instabilities and basic needs.

These young people's names have been changed to preserve student anonymity.

COMMON THEMES FOR WHY STUDENTS DISENGAGE

Racial Bias & Negative School Climate

- *Low adult expectations*
- *Lack of racial representation among teachers*
- *Exclusionary discipline*
- *Bullying and peer conflict*

Insufficient Academic Supports

- *Lack of transparency regarding academic standing*
- *Lack of support for students' individual learning needs*
- *Lack of support when a student changes schools*

Unmet Basic Needs

- *Lack of mental health services*
- *Housing instability and family trauma*
- *Navigating parenthood*
- *Lack of support for medical issues*

RACIAL BIAS AND NEGATIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE



School climate is a broad term used to describe the learning environment or quality of school life. Positive school climate can be reflected in norms, values, relationships, and organizational structures that support healthy development and mutual respect.

The majority of the young people we talked to experienced the high school environment as negative, and many of those experiences included a layer of racial bias. Their stories ranged widely and included not feeling seen or heard, experiencing disciplinary actions such as suspensions or expulsions, and feeling physically and emotionally unsafe. Negative school climates led students to feel unsupported and unmotivated and were cited repeatedly across our interviews as a reason why students did not attend classes, got behind in school, and eventually disengaged.

Low adult expectations

Students felt labeled in negative ways by teachers and other adults in their school. The feeling that teachers did not want to help them succeed contributed to negative academic self-concepts and decreasing motivation.

"I was in the position where I didn't really care because the teachers didn't really seem like they cared."

"Carson," African-American male

Some students talked about experiencing racial bias in the form of low expectations.

"...if they [teachers] really had an expectation, they would've helped a little more... I don't know, sometimes I even thought it was a racist thing ... Because we're Mexicans, I felt like they didn't even look at us sometimes. They didn't really pay attention and I would see them coming up to other students of their same race, let's say, and they would help them out, but not us."

"Victoria," Latinx (Mexican) female

Lack of racial representation among teachers

Students described the lack of racial and cultural representation among their teachers as part of why their school environment was unsupportive. This disconnect is well documented in the field and diversifying the educator workforce is an area of focus in our region and beyond. One African-American student talked about not having an African-American teacher until junior high school and the difference it made once he did.

"He was the first teacher of color that I ever had. ... it was like an uncle, a male role model so to speak." ... "He knew how to talk to me, how to relate to the things I was going through at my house."

"Paul," Black/African-American male

Exclusionary discipline

Exclusionary discipline is any type of disciplinary action, such as suspension or expulsion, that removes students from their educational setting. It has been well documented, locally and nationally, that Black and Brown children experience more frequent and severe discipline compared with their white peers. Students talked about exclusionary school discipline as a key driver in their experiences of negative school climate and school disengagement.

"The teachers they would kick me out of the class. They didn't really care for me. They just thought I was some troubled kid ... I got picked on a lot. And so, I would fight a lot. From middle school all the way to high school ... the fighting got me expelled permanently from school ... I got expelled in ninth grade."

"Teresa," multiracial female

Another young man linked exclusionary discipline to his academic struggles.

"I was never really good in class. I got suspended and kicked out, so I didn't spend too much time in class."

"Paul," Black/African-American male

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Peer conflict and bullying

Students described experiences of bullying and fighting as the norm throughout their educational experiences. Students felt unsupported by staff and unsafe at school which limited their ability to focus on academics.

"Academically, I felt like it was kind of hard because since I was not getting along with anyone, it was hard to concentrate on my own studies. It's like a normal thing...I feel like teachers just say, 'Oh here's another fight' ... they'd just say, 'Ah, this school is ghetto. It happens.'"

"Teresa," multiracial female

One student described how the presence of police made school feel like prison.

"It was really cool when I was a freshman and sophomore. And then it [school] started making changes, it was like a jail basically. During the lunch they would lock down every door, you couldn't leave, nothing... There was officers. And they got like a big steel door."

"Gabe," Latinx male



INSUFFICIENT ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

When academic struggles are met with little support, students—particularly Black and Brown students—may begin to doubt themselves and accept harmful narratives about their ability to do well in school. Students described academic struggles that went unsupported by their schools and how this contributed to their eventual disengagement.

“What most of us found, myself included, was that counselors are really focused on these kids who are doing well, and the kids that they knew were going to succeed they would get the help. Even if I went in and be like, ‘How can I get this better?’ most of the time the answer would be like, ‘You just have to try harder. You have to come to class, and that’ll help you...’ but that doesn’t give you clarity down a path that you’re already confused on.”

—“Maya,” Latinx female

“
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”

Lack of transparency regarding academic standing

Being behind in credits was one of the most frequently cited reasons for school disengagement, and many students lacked a clear understanding about their academic standing, or ways to get in good standing, until they were in their senior year of high school.

“Halfway through my senior year. They’re like, ‘You’re not going to graduate. You’re missing a bunch of stuff.’ ... I didn’t find that out until one of my teachers, they’re like, ‘What’s up with your grades? We’ve been checking your grades.’ ... ‘When I found that out, I just kind of ... It put me in a very negative mindset of like I’m just not going to try ... It’s like I know I’m going to have to find a different way or be a super senior or something, so I stopped trying.”

—“Maya,” Latinx female

Lack of support for students’ individual learning needs

For many students we interviewed, experiences of negative school climate and lack of support from educators were linked to the fact that their learning needs were not effectively addressed.

• Experiences in special education

Many students discussed how experiences in special education influenced their decisions to leave high schools.

“The [individualized education program] plan was mainly just more time on assignments... I never used it once...it did kind of feel like they just didn’t know what to do with me ... so they were like, ‘He doesn’t really have any learning disabilities, but we don’t know what to do with him. So, let’s put him in here and see if it helps.’ And it didn’t.”

—“Michael,” white male

Another student noted how a lack of continuity in special education services undermined her ability to succeed in school.

“... [In] sixth and seventh grade, I did actually have a class called ‘math improvement,’ but they took it out eighth grade year and... I started failing math because I didn’t have that support anymore. Math is not my strongest subject ... I really needed the help with it, so when that happened, I just gave up on math eventually because I was like, ‘I can’t do work with it. I’m not getting the help I need.”

—“Caitlin,” Black/African-American female

• Experiences of English Language Learners

English language learners frequently cited a lack of academic support as a reason for their school disengagement.

“I made a lot of friends at [high school]. It was a great school, it was just that, because I didn’t get enough attention and since I didn’t really know English, I just quit. That was the reason why I left.”

—“Victoria,” Latinx (Mexican) female

Lack of support when a student changes schools

Changing schools can have a negative impact on students’ education, and this was a common reason for disengagement cited by young people in both phases of our research. Students changed schools under a number of circumstances, because of immigration, school discipline, family or housing instability. Students transitioning into new schools, without existing peer and teacher relationships, need positive, intentional social and academic support to foster belonging and academic momentum.

“I got in trouble a lot in school, so then we just moved a lot ... I switched schools every two years because we moved so much, so it was like, I don’t know nobody ... Each time it was completely new people.”

—“Tony,” African-American male

"... I FELT LIKE I WAS BEING TREATED LIKE A STATISTIC."



UNMET BASIC NEEDS

Students are often managing a range of complex responsibilities and realities outside of school. These experiences significantly affect social relationships and mental health that without support, can undermine school engagement. Students who disengaged describe juggling complex family or community dynamics with limited support from adults at school, which contributed to their feeling that the school did not care about their well-being. Many students connected their experience of negative school climate with a lack of support for their health and wellness needs.

Housing instability and family trauma

Many young people explained that school disengagement was the result of instability and unaddressed trauma. Students described experiencing a variety of family instabilities and adverse childhood experiences, including housing challenges; parental substance use; deportation of a parent; family incarceration; and family deaths. These adverse experiences took a toll on students' mental health. Compounding the sense that there was nowhere to turn, students also described their schools as unsympathetic and unhelpful to their life circumstances.

"[We] lost the apartment and we became homeless ... Long list of just living at hotels and living with my friends...So that was really hard. And then that's where the school problems started ... Because, you know, it's like depression. So, you're sad, you're dealing with death, you're dealing with everything... so you're gonna miss some days of school."

"Lana," African-American female

Lack of mental health services

Many students we interviewed described unmet mental health needs, ranging from anxiety to suicidality, as significantly contributing to their disengagement. Some connected their mental health challenges directly to family instability, negative experiences at school, moving around, and other factors. The common thread was the need for schools to do a better job helping students who are struggling.

"Maybe, maybe it'd be good if they notice a problem with students like that ... because, you know, they are going into depression, maybe they want to kill themselves ... they should ask."

"Lana," African-American female

Navigating parenthood

Becoming a parent as a high school student can be stigmatizing, which does not help with the additional access challenges a student faces: from missing classes due to morning sickness to finding affordable childcare in order to attend school. Students often struggle to navigate these challenges without school support. In our interviews, students who are parents described logistical challenges and the negative perceptions displayed by school staff and how these contributed to their disengagement.

"When some of the teachers...found out that I was pregnant and that I wasn't going to pass and I wasn't going to graduate, all of a sudden...I felt like I was being treated like a statistic."

"Maya," Latinx female

Lack of support for medical issues

Several students described navigating debilitating medical issues while attending school. One student was diagnosed in seventh grade with a disease that limited her ability to attend school. She reported receiving support during middle school but noted a shift when she entered high school.

"[In] seventh grade I was diagnosed with a disease ... I ended up missing a lot of school ... Then I fell behind in classes and I was never able to recover ... [High school] was like, 'That's a maintainable thing. You should be able to show up'...So, they didn't help me as much as middle school ... I think they thought it was just an excuse to skip ... to not do homework on time and that kind of stuff."

"Rachel," white female



What students tell us about

REENGAGING IN SCHOOL

The students we interviewed for this project completed their high school experiences in alternative settings and are now in the process of continuing their education. Here, they share powerful stories of resilience in the face of persistent barriers. Their stories offer valuable insights to school staff about how adult attitudes and school structures can be transformed in order to better support students and families.

**“
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”**

Students want to complete high school and go on to college

Despite struggling with school for a range of reasons, many students who formally disengage from school manage to persist. Students are motivated to learn, and this and other studies demonstrate that they understand both a high school education and postsecondary training are important to their success in life.

"I knew what was back in L.A. waiting for me, so it was either go back there and talk to some people, gangbang, and just do nothing, and become a product of my environment, or stay here and challenge myself. It came to a point of time where I have to weigh out the risk and the reward."

— "Paul," African-American male

One student described her experience enrolling in a reengagement program after trying unsuccessfully to reenroll at her previous high school at age 17.

"I remember them asking, 'So what do you want to do?' I was like, 'Well, I want to go to college.' And then that's when they referred me to [my Education Advocate] because she has connections with college. So, she helped me enroll for classes and she explained it to me because I didn't know what [getting into] college was about."

— "Victoria," Latinx female

Relationships motivate reengagement

Many students described their experiences reengaging in school as dependent upon positive relationships. Reengagement was possible because students felt the adults guiding them through the process cared about them, were invested in their educational and personal success, and were willing to go out of their way to support their progress.

"They're really communicative, even if you have questions, you can just email them and they'll email you back. It's not like high school anymore. It's more personal. It's great."

— "Victoria," Latinx female

Positive attitudes and behaviors from adults matter

A critical factor in reengagement is how adults signal their belief in the young people they're serving. Students do better when they see adults believe in their potential. In fact, students said their assessment of reengagement programs was largely contingent upon whether they felt the adults understood them and thought that they could succeed.

"Seeing that there were people who genuinely want to see you succeed pushed me and motivated me, and I said, 'OK. I do have people who care, who do want to see me succeed and want to see me get this diploma.' That kind of drove me."

— "Maya," Latinx female

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”**



How to help

MORE STUDENTS SUCCEED

Positive high school experiences where students have trusting relationships with supportive adults and access to resources that support their well-being are crucial to educational success. The following recommendations were informed by the experiences of the students we interviewed, and draw on what they told us both about disengaging and reengaging. Students described what their teachers and schools could have done in order to improve their experience and what might have helped them remain in school through graduation.

1. Make schools more welcoming, especially for students of color

High schools should direct additional attention to fostering positive, trauma-informed school climates in which students feel safe, supported, and welcome—particularly students of color and immigrant students. Prioritizing the creation of welcoming environments and positive connections is particularly important for new students who are transitioning into schools without established peer and teacher relationships.

2. Diversify the educator workforce

An important strategy for making schools more welcoming for students of color is ensuring that they have access to supportive adults who look like them or can relate to them. While our student body is extremely diverse, the same is not true of our teaching workforce. Schools need to be intentional, through hiring efforts as well as community partnerships, to ensure that schools are culturally inclusive environments where students feel respected, valued, and engaged.

3. Prioritize building trusting relationships

Schools must prioritize the development of trusting relationships among students, staff, and families. Students need to be able to access academic and social supports that will help them navigate barriers. However, students will only access such resources if they trust that the adults offering support believe in their potential and want to see them succeed.

4. Reduce exclusionary discipline and address racial disparities

The negative effects of exclusionary discipline, particularly on students of color, is well-established. Schools should pursue alternative approaches such as restorative justice and other culturally responsive practices. Districts should improve reporting practices, stay abreast of discipline policies, and scrutinize and address patterns of racial bias in discipline rates.

5. Identify and support struggling students early

Students who are struggling in school, meaning those who fail a course, experience behavioral challenges, or whose attendance is poor, must be identified early with appropriate support made available to them and their families. School staff should operate as a support network and work together to identify challenges early on, communicate with students and families in culturally relevant and supportive ways, and address barriers to learning with supportive resources and interventions.

6. Increase mental health supports

Schools must become trauma-informed, healing-centered spaces given they are serving students who have experienced significant instability and adversity. Exposure to trauma is widely noted to be associated with school disengagement when young people are not provided adequate mental health care and space to heal. Schools have a unique opportunity to be a stabilizing force in young peoples' lives and must find ways to work with partners to address mental health needs, as this is crucial to providing a context in which young people can learn.



APPENDIX

Content Analysis Summary

During the first phase of this project, the study team used qualitative coding as a way to organize and synthesize 339 short-answer responses and capture a summary or salient description of students' experiences.

During initial intake meetings with an Education Advocate (EA), EAs collect and enter student responses to the question, "Why did you leave the traditional academic pathway?" Table 1 describes the students who participated in the intake meetings.

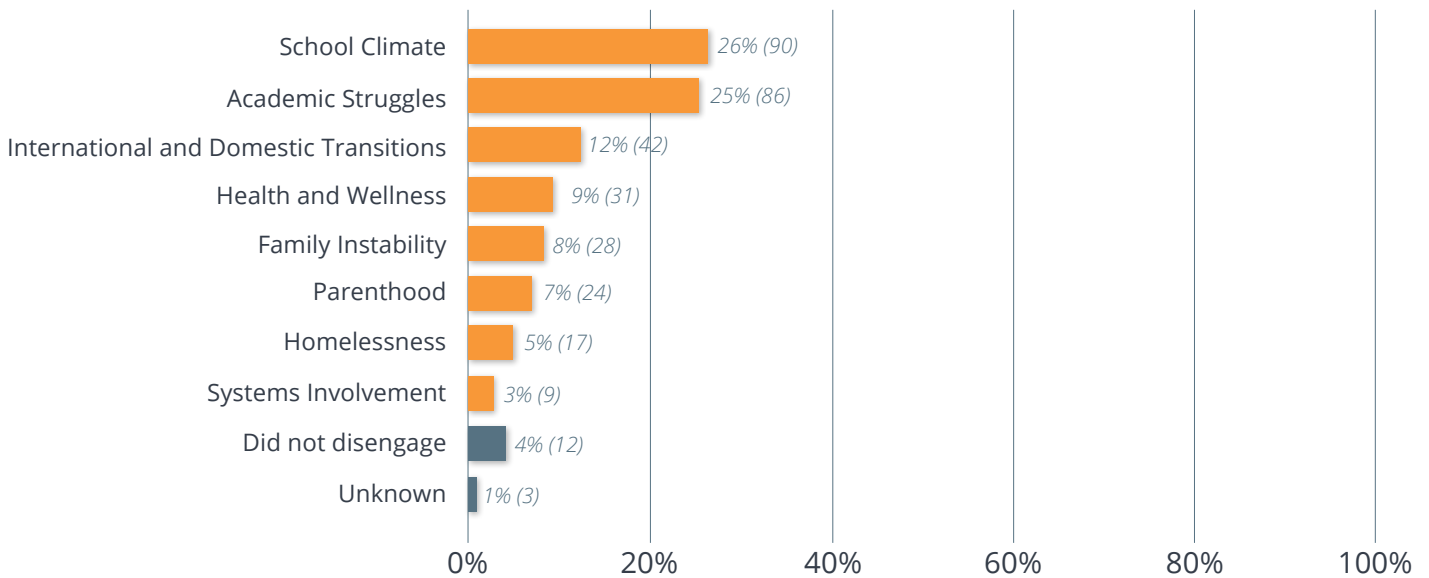
Once coding was complete, codes were aggregated and summarized by frequency to identify the primary reason for student disengagement (Table 2). Of the initial 339 responses, 12 young adults did not disengage from comprehensive high school and 3 had unknown reasons for disengaging, these responses were excluded from the analysis. Results from the content analysis directed the study team to conduct in-person interviews that asked students about their experiences of disengagement related to school climate, academic struggles, international and domestic transitions, health and wellness, family instability, parenthood, homelessness and systems involvement.



Table 1: Demographics of Young Adult SEA Intake Data

All Young Adult Responses	100% (342)	All Young Adult Responses	100% (342)
White	30% (103)	Female	49% (166)
Latinx	22% (74)	Male	45% (153)
Black/African American	21% (73)	Transgender, Transgender Male, Transgender Female, Gender Fluid, Gender, Non-Binary, Two-Spirit, Other	2% (6)
Multiracial	12% (40)	No response	5% (17)
Asian	5% (16)		
Native/Indigenous	2% (8)		
Middle Eastern	2% (7)		
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	2% (7)		
No response	4% (14)		
Average age = 19			

Table 2: Primary Reason for Disengagement*



* Note: Total sample N =339; 3% of sample (n=12) reported not having disengaged from school or earning their diploma from a comprehensive high school. Seattle Education Access also provides navigation support or students that graduate from high school or GED equivalent schools; 1% of sample (n=3) had unknown as the reason for disengaging.



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