

Why teens drop out from Santa Clara County schools

IN STUDENTS' STORIES, NO EASY ANSWER TO EDUCATION CRISIS

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 Video

- [Life after dropping out](#)

Gavin Neves needed a job. A Broadway High School student felt threatened in class. Margarita Craig got pregnant.

California high school students who drop out believe there's a good reason to leave school. Even in complicated circumstances, the trigger point can often be summed up in one word. Fear. Poverty. Boredom. Failure. Addiction.

Though schools offer myriad programs to catch troubled teens, the dropout rate is higher than educators ever suspected. Data released last week suggests that 24 percent of teens drop out of high school, nearly double the previous estimate of 13 percent.

In Santa Clara County, the rate of students who drop out over a four-year period is 20.2 percent, less than the statewide figure, but still "ghastly," according to Dan Moser, associate superintendent of the East Side Union High School District.

Struggling students cite a variety of pressures pushing them out of the school doors for good. Their stories suggest there will be no easy solution

to solving the dropout crisis.

Behind the numbers are students like Raquel Gomez, who was drinking and skipping classes at Andrew Hill High School by the time she was 16. "I started hanging around with the wrong people," said Gomez, now 21. She'd go to school in the morning, then cut out for the park, the mall, a crosstown bus ride or a party at someone's house. She'd be home promptly at 3:30, so her parents suspected nothing, she said - until the police busted a party at her own San Jose home one day.

She dropped out at the beginning of senior year and worked for a year at McDonald's, earning \$6.80 an hour. After getting married and having a daughter with acute medical needs, she realized she couldn't survive on the minimum-wage jobs open to dropouts.

Last year, Gavin Neves, 18, found himself without a home or any income after a dispute with his mother. By then, his junior year, school had become "a social experience, more like going to a high school dance every day." He dropped out and became a door-to-door salesman for a painting contractor.

It was tough, even though he enjoys talking to people. "You know how people say they hate door-to-door salesmen? I totally get it now." He later became a fry cook, and now plays acoustic guitar at an art studio in San Jose and plays gigs with his band, Captain Gavin and Mad Max.

School administrators say they work hard to accommodate students like Neves, who has re-enrolled in independent study, thanks to an attentive vice principal at Willow Glen High School.

Many schools have programs for at-risk kids. The East Side Union High School District offers after-school programs, homework centers, medical

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clinics, counseling, drug and alcohol programs at many of its 10 large campuses, and a summer bridge program for incoming freshmen.

Even so, kids fall between the cracks. East Side's four-year dropout rate is 27.9 percent, the highest in the county.

An 18-year-old welder, who did not want his name used, dropped out a year ago. After being shuffled from Pioneer to Del Mar to Broadway High - where he said "you had to watch your back" - he quit. And when he got in trouble, "my dad was a violent type. He'd kick my butt."

Although he was labeled a troublemaker, he said all he wanted was "somebody to understand me." In all his years in school, he remembers connecting with just one teacher, at John Muir Middle School, who brought her guitar to class and sang.

The community group PACT, People Acting in Community Together, has focused on the dropout problem and advocates forming small schools where educators establish close relationships with students and parents.

That human connection is essential, say others working to prevent dropouts. Kids need "a stable, consistent, mature person they trust. They need someone who cares about them and who gives them skills and successes every day," said Molly McCrory of Mountain View-based Just Read. The program matches volunteers who tutor and mentor students.

Yet sometimes, no amount of cheering - or nagging or threatening - can motivate a student. Margarita Craig, 19, attended five high schools, and dropped out three times, once from Broadway High, and twice from Metropolitan Adult School in San Jose.

"My mom was always pushing me, but I said no,"

said Craig, who left home after 10th grade. "I was in the party mode. I wanted to go out and enjoy life." She got pregnant and dropped out.

Now she's working on her high school diploma. "Once I get to walk across that stage, it's going to be great," Craig said.

But youth counselors see many cases not nearly as hopeful.

One boy, then 12, quit two weeks into sixth grade in fall 2007 after being beat up in the bathroom at John Muir. "A bunch of people surrounded me for the shoes I had" - white Nike Cortezes, with a black swoosh, a style favored by gangs.

He doesn't want his name to be "out there." Although he says his dad wanted him back in school, other crises intervened, too: His father lost his job; his family was evicted and then moved in with his grandmother.

Still afraid, he's resisted district officials' efforts to re-enroll him, although he's thinking of returning to school in August.

"There's a lot of kids like this, unfortunately," said Joaquin Parra of Washington United Youth Center. Schools can't guarantee anyone's safety. He says once 16- and 17-year-olds avoided school out of fear, but now scared kids are as young as 11 or 12 - and thus not even on the radar of the state, which counts only high school dropouts.

Repeated lectures on the importance of staying in school didn't dissuade those who chose to leave. But that doesn't prevent some former dropouts from trying to steer other young people onto the right path.

Gomez, now with a newborn and about to become a

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single mom, has enrolled in adult school. Life after leaving high school hasn't been easy, she tells young, disengaged students: "I'm having a hard time."

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