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School Dropout: Causes, Risk Factors, Consequences, and Strategies for Prevention and Educational Reintegration

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Abstract

School dropout is a complex educational and social phenomenon in which learners leave formal education before completing the level in which they are enrolled or before obtaining an expected qualification. It is rarely the result of a single event. Rather, it usually develops through a cumulative process of disengagement shaped by individual, family, school, community, and structural conditions. This review examines the concept of school dropout, its major theoretical explanations, its principal risk and protective factors, and its psychological, social, educational, and economic consequences. Particular attention is given to poverty, weak academic achievement, grade repetition, absenteeism, low school engagement, family responsibilities, distance to school, school climate, bullying, disability, gender-related pressures, and the perceived relevance of education. The paper also discusses early-warning systems and evidence-informed prevention strategies, including academic support, psychosocial services, family-school partnerships, inclusive education, financial and transportation assistance, flexible learning pathways, vocational guidance, and re-entry programs. Current international evidence indicates that dropout prevention is most effective when it is proactive, data-informed, student-centered, and coordinated across schools, families, social services, and public institutions. The paper concludes that reducing school dropout requires not only keeping students physically enrolled, but also ensuring that they experience meaningful learning, belonging, safety, support, and realistic pathways toward further education, training, employment, and social participation.

Keywords: school dropout; educational disengagement; absenteeism; academic failure; school retention; early warning systems; educational reintegration.

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental component of human development and an important mechanism through which societies expand opportunity, reduce inequality, strengthen citizenship, and improve social and economic participation. Nevertheless, access to school does not automatically guarantee completion. Many children and adolescents enter formal education but experience repeated academic, social, family, or economic difficulties that gradually weaken their connection to school. When these pressures are not identified and addressed, disengagement may culminate in prolonged absence and eventual dropout.

The global scale of educational exclusion remains substantial. UNESCO's 2026 Global Education Monitoring Report states that 273 million children and youth were out of school in 2024 and that progress in reducing out-of-school rates has slowed since 2015. The same report emphasizes that access must be understood together with progression and completion, because enrollment alone does not ensure that learners remain in school or acquire meaningful learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2026).

School dropout is therefore both an educational outcome and a broader indicator of vulnerability. It can reflect difficulties within the learner, but it can also reveal weaknesses in the relationship between the student and the educational environment. Poverty, family obligations, disability, geographic isolation, poor school quality, weak academic support, exclusionary disciplinary practices, and limited confidence in the value of schooling may interact over time. Consequently, effective

prevention requires a multidimensional approach rather than an explanation that attributes dropout solely to student motivation or family choice.

This paper provides a scientific review of school dropout with four objectives. First, it clarifies the concept and distinguishes dropout from related conditions such as temporary absence and being out of school. Second, it examines theoretical perspectives and major risk factors. Third, it analyzes the consequences of premature school leaving for individuals and societies. Finally, it presents prevention and reintegration strategies that can be adapted to different educational contexts.

2. Conceptualizing School Dropout

School dropout generally refers to leaving an educational program before completing the expected cycle or obtaining the relevant credential. However, measurement is not always straightforward. A student may leave one school and enroll in another, interrupt education temporarily, move into vocational training, migrate, or return after a period of absence. For this reason, educational systems need definitions that distinguish permanent dropout from transfer, temporary interruption, and alternative forms of recognized education.

A useful conceptual distinction is between the event of dropout and the process of disengagement. The event is the observable point at which the student is no longer enrolled or attending. The process may begin much earlier through declining attendance, repeated lateness, low participation, academic failure, behavioral difficulties, social isolation, or a weakening sense of belonging. UNICEF and UNESCO monitoring frameworks therefore encourage education systems to identify early indicators rather than waiting until a student has already left school (UNICEF & UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016).

Dropout is also closely related to the broader category of out-of-school children and adolescents. Some young people never enroll, while others enroll late or leave before completing a cycle. These groups may share structural disadvantages, but their needs can differ. A learner who has never entered school may require access and enrollment support, whereas a student who has disengaged after several years may require academic recovery, counseling, flexible scheduling, or a pathway back into education.

The language used to discuss dropout also matters. Describing students simply as 'dropouts' can reduce a complex trajectory to a fixed personal label. A more constructive approach focuses on premature school leaving, disengagement, interruption, retention, and re-engagement. This shifts attention toward changeable conditions and the responsibilities of educational systems as well as learners and families.

3. Theoretical Perspectives

No single theory explains all cases of school dropout. Ecological perspectives are particularly useful because they view development as occurring within interconnected environments. From this perspective, student outcomes are influenced by personal characteristics, family relationships, peer groups, school organization, community conditions, and wider economic and policy structures. Dropout may occur when risks accumulate across several of these levels without sufficient protective support.

The school engagement perspective emphasizes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive connections to learning. Behavioral engagement includes attendance, participation, effort, and compliance with school expectations. Emotional engagement concerns belonging, relationships, interest, and attitudes toward school. Cognitive engagement includes investment in learning and willingness to use effortful strategies. Weakness in one dimension can influence the others. For example, academic difficulty may reduce confidence, which may decrease participation and attendance, thereby producing further academic difficulty.

A push-pull-fall-out framework is also useful. 'Push' factors are school-related conditions that make continued attendance difficult, such as repeated failure, exclusionary discipline, unsafe environments, or poor teacher-student relationships. 'Pull' factors are circumstances outside school that compete with education, including paid work, household responsibilities, caregiving, financial pressure, migration, or early family formation. 'Falling out' refers to a gradual loss of connection in which the student no longer perceives schooling as relevant or attainable. In practice, these mechanisms often overlap.

Human capital perspectives emphasize the perceived costs and benefits of continued schooling. Families and students may compare immediate costs, such as transportation, materials, foregone earnings, and time, with expected future benefits. When school quality is poor or employment prospects appear disconnected from education, the perceived return to staying in school may decline. This does not mean that dropout is simply a rational economic choice; rather, economic perceptions interact with academic experience, social expectations, and available alternatives.

4. Individual and Academic Risk Factors

Academic performance is among the most visible predictors of disengagement. Students who repeatedly receive low grades may experience frustration, reduced self-efficacy, embarrassment, or the belief that success is unattainable. When instruction does not respond to learning gaps, poor performance can become cumulative. Grade repetition can intensify this process by increasing age-for-grade differences and separating students from their original peer group. The problem is not repetition itself in every case, but repetition without effective diagnostic and remedial support.

Attendance is another critical indicator. Frequent absence reduces exposure to instruction and makes it difficult for students to keep pace with classmates. As learning gaps widen, returning to school can become more stressful, increasing the probability of further absence. UNICEF and UNESCO monitoring guidance identifies attendance, behavior, and course

performance as practical foundations for early-warning systems because these indicators can reveal disengagement while intervention is still possible (UNICEF & UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016).

Motivation and perceived relevance also matter. Adolescents are more likely to disengage when they see little connection between curriculum content and their future aspirations. A rigid curriculum, limited career guidance, or a lack of visible pathways to higher education and employment can weaken persistence. Conversely, students who understand how present learning connects to meaningful future goals may be more willing to tolerate temporary academic difficulty.

Social and emotional factors can influence school participation as well. Persistent anxiety about school performance, peer conflict, bullying, loneliness, or a weak sense of belonging may make attendance difficult. These conditions should not be treated as evidence that a learner is unwilling to learn. They may signal a need for supportive relationships, counseling, anti-bullying measures, classroom inclusion, or changes in the school environment.

5. Family and Socioeconomic Factors

Household poverty can influence dropout through both direct and indirect mechanisms. Even where tuition is free, families may face costs for transportation, clothing, meals, supplies, digital access, or examination-related needs. Young people may also be expected to contribute to household income or unpaid domestic work. A World Bank review identifies financial constraints, family responsibilities, distance to school, and lack of interest as recurring factors associated with non-enrollment and dropout in different settings (World Bank, 2024).

Parental education and family familiarity with the school system can also shape persistence. Families with limited educational experience may have fewer resources for helping with homework, navigating administrative procedures, or planning transitions between educational levels. This should not be interpreted as a lack of concern. Many parents strongly value education but face constraints of time, literacy, income, transportation, or communication with institutions.

Family instability, migration, housing insecurity, caregiving responsibilities, and changes in household composition can interrupt schooling. These disruptions may be temporary, but without flexible administrative procedures they can become permanent. Schools that respond to irregular attendance only through punishment may overlook the conditions producing absence. A more effective approach combines clear attendance expectations with investigation of barriers and practical support.

Family-school partnerships are therefore central to prevention. Communication should begin before a crisis. Families need understandable information about attendance, academic progress, available support, and pathways after compulsory schooling. Schools also benefit from listening to families, because parents and caregivers may identify transportation, financial, health-related, social, or scheduling barriers that are not visible in classroom records.

6. School-Related and Institutional Factors

School characteristics can either protect students or contribute to disengagement. A supportive climate is characterized by safety, respectful relationships, clear expectations, fair discipline, academic support, and opportunities for participation. In contrast, environments marked by humiliation, discrimination, violence, inconsistent rules, or low expectations can weaken students' attachment to education.

Teacher-student relationships are especially important during adolescence. A student who believes that at least one adult in the school knows them, notices their absence, and expects them to succeed may be more likely to seek help during difficulty. This does not require teachers to become counselors; it requires a school culture in which academic monitoring and human connection operate together.

Curriculum and pedagogy also affect retention. When instruction is consistently too difficult, too easy, disconnected from students' prior knowledge, or based mainly on passive memorization, learners may disengage. Differentiated instruction, formative assessment, tutoring, and opportunities to demonstrate learning in varied ways can reduce the accumulation of failure. Inclusive practices are particularly important for students with disabilities or learning difficulties.

School transitions can create additional risk. Moving from primary to lower secondary or from lower to upper secondary often involves larger institutions, new teachers, more complex schedules, and increased academic demands. Prevention efforts should therefore pay particular attention to transition years. Orientation, mentoring, bridge courses, and early monitoring can help students adapt before difficulties become severe.

7. Community, Geographic, Gender, and Inclusion Factors

Geographic location affects access and persistence when schools are distant, transportation is unreliable, or routes are unsafe. These challenges can be especially important in rural, remote, desert, mountainous, or dispersed communities. Distance may interact with gender expectations, disability, climate, and household resources. Transportation support and flexible learning arrangements can therefore be retention policies rather than merely logistical services.

Gender patterns vary across societies and educational levels. Girls continue to face serious barriers in many contexts, including domestic responsibilities, safety concerns, early marriage, and gender norms. At the same time, UNESCO has documented that boys in many countries face elevated risks of grade repetition, lower learning outcomes, and failure to complete secondary education. Poverty and child labor are among the factors associated with boys' disengagement in several contexts (UNESCO, 2022). Effective policy should therefore avoid assuming that one gender is universally at greater risk and should instead examine local evidence.

Students with disabilities and functional difficulties may be at increased risk when schools lack accessible infrastructure, appropriate learning materials, trained staff, or individualized support. Exclusion can occur even when a student is formally enrolled. Genuine inclusion requires participation, learning, and belonging, not merely physical presence in a classroom.

Community violence, displacement, emergencies, and economic shocks can also interrupt education. During periods of disruption, maintaining contact with students is essential. Flexible learning, distance education where feasible, accelerated learning, and simplified re-entry procedures can prevent a temporary interruption from becoming permanent exclusion.

8. The Algerian Context as an Illustrative Case

Algeria illustrates how high participation at earlier educational levels can coexist with important retention challenges later in the educational trajectory. UNICEF Algeria reports that, based on 2019 administrative data, net attendance was 96.9 percent at primary level, 85.0 percent at intermediate level, and 51.1 percent at secondary level. It also reports that almost 600,000 children were at risk of dropping out in 2019, with elevated vulnerability among children from poorer households, rural children, boys at secondary level, children with functional difficulties, and children living in the South and Central Highlands (UNICEF Algeria, n.d.).

Earlier UNICEF analysis of out-of-school children in Algeria also identified barriers including inadequate infrastructure, limited early-childhood opportunities, low education quality, resource-management constraints, and insufficient special-education opportunities for children with disabilities. The report emphasized that exclusion is not evenly distributed and that rural residence, poverty, and disability can intensify educational disadvantage (UNICEF MENA, 2014).

These observations demonstrate why dropout analysis should not rely only on national averages. A country may achieve high primary enrollment while still experiencing substantial inequality in progression and completion. Disaggregated data by region, sex, disability, household socioeconomic status, and educational level are necessary for identifying where preventive resources should be concentrated.

For Algeria and comparable contexts, a comprehensive retention strategy can combine early identification, remedial education, psychosocial support, improved guidance, stronger links between general education and vocational training, distance-learning options for remote areas, and targeted support for vulnerable families. Such measures are consistent with UNICEF's emphasis on prevention, remedial support, psychosocial services, and educational pathways for adolescents at risk of leaving school.

9. Consequences of School Dropout

The most immediate educational consequence of dropout is the interruption of learning. Students who leave before completing basic or secondary education may have weaker literacy, numeracy, digital, and problem-solving skills than they would have acquired through continued schooling. These gaps can restrict access to further education and formal training and may become more difficult to address later.

Economic consequences can emerge over the life course. Educational qualifications often influence access to stable employment, occupational mobility, and earnings. Although the relationship differs across economies and individuals, premature school leaving can narrow the range of available opportunities. At the societal level, large numbers of young people leaving school without adequate skills can reduce productivity and increase the cost of remedial education and social support.

Dropout can also affect social participation and personal development. School provides more than academic instruction; it can offer peer networks, adult mentorship, structured routines, civic learning, and opportunities to develop communication and collaboration skills. Leaving school may reduce access to these protective environments, particularly when no alternative education, training, or employment pathway is available.

It is important, however, not to treat negative outcomes as inevitable. Young people who leave school can return, enter vocational education, complete equivalency programs, or succeed through other recognized pathways. Reintegration policy should therefore avoid stigma and preserve second-chance opportunities. The objective is not to define a young person by an interrupted educational trajectory, but to make continued learning realistically accessible.

10. Early Identification and Early-Warning Systems

Because dropout often develops gradually, prevention is more effective when schools identify warning signs early. Early-warning systems use routinely available information to detect students who may need additional support. Common indicators include attendance, academic performance, behavioral changes, grade repetition, and disengagement. These indicators should trigger investigation and assistance rather than automatic punishment.

An effective system requires accurate and timely data. Attendance records that are entered weeks late cannot support rapid intervention. Similarly, a single low grade should not automatically classify a student as likely to drop out. Schools should examine patterns across indicators and combine quantitative information with professional judgment and communication with the student and family.

The response to an alert is more important than the alert itself. A school may identify hundreds of at-risk students but achieve little if it lacks tutoring, counseling, family outreach, transportation assistance, or referral pathways. Early-warning systems therefore need clearly defined intervention protocols, responsible staff, confidentiality protections, and follow-up procedures.

Student voice should also be incorporated. Administrative data can show that a learner is absent, but they may not explain why. Short interviews, mentoring conversations, and family meetings can reveal whether the underlying barrier is academic difficulty, transportation, bullying, work obligations, caregiving, health-related needs, or a belief that schooling has no future value. Intervention should then match the actual barrier.

11. Prevention and Intervention Strategies

Effective dropout prevention is generally multi-tiered. Universal strategies are designed for all students and include high-quality teaching, safe school climates, regular attendance monitoring, career guidance, and strong family communication. Targeted strategies serve students showing early signs of risk and may include tutoring, mentoring, counseling, attendance plans, financial support, or case management. Intensive strategies are needed when students face multiple or severe barriers and may require coordination among education, social protection, health, and community services.

Academic support should be timely and diagnostic. Simply assigning more work to a struggling student may increase frustration. Schools need to determine which foundational skills are missing and provide structured opportunities to recover them. Tutoring, small-group instruction, catch-up programs, and formative assessment can help students experience success and rebuild confidence.

Financial and material interventions can be important where the costs of schooling contribute to absence. Depending on context, responses may include transportation assistance, school meals, supplies, social protection, or other targeted support. Such programs work best when they address a clearly identified barrier and are combined with attention to school quality.

Psychosocial support is another important component. Students experiencing bullying, family stress, social isolation, or emotional difficulty may require access to trained school counselors or referral services. A supportive school environment should normalize help-seeking and protect confidentiality. Teachers also need procedures for referring concerns rather than carrying responsibilities outside their professional role.

Curriculum relevance and educational pathways can strengthen motivation. Career education, exposure to occupations, vocational and technical options, project-based learning, and links between academic subjects and real-world applications can help adolescents understand the purpose of continued learning. Flexible pathways should maintain educational quality while recognizing that students have different strengths, interests, and circumstances.

Evidence-based guidance for secondary schools also emphasizes monitoring student progress, providing intensive individualized support when warning signs appear, improving engagement, and creating supportive environments. Prevention is strongest when interventions are sustained rather than implemented as isolated short-term projects (Rumberger et al., 2017).

12. Educational Reintegration and Second-Chance Pathways

Prevention cannot reach every student before they leave. Education systems therefore need credible re-entry mechanisms. Reintegration may involve returning to mainstream school, entering vocational training, enrolling in alternative or accelerated programs, using distance education, or completing an equivalency credential. The appropriate pathway depends on age, previous attainment, learning gaps, responsibilities, and future goals.

Administrative flexibility is essential. Complicated documentation, rigid age rules, or punitive treatment can discourage return. Re-entry procedures should be clear and accessible, while diagnostic assessment should determine what the learner knows rather than assuming that time away from school equals total learning loss.

Reintegration also requires attention to belonging. A returning student may worry about being older than classmates, being judged for previous absence, or failing again. Mentoring, orientation, individualized learning plans, and respectful communication can reduce these barriers. Schools should avoid public labeling of returning learners.

Second-chance education should not be regarded as inferior education. It should provide recognized learning, qualified instruction, progression opportunities, and connections to further study or employment. When alternative programs become dead ends, they may reproduce rather than solve exclusion.

13. Policy Implications

At the policy level, dropout reduction requires coordination across multiple sectors. Ministries of education cannot independently solve problems rooted in poverty, transportation, disability access, child protection, or regional inequality. Data-sharing and referral arrangements can help institutions respond while respecting privacy and safeguarding children.

Funding should be sensitive to disadvantage. Schools serving high-risk populations may need additional counselors, remedial teachers, transport resources, special-education support, or smaller intervention groups. Equal funding per student does not necessarily produce equitable opportunity when needs differ substantially.

Accountability systems should also be designed carefully. If schools are judged only by examination results, they may have incentives to exclude struggling learners. Indicators of success should therefore include attendance, retention, progression, re-entry, school climate, and learning growth in addition to final test performance.

Finally, policy evaluation is essential. Programs that appear promising should be monitored for participation, implementation quality, retention, learning outcomes, and equity. Governments should identify which interventions work for which groups and under what conditions. Local adaptation is necessary because the causes of dropout differ between urban and rural settings, educational levels, and social groups.

14. Discussion

The literature reviewed in this paper supports a central conclusion: school dropout is usually the endpoint of an interaction between accumulated risks and insufficient protective support. Individual characteristics matter, but they operate within family, school, community, and policy environments. This explains why simple interventions aimed only at changing student attitudes often have limited impact.

The distinction between risk factors and causes is important. An indicator such as absenteeism predicts dropout, but absence itself may be produced by many different causes. A student may be absent because of transportation problems, academic avoidance, family responsibilities, bullying, disability-related barriers, or temporary disruption. Effective prevention therefore requires both prediction and diagnosis.

The evidence also suggests that retention should not be defined as keeping students enrolled at any cost. Students need meaningful learning, safety, dignity, relationships, and realistic future pathways. A learner who remains officially enrolled but is chronically absent or learns very little remains educationally excluded in important ways. Retention policy must therefore be connected to education quality and inclusion.

Recent global evidence reinforces the urgency of this issue. UNESCO reports that 273 million children and youth were out of school in 2024 and emphasizes that progress toward universal access and completion has slowed. The challenge is therefore not simply to expand the number of school places, but to build systems capable of identifying vulnerability, sustaining participation, supporting learning, and reopening pathways when education has been interrupted (UNESCO, 2026).

15. Conclusion and Recommendations

School dropout is a multidimensional phenomenon with academic, psychological, social, economic, institutional, and geographic dimensions. It develops through different pathways, but common warning signs include poor academic performance, repeated absence, grade repetition, weak engagement, behavioral changes, and declining belonging. These indicators are most useful when they lead to supportive and individualized intervention.

A comprehensive response should begin with prevention: high-quality inclusive teaching, safe school environments, systematic attendance monitoring, academic remediation, career guidance, family engagement, and practical support for students facing financial or geographic barriers. Schools should establish early-warning procedures and multidisciplinary response teams capable of matching interventions to the specific reasons behind disengagement.

Education authorities should strengthen second-chance and reintegration pathways so that leaving school does not become an irreversible event. Flexible re-entry, vocational and technical education, equivalency programs, accelerated learning, and distance options can provide routes back into recognized learning. Particular attention should be given to students affected by poverty, disability, rural or remote residence, family responsibilities, and difficult transitions between educational levels.

Ultimately, reducing dropout requires a shift from asking why students fail to remain in school to asking how educational systems can create the conditions that make continued participation possible and worthwhile. When learners experience academic support, belonging, safety, relevance, and credible future opportunities, the likelihood of persistence increases. Dropout prevention is therefore not a single program; it is an organizing principle for equitable and responsive education systems.

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Source Note

The review draws on international evidence and institutional reports from UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and evidence-based dropout-prevention guidance. Statistical claims in the text are attributed to their institutional sources. The article is written as an academic review and can be further adapted to a specific journal's citation and formatting requirements.