

## For each high school dropout, a story

**Problem's roots range from drugs to trouble at home**

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Griswold, Conn. — John James was so behind in school he didn't know what was going on. He knew he needed help, but he didn't know where to get it.

He just didn't see another way out.

So he quit.

"I just couldn't deal with it," said James, 17. "And I was just getting into a lot of trouble, so other things were on my mind."

James is emblematic of a problem Griswold faces; kids with potential who get discouraged, isolated, disconnected and ultimately give up because they have a hard home life, they start running with the wrong crowd, or they get bored and fill the gaps with trouble.

Griswold reported in 2007-08 a cumulative dropout rate of 15.8 percent over four years of high school, more than double the state average of 6.6 percent.

That rate earned the town a seat at the Governor's Summit on Drop Out Prevention held in Cromwell last week, where the 22 districts with the highest rates were invited, including nearby Killingly, Plainfield and Putnam.

The purpose was to make local leaders aware of what it means to a community when a student leaves high school and doesn't go back. Griswold school board member Theresa Madonna said she was struck by a particular comment at the summit: "Dropping out of high school is the equivalent of economic suicide."

Superintendent Paul Freeman, who took over the job two months ago, told the Board of Education Monday night that the summit was about finding ways to improve, not finding fault. He said during an interview last week that he knows Griswold has work to do, but the district is enthusiastic about doing it.

"We're not afraid to face these concerns," he said.

### **Poverty, incarceration**

A study released this month by Northeastern University in Boston reported high school dropouts are more likely than their educated peers to end up poor, unemployed or in jail. The research examined employment, earnings, rates of incarceration, parenting experiences and family incomes of adult high school dropouts in 2006 and 2008.

The study found that less than half of the nation's dropouts were employed on average during 2008. Nearly 1 in 10 young men without a high school diploma were in jail on any given day from 2006 to 2007.

"Not finishing high school leads to a lifetime of despair, a lack of success and, in many cases, incarceration," said Tom Murphy, spokesman for the Department of Education. "This serves no one."

Children's reasons for leaving high school vary, but they carry certain themes; kids don't feel connected to the school, they're overwhelmed, or they don't think anyone cares whether they show up. Their friends may not be interested in school. Then the students face their specific situations; they may be pregnant, have a mother or father who is sick, mentally ill or addicted to drugs or alcohol. The teenagers themselves may have an addiction problem.

Griswold High School has programs to address dropout prevention; the school offers counseling, an academic academy for students to attend regular class and get extra help, summer programs to help kids catch up, and child care for students who are parents.

But the problem persists.

As a group, Griswold's dropouts tend to be white, male, often poor, sometimes behind academically or struggling with a discipline problem. Most

missed school frequently; statistics showed dropouts from Griswold had an average attendance of 68 percent, compared to 91 percent for students who completed high school.

Ricky Bevis, a supervisor at the Griswold Youth Center, which has been active in trying to keep young people in school or get them to return, said children are struggling in single-parent families or ones that are overwhelmed. Drugs are sometimes an issue, she said.

"Our whole family unit has been fractured by all of the stresses," she said. "Both parents are working to keep a roof over their heads, there's worry about money, and there's drugs, which has really destroyed the fiber of all things. And I really don't think we get it."

#### **'He felt inferior'**

Each child who drops out of school has a unique story.

John James went to Norwich Technical High School as a freshman and failed because of excessive absences.

His mother, Heather James, did not have a working car at the time.

"It was bad," she said. "The bus came at 6 a.m. so if he missed the bus, I couldn't bring him."

James said he also got into fights at school. James lives with his two younger siblings and his mother works for a private agency caring for disabled people. His father lives in Florida.

James couldn't stay at Norwich Tech, so he returned to Griswold High the next year as a freshman.

He failed. James said he couldn't keep up with the work, and he started hanging out with kids selling drugs.

Until one day, when he drove down East Main Street and met up with a dealer under investigation by the state police.

They nailed him. James spent the night in the police barracks, locked in a room that smelled of excrement, behind bars with a wooden bench and brick walls. He lay awake all night.

"It just clicked in my head that I had to go back to school and get an education," he said. The juvenile court gave him six months probation for possession.

The next year, James returned to school as a freshman.

Again, he couldn't keep up. Heather James said she fought constantly with her son about staying in school. "I was begging them to help him, but the thing was, he had such a poor attitude," she said.

She also believes he struggled socially; her kids have what they need, but not a lot of nice clothes. "He felt inferior there. He really did," she said.

She asked the school to evaluate James for special needs, and she said they did. They found he did not qualify.

Finally, he wouldn't do it anymore. He woke up one morning, refused to go to school and began crying.

His mother said she followed him to the guidance office and signed the paperwork so he could withdraw.

James said a guidance counselor told him high school isn't for everybody. His mother said she also heard the remark. "I was so upset," she said.

High school Principal Mark Frizzell, who attended the governor's summit, said he could not comment on a particular student for confidentiality reasons. But he said students withdraw for many reasons, and no one reason can be associated with everyone.

"That's one student that had a personal experience. We have 750 (students) here," he said.

#### **Reaching students**

At the end of the daylong summit, the schools were asked to write down all of the programs they offer kids. The point was to build on what they do well, Frizzell said.

"We offer a lot of good things for students," he said. "But we also have more things we need to fine-tune and align. We need to put more checks and balances into place."

One may be starting. The high school began a program this fall to connect more with students. The program matches eight to 10 students with one staff member, then has the same group meet throughout the school year. Every student is involved in a group.

Freeman also is scheduling a meeting during the next few weeks of the same group that gathered at the summit. As they talk, he said they will look at the larger picture, because dropping out of high school is a gradual, not a sudden occurrence, that is bigger than any school, he said.

"Dropout concerns are community concerns," Freeman said. "So as we look at doing better, we are focusing on doing better as a community."

### Turning things around

James started back at Griswold High this fall. He said his mother and his girlfriend helped motivate and encourage him. He got a job cooking at Joe DiMaggio's Pizza in Jewett City, and started earning his own money. Owner Joe DiMaggio said James applied when DiMaggio needed the help, and James is gradually getting used to the work routine.

Sports also encouraged James; he saw that he could play baseball through school.

"I've got to get on the team. If I get good grades, I can play," James said.

Heather James said her son also met a new guidance counselor who was kind, helpful, and who looked for classes he was interested in so he would succeed. "I am just so thankful that I gave him another chance," she said.

The job, sports and interesting classes all combined to help James; she said she and her son have always been close, and she knows how badly he wants to graduate.

Looking forward, she believes the school needs something for children who don't qualify for special education, but who are obviously struggling.

James said he is getting A's and B's. He said he believes Griswold can do more for students like him.

"I think they drop out because they don't have any sense of security," he said. "They're just in bad situations, and the parents aren't really helping them out. Or they're with the wrong crowd. Basically, if you fall behind and you don't find the right help, you're set up for failure."

#### By the numbers

##### Cumulative dropout rate:

Griswold: 15.8 percent

State: 6.6 percent

##### Other statistics on Griswold dropouts:

Average attendance: 68.2 percent

##### By gender:

Male: 63.3 percent

Female: 36.7 percent

##### By race:

American Indian: 3.3 percent

Black: 10 percent

White: 83.3 percent

Hispanic: 3.3 percent

##### Other factors:

Those on free/reduced lunch: 50 percent

Those in special education: 20 percent

Those with a discipline offense in the 2006-07 school year: 50 percent

Those with a discipline offense in the 2007-08 school year: 26.7 percent

Those with an offense in both years: 20 percent

#### At a glance

Top five reasons given by students for dropping out of school:

1. Classes were not interesting: 47 percent

2. Missed too many school days: 43 percent
3. Friends not interested in school: 42 percent
4. Too much freedom, too few life rules: 38 percent
5. Failing school: 35 percent

Source: California Dropout Research Project, May 2007

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