Disengaged and Nearing Departure: Students at Risk for Dropping Out in the Age of COVID-19

Abstract

In this article, the author examines the turbulence of the current educational context in light of COVID-19 and the associated school closures, for disengaged, older students nearing the end of their high school journeys. She provides concise overviews of the way high school dropout problem has been conceptualized, the theoretical framework of turbulence theory, and the relevant challenges and barriers that disengaged, older students at risk for dropout/pushout are currently experiencing. She asserts that even with established supports in place, more attention is needed to developing approaches that consider the turbulence that older students experience nearing high school departure during this period of school closure and remote instruction. The author offers vignettes, both from her own experience as a school counselor and one from another educators about what this turbulence looks like for vulnerable students and families. She concludes by offering recommendations for further supporting older, disengaged students at-risk for pushout or dropout.

Keywords: High school dropout, pushout, chronic absenteeism, turbulence theory, COVID-19

Introduction

High school dropout remains a critical concern for researchers, educators, policymakers, and community leaders, and with good reason. Well established in the literature is the litany of unfavorable quality of life outcomes that dropping out of high school is connected to, including increased criminal involvement and incarceration (Moretti, 2007; Backman, 2017), higher levels of unemployment (Sweeten, Bushway & Paternoster, 2009), lower lifetime earnings and income tax payments (Rouse, 2007) and increased risk of health conditions and mortality (Muenning, 2007). Indeed, dropping out of high school has a devastating impact on individuals, families and communities, but it is also a painfully loud signal that a system, or set of systems, has failed.

In past work, dropping out of high school has been widely conceptualized as a decision that students make, related to either the investment of rewards and effort (Rosen, Warkentien & Rotermund, 2019; Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin & Royer, 2008) or a myopic individual disposition (Oreopoulos, 2007). In recent years, an alternate conception, the pushout, has emerged. Changing the locus of control from the student to the system, researchers have begun to illuminate the complex structural and contextual processes school leaders use to push difficult students out, with the reasons typically related to students' failure to achieve acceptable

levels of attendance and academic course credit or to comply with behavioral expectations (Mireles-Rios, Rios & Reyes, 2020; Lukes, 2014; Tuck, 2012).

Decades of research on early withdrawal from high school identifies chronic absenteeism as a primary early warning sign for student dropout and pushout (Rumberger, 1995; Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, Catalano & Hawkins, 2002; Kearney, 2008; Gubbels, van der Put, & Assink, 2019). Moreover, Lessard and colleagues (2008) found that students often utilize a pattern of stopping and restarting, only to stop again, on their pathway to high school dropout, or pushout as the case may be. Thus, the reality of school closing and programs changing for students at-risk for dropping out of school presents a serious barrier with far-reaching implications for students, families, and communities at large.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that informs my discussion and analysis of vulnerable high school students nearing the end of their high school pathways during the pandemic rests on the notion of the ubiquity of turbulence as a driving force in the personal lives of students and families, the professional lives of teachers and educational leaders, and the organizational life of schools and districts (Gross, 2019). Specifically, I use Shapiro and Gross's concepts of the four degrees of turbulence (light, moderate, severe, extreme) and the three forces (positionality, cascading and stability) that impact the levels of turbulence experienced by a school system, stakeholder group, or a person (Shapiro & Gross, 2013) to analyze the current challenges people and systems are experiencing, and to discuss possible solutions. As is the case with complex dynamic systems found within natural phenomena, and certainly when considering how a school system might address a pandemic involving a novel corona virus, small and thoughtful changes can yield important shifts, perhaps made possible by the very turbulence typically understood to be a threat to the system.

School Closures, Disengaged Students, and Turbulence

Turbulence theory can be applied to students, teachers, schools, districts, communities, and organizational systems. Designed to illuminate the contextual forces, degree of turbulence and the ramifications associated with a changed level in turbulence, this model is applicable both to the ways that disengaged older students and their families nearing the end of their high school journeys experience the school closure, and their educational leaders being subjected to heightened levels of turbulence as expert guidance, expectations, and constraints continue to change and swirl around them.

To gain perspective on how an organization or stakeholder is impacted by turbulence, Gross and colleagues (2020, 2019, 2013) recommend looking at the contextual and positionality variables that influence any given situation with a "rapid, well-considered response" (Shapiro & Gross, p. 46, 2013). Because the scope of this article focuses on the way that older, at risk student's pathway to high school graduation may be impacted by school closure, students disproportionately at risk for experiencing this closure adversely includes older students who have experienced chronic absenteeism, may be low income and/or from a racial or ethnic minority, have experienced learning or behavioral challenges in the past. In the case of closure

related to COVID-19, the events that cascade including the rapidly changing guidance about COVID-19, community concerns about learning, engagement, and the emotional wellbeing of students, the economic devastation that families are experiencing in real time and the ongoing discussion about how school will operate in the community and social media platforms alike. A third force, degree of stability, varies by family, school and community, keeping in mind that vulnerable students disproportionately experience housing and a lack of access to quality health care and food security, and are inequitably represented in low income neighborhoods and schools. Equally important is establishing the degree of turbulence. When school closed unexpectedly and continue to struggle to fully reopen due to COVID-19, the turbulence level for many struggling students and families is severe to extreme, depicted by students' "feelings of crisis" and "damage to the institution's normal operation" (Shapiro & Gross, p. 55, 2013).

In the next section, I explore some other ways that school closures related to COVID-19 influence the educational experiences of students at risk for withdrawing from high school prior to attaining the diploma.

Stranded During COVID-19

The Digital Divide During a Pandemic

While the devastating impact of COVID-19 to educational processes is only beginning to be explored by researchers, to date, there are some alarming trends that have begun to be documented regarding student engagement and learning during the school closures last Spring. In an effort to track the school closure and remote learning plans for the thirty largest districts across the nation, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (Lake, 2020) has identified a continuum of how much curriculum, instruction, and monitoring was occurring, at different points of time. Their analysis of the thirty largest districts' plans for closure and remote instruction, Seattle's Center on Reinventing Education (Lake, new you2020) found that 90% of the thirty largest districts across the nation provided students varying levels of exposure to curriculum with no instruction or monitoring components when schools first closed in March; by the end of May, that percentage was down to 34% indicating that even by the end of Spring, about a third of districts were not yet providing online instruction, monitoring or attendance collection (Lake, 2020). Correspondingly, in May 2020, the *Boston Globe* reported that more than 20% of Boston's public-school students had not logged on to their online learning program or picked up their physical, paper assignments two months after schools had closed and switched to distance learning (Tonnes, 2020). Importantly, the district's African American and Latinx student groups are disproportionately represented in that number, as compared with their White counterparts. Likewise, the number of students failing to participate in learning after school closed was even higher in Los Angeles, according to a New York Times article from July, with a third not logging on or completing their physical work (*New York Times Editorial Board*, 2020). By the same token, struggling to engage students living in poverty, a third large urban public-school system, Washington D.C., closed schools three weeks early (*New York Times Editorial Board*, 2020).

More recently, Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis and Viruleg (2020) explored long term consequences to economic and racial disparities in student achievement using statistical models estimating the effects of school closures, based on prior studies (i.e., Woodworth, Raymond, Chirbas, Gonzalez, Negassi, Snow, Van Donge, 2015) investigating the efficacy of remote learning. Importantly, they found that despite the quality level of the remote instructional program, across the board, all students progressed less through remote instruction than through conventional, face to face instruction, with students coming from low quality remote programs stagnating in their learning progress most significantly. Also worthy of note is the disproportionate burden low income and students of color experience in terms of less than optimal learning outcomes. Accordingly, Dorn and colleagues (2020) found that Black, Hispanic and low-income students shoulder the risk for not receiving average or high-quality remote instruction, leading to the all too certain consequence of disproportionate levels of loss of learning.

While the problem of pushing out the struggling student is by no means new, with the turbulence that COVID-19 has brought to educational settings across the board, students who are vulnerable to the pushout phenomenon under typical circumstances seem to be facing even greater barriers to attainment of a high school diploma. For older students who struggle to attain high school graduation under typical circumstances, school closures can magnify the sense of disengagement and disconnection these students feel towards school. Although there have been no studies to date on how the COVID-19 closures have impacted graduation rates, recent work has illuminated the challenges that school, families and students are currently facing in terms of learning and engagement. Notably, Dorn and colleagues (2020) estimate that 2 to 9% of students could drop out of school as a result of COVID-19 and associated school closures, with total students estimated to be anywhere from 232,000 to 1.1 million. This study provides clues to what we may be facing, a secondary pandemic of sorts related to dropping out, or arguably, pushout efforts towards highly disengaged students from high schools that have physically closed due to COVID-19.

While there have not been any published studies to date on this emergent phenomenon, educational leaders are beginning to identify critical barriers students are facing. One issue continues to be the digital divide and a host of closely related challenges. Across the United States, seven million school-aged children are currently living in homes without Internet connectivity (Walters, 2020), with a reported 35% of low-income households with school aged children operating without a Broadband connection (Anderson & Kumar, 2019). In a recent Federal Communications Commission report (FCC, 2020), the FCC confirmed that significant income differences exist between households with broadband Internet and their counterparts without this service, an inequity experienced most profoundly in rural and Tribal communities, but is also regularly experienced by low income people in urban areas as well. Related to the issue of access to a high quality Internet connection, technological device (e.g., computer, tablet, smartphone) ownership is also increasingly associated with income, among other factors, with 26% of Americans with income under $30,000 limited to the use of a smartphone for internet-based usage, a logistical constraint when the higher speeds associated with broadband Internet service or larger screens are needed for specific academic, personal or social tasks. (Anderson &

Kumar, 2019). Similarly, in a recent survey of three thousand high school students, the Hispanic Heritage Foundation (2020) found that Hispanics and African American students were more likely to use a smartphone to complete coursework than a computer. Most compelling, perhaps, was that nearly half of all students surveyed reported not being able to complete coursework, with a similar percentage reporting receipt of a diminished grade, because of a lack of access to adequate digital resources.

All things considered, many low-income and diverse students still lack consistent access to the adequate speed for Internet connection and the appropriately size and type of device to launch conventional online learning programs and applications, culminating in what was known as a homework gap prior to the pandemic. Since face to face instruction was halted last spring and subsequently continues to be limited at the start of the current school year, this homework gap, created by unequal access to digital resources, may need to be re-conceptualized and more broadly understood as an overall student engagement gap that has serious, far-reaching implications for vulnerable students. In the next section, I explore some of the unique logistical barriers that students face that are often absent in discussions of the digital divide and the homework gap.

Beyond the Digital Divide

Beyond the digital divide, however, there are broader inequities that surface during an unprecedented school closure such as this. Vulnerable students are without an array of support services that have traditionally been coupled to their physical school buildings. Among these are logistical and mental health needs that are largely unaddressed during times of school closure. As has been noted, it is these unique and pervasive barriers, above and beyond those that exist in traditional school programs, that require expedient attention in discussion and research so existing disparities in the attainment of the high school diploma do not increase, but instead, begin to diminish.

Logistical Barriers When Out of School Time is All Day

While the discussion of the digital divide focuses almost entirely on the distribution of devices and accessories for connectivity (i.e., Hot spots), this emphasis neglects some fundamental and logistical barriers that school leaders are often not aware of, but exert a significant toll on their high school students' engagement with distance learning. Amongst other barriers, older students are often tasked with additional responsibilities within the family unit that educational leaders may not adequately understand both in terms of how the tasks may influence the student's learning and engagement and what the roles might mean in terms of the student's own role identity system. In recent work illuminating the perspectives of high school students learning from home after the pandemic closed schools, Marstaller (2020), for instance, provides a rare snapshot of how an under-credited and over-aged student, born and educated in a refugee camp prior to coming to her Utah school system, experiences her own schooling and senior year after schools closed in Spring 2020. Amongst other observations, Elizabeth, describes the experience of assisting her younger siblings and cousins with their own academic and logistical

challenges, while attending to her own senior year coursework in their shared home, often with limited space for the demands of multiple students engaged in home learning simultaneously.

> During all of these study at home weeks I am pretty busy, helping my siblings, making sure they are done with their work or meeting with their teacher. But also I like it because I am learning new things from them while we are studying together.

The challenges that Elizabeth sparsely mentions are commonplace in households across the country. What is remarkable is her unique ability to understand these challenges as a mutually beneficial interaction, not taking away from, but rather contributing to Elizabeth's efficacy as a learner. While this snapshot provides but one older student's experiences during her school closure due to COVID-19, it serves to illuminate the unforeseen logistical challenges that engaging with remote instruction entails for older students (limits associated with home environment, childcare and familial responsibilities).

Lack of Mental Health Supports

One of the most difficult, often unseen, barriers to learning and student engagement that vulnerable students face are related to the unmet emotional and mental health needs of the students and their families. During this pandemic, these challenges have been amplified. In a general review, Kontoangelos, Economou and Papageirgiou (2020) looked at the psychological effects of COVID-19 pandemic on children, amongst other groups across studies, finding that children are at risk for increased levels of anxiety and fear as responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Inherently, the ability for school professionals to engage in the existing identification process for students with mental health and behavioral needs are greatly limited when schools are closed; markedly, this identification is an essential, early step in diagnosis and timely treatment, as well as critical prevention of the array of negative health and quality of life outcomes associated with untreated mental health issues (Golberstein, Wen & Miller, 2020).

Prior work has documented the role school services have in the delivery of mental health and other forms of health care, for students (Ali, West, Teich, Lynch, Mutter & Dubenitz, 2019; Lovenheim, Reback, & Wedenoja, 2016; Lipari, Hedden, Blau & Rubenstein, 2016; Reback, 2010), with recent attention to how school-based health care services may be a promising avenue to address chronic absenteeism (Graves, Weisburd, Salem, 2019). Data from a nation-wide survey, the National Survey of Drug Use and Health, documents that 3 million adolescents, or 13.2%, received mental health services at an educational setting (Lipari et al, 2016). Similarly, among all adolescents who received mental health services, 57% of students received some component through the school setting (Ali et al., 2019). A recent study found that school-based health centers, a more comprehensive, accessible, model than conventional school-based health services, reduced teen pregnancies (Lovenheim, Reback & Wedenoja, 2016), while earlier work documented that access to school mental health services decrease student behaviors disruptive to learning (Reback, 2010).

Certainly, these needs do not thoroughly cover all the unaddressed needs that at-risk, older students are experiencing when schools are closed. Rather, they represent two common

kinds of unaddressed or under-addressed needs that students experience . In the next section, I present a vignette of one older student's pathway to graduation while his school was closed due to COVID-19, thus highlighting the complex, array of unaddressed needs and barriers he encountered.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

A Glimpse into One School's Efforts to Reach a Vulnerable Student

A first-hand example can illustrate the complex challenges that vulnerable students face without the supports of in-person school. In one school where I operated in multiple roles, I was counseling and teaching a senior, an African American male student who was receiving Special Education services, and who was nearing the end of a very checkered, difficult school year when COVID-19 forced his school to close. Stemming from an incident where the student was driving a vehicle with a firearm, accompanied by another younger student, the student was subsequently, awaiting a court date. Prior to the closure, the student had been receiving individualized, in-person instruction in school, but after the conventional school hours, through a homebound program reserved for students with special health or behavioral circumstances. The student's grades had begun to stabilize and after a bumpy start and the student began to increase his engagement with the coursework with the individualized attention of the one on one teaching, even more than his conventional schedule in Resource classes. Like many parents, the student's parent, a single mother, did not advocate for a specific instructional program, but tended to emphasize how important support was for her son so he could attain graduation, as her primary concern.

Thus, when COVID-19 struck, the school, like so many others, went quickly to an all remote program. As a result, all homebound instructional services provided by the district stopped as well, with students being routed back into their regular classes, now delivered remotely. The student who had been out of the conventional classes for months awaiting his court date now had to contend with a jarring shift to distance learning without the one on one, face to face teaching he had experienced the last two marking periods. Not surprisingly, the student had a difficult time engaging with the distance learning, and ultimately did not do enough to achieve a passing grade in a required course. The brand-new system of delivery of instruction proved to be too unfamiliar and unintuitive for a student who struggled to engage with school in stable, typical times. Like countless others, the student had to recover his credits during the summer, with leadership reverting to familiar coursework presented in the printed form. The question of how meaningful the learning was is daunted only by the question of how punitive the consequences of high school pushout would be for this struggling senior.

This snapshot of one vulnerable student's experience demonstrates the myriad of leadership practices that can culminate in a vulnerable senior's inability to attain high school graduation in four years. Importantly, the four-year graduation rate, remains a high-stakes accountability measure and a well-established component of school and district reporting. Since 2010, this measure, now known as the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate, has increased in

rigor in terms of the process for accounting for unenrolled high school students, and has been commonly applied across all states (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Thus, while districts may not have known how to meet the needs of disengaged students nearing the end of their high school journeys when COVID-19 hit, the pressure to graduate these struggling students remained a driving force for educational leaders. In the next section, I focus on how emerging conceptualizations and processes regarding student attendance and absenteeism that are influence the way that educational leaders intervene with disengaged students.

Attendance Collection and Intervention: More than Just a Ubiquitous Practice

One overlooked area relating to student engagement since schools closed due to COVID-19 relates to the way educational leadership conceptualizes and responds to student attendance and absenteeism. With the rapid changes in school programs, and as was the case with many other school processes, the collection, analysis, and intervention practices related to attendance changed significantly after schools closed. Rather than the established, universal practice of daily attendance inputted by classroom teachers and reported by clerical staff, districts unexpectedly had to adapt this process once the brick and mortar school closed. Moreover, the omnipresent pressure of county and state accountability requirements for attendance collection and response were largely eased for school districts due to COVID-19. Thus, while some districts shifted the responsibility for collecting attendance to families, asking parents and students to self-report student attendance through the completion of online forms, phone calls, and app interactions, other districts opted to forgo the formal collection of attendance, and instead, interpret attendance and absenteeism through daily or even weekly engagement with a distance learning assignment to varying degrees. With these adaptations, the conventional attendance collection practices such as routinized calls, letters and emails to parents, as well as discussions and meetings about absenteeism with staff, students and family, the informational communication to parents and students about absenteeism w largely missing after schools closed.

Changes in leadership practices concerning attendance and absenteeism were not limited to less precise and regular collection and subsequent communication. How districts responded to and intervened with chronically absent students also changed. Prior to the COVID-19 closures, accountability around absenteeism had increased in importance in recent years, fueled by the passage of Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 which allowed for a broader scope for accountability systems that could include absenteeism as a key component (Rafa, 2017; Bauer, Liu, Schanzenbach & Shambaugh, 2018). Adopted by thirty-six states and the District of Columbia as of 2020 as a school quality or student success indicator (Attendance Works, 2020), ESSA required states to collect and report absenteeism data on state report cards (Attendance works, 2020). Districts were also required to develop interventions to improve attendance which typically entailed family engagement and student mentoring components designed to increase the schoolwide attendance rate.

Well established to be a problem disproportionately experienced by low income, racially diverse and older students, peaking during a student's last year of school (Hough, 2019; Balfanz

& Byrnes, 2012), chronic absenteeism conventionally requires a host of intervention choices from schools including engagement with families, incentives for students, case management services, peer mentoring, schoolwide positive behavior systems, and in the most severe absentee cases, referral to applicable community agencies including Mobile Response services and Child Protective Services. In these cases, referrals such as these can yield additional intervention and support services for students and families struggling with compliance with attending school. Moreover, agencies who receive reports from sources outside the school rely on background information provided by school officials to monitor existing cases. Without adapted school processes that consider attendance, absenteeism and engagement during school closures, students may be missing critical services from agencies, apart from schools. In the next section, I provide a brief glimpse into what districts across the nation are doing to address the digital divide and support student engagement equitably.

Early Efforts to Address the Digital Divide

Together with multiple levels of government, technology companies, and nonprofits, districts have attempted to address this undisputed digital divide and provide digital resources to vulnerable students and families in several different ways. Early on, in an effort to expediently provide instruction to digitally stranded students immediately following the school closures, some districts opted to provide printed instructional materials for students such as the Seattle Public Schools (Institute of Education Sciences, 2020). This stop gap measure did not suffice for long; by the middle of spring, and into the summer, the push, instead, was for devices and Internet access for every student for the reopening in September (Seattle Public Schools, 2020). Other districts capitalized on partnerships with area companies to supplement instruction trying to sidestep the digital access gap. One unique illustration of this approach comes from Los Angeles's Unified School District, where the district is partnering with the public broadcasting station, PBS SoCal/KCET, to provide instructional and extracurricular programming via television to students this fall. Utilizing three separate channels identified by developmental age, the approach also serves to comply with district's public health mandates concerning large gatherings with spectators (Kohli & Blume, 2020). While television as the platform is less than cutting edge considering the potential of Internet-based learning applications, the approach provides an immediate solution for the inequities in access, and is adaptable to be employed alongside print materials and online instructional options (Kohli & Blume, 2020; Institute of Education Sciences, 2020).

Other districts attempted to tackle the digital divide in-district while pursuing federal programming for funding broader efforts. For instance, in South Bend, Indiana, where 15 percent of students lack Internet access, the district joined others like it (i.e., Austin Independent School District, Charleston County School district to name a few) by equipping their school busses with Wifi. Broadening an initiative that the school board started pre-Corona virus, the busses are parked in neighborhoods where families experience the digital divide most significantly (ABC News, 2020), supporting the students living in the closest proximity and the students mobile enough to get to the locations. While not a complete solution, the district, to

date, continues to pursue additional funding through the E-rate federal program so that more busses can be equipped with WiFi and reach more students.

Not surprisingly, increasing access to digital technology for students and families has relied on a variety of funding sources. One such source has been Internet and wireless providers, mostly in the form of short-term and piecemeal solutions. In the immediate aftermath of the outbreak, Comcast and AT&T offered free Wifi, and Charter offered free broadband to families with students. In terms of data, T Mobile and Comcast offered additional smartphone data, while Verizon provided economic relief in the form of moratoriums on late fees and disconnections (Associated Press, 2020).

A second funding source for improving access to digital technology has been government funded and nonprofit programs. Lifeline, a federal government program, brings higher cost broadband services to low income families if they qualify for programs such as Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Headstart, the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations and others (Reviews.com, 2020). Moreover, nonprofits like EveryoneOn, partnering with Frontier, offered broadband affordable and accessible, while another nonprofit, Human I-T reused donated technology and offered discounted internet connection for those who qualify for federal assistance programs (i.e., SNAP) (Reviews.com, 2020). While these programs aid with connecting low income people to important digital resources, the reality is that it may still not be adequate to re-engage struggling students when schools are closed and truly close the homework gap, especially when coupled with other substantive barriers that older students and their families are facing.

Recommendations

Deeply committed to providing tools for educational leaders to gain perspective in trying situations, Shapiro ang Gross (2013) provided the turbulence gauge, a simple table that can be applied to multiple situations across a setting, and optimally completed from a variety of stakeholder perspectives. The tool allows leaders to be both collaborative and reflective in the throes of sweeping turbulence and change.

A second recommendation is for educational leaders to gain a nuanced understanding of their district's level of digital equity. Which neighborhoods are disproportionately experiencing a lack of access to digital resources? What student groups are inequitably shouldering the burden of the digital divide and the existing gaps related to coursework and student engagement? What does the district's existing divides look like broken down by grade level? As Krueger (2015) notes, an assessment regarding digital inequity experienced by students is ironically simple to implement and incurs no additional cost to educational leaders, but has the potential to yield so much valuable insight into parent and students lived experiences.

Lastly, student absenteeism continues to be a problem with far-reaching implications, and perhaps especially during times of school closures. Absent an effort to reconceptualize intervention efforts for student absenteeism that considers what disengagement and absenteeism

means once schools are closed, educational leaders are certainly missing an important component to the addressing the personal, social and academic problems of disengaged students.

Conclusion

In severely turbulent times, leaders have a choice to utilize an increased awareness about what their students, families and communities are experiencing to strategically improve the way they engage with at-risk students or to muddle through without a strategy on how to gain perspective from the turbulence. Grappling with the contextual forces, drivers and level of turbulence that the COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in for disengaged students affords school leaders the opportunity to gain understanding of our students' unique, complex barriers to engaging with school. Indeed, the school closure has exacted a host of tolls on older, disengaged students that relate to learning, attendance, attainment, and other quality of life outcomes. While some leadership practices have yielded important gains in addressing the digital divide and other areas of need, more work is clearly needed to address the specialized needs of older students reaching the end of their high school journeys during this pandemic. While much of the portrait of what this pandemic will leave behind in its wake will be fleshed out in the months and years to come, it is imperative that research and policy attention include those students that are nearing departure, often too quickly and quietly to alter their trajectories.

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