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ORIGINAL PAPER

School dropout among students: how to prevent it

Daniela Scorțan[1)]

Abstract
School dropout can be understood as the failure or irregular use of education and training services by school-age young people. It must be analyzed in holistic and multidimensional terms, as it cannot be traced back to a single cause (be it biological, psychological, or social), requiring a broad and multidisciplinary perspective. A key role in combating school dropout is guidance, which must be ongoing and integrated into the various subjects included in the curriculum, both as an enrichment of the curricular subjects and as a stand-alone subject. For guidance to be truly effective, it is necessary to create a shared framework of essential content for strengthening the self, understanding one's aspirations, and gaining a deeper understanding of the world of study and work, as well as the local context. This development of self-direction skills and the ability to plan actions to achieve the personal and professional development generated by guidance is crucial. To combat the phenomenon of early school leaving, promoting the well-being of young people and their active participation in their educational and social journey, it is necessary to adopt a comprehensive action based on a systemic, consistent, and ongoing approach that addresses educational challenges by investing in individuals and their living environments. Specifically, it is necessary to develop integrated educational systems involving schools, families, and the local community (local authorities, social and health services, associations, educators, and the business community). This will provide an integrated and comprehensive response to the problem through collaborative networks that adopt long-term planning (to ensure continuity in school transitions and support during critical moments) and include monitoring activities to refocus and optimize efforts over time.
Keywords*: school dropout, guidance, support, monitoring activities, aspirations*

[1)] Lecturer, Ph. D., University of Craiova, Department of Modern Languages, Romania, Phone: 0720.154.311, Email: danielascortan@yahoo.com

Introduction

When a student drops out of school, the process usually starts years before they actually leave the building. Poor attendance, falling grades, and behavioral changes signal early disengagement. To prevent school dropout, schools and teachers need to recognize these warning signs and apply structured interventions early.

Traditional academic methods often fail students who face financial pressure, family responsibilities, or mental fatigue. Educators must adapt their instructional approach. Offering flexible learning schedules, practical vocational training, and project-based tasks gives students a clear reason to stay enrolled. Real-world tasks, like creating digital resources for local nonprofits, show students the immediate value of their education and provide an authentic audience for their work.

Furthermore, educational institutions cannot rely entirely on classroom teachers to solve this problem. Building a strong prevention system requires involving parents, school counselors, and local authorities. Regular communication with families helps schools track academic progress at home. Using early warning systems powered by attendance and performance data allows administrators and teachers to step in before the student completely disconnects. By combining data monitoring, practical learning, and consistent psychosocial support, schools give students the necessary tools to graduate and secure a stable future.

Unmanaged virtual learning environments contribute to student exhaustion and subsequent disengagement. To counter this, educators must actively manage screen-based instruction. Chiriţescu and Păunescu (2026: 77) argue that teachers must become digital mediators, adjusting their methods specifically to „prevent cognitive fatigue and school dropout in the virtual environment." Addressing student burnout is a necessary step for maintaining retention rates. „This period of crisis also highlighted the need to rethink the teacher's role, who shifted from being a knowledge transmitter to a digital mediator".

As Andreea Mihaela Stoian (2019: 132) notes, preventing dropout caused by rigid classes requires schools to balance standard lessons with hands-on learning, emotional support, and personal mentoring that match students' real-life needs. „The teacher is and will remain a mentor and a guide for his students no matter the subject that he/she teaches. Today's teachers represent the contemporary school that has to offer balance – a balance between its curriculum and all the other alternative methods of learning."

School dropout rates remain highest in low-income and rural areas. These school districts operate with heavily restricted budgets. Many modern dropout prevention programs depend on complex artificial intelligence to track student progress. Under-funded schools struggle to pay for the required technology. A functional digital system requires stable internet connections, modern hardware, and continuous technical support. When schools lack these basic elements, the digital systems fail. When the system breaks down, the learning process stops entirely. Struggling students suffer the most in these situations because they rarely have additional educational resources or internet access at home.

Adopting artificial intelligence requires long-term financial commitments. Buying the initial software represents just a fraction of the total cost. Schools must pay for continuous updates, server costs, and technical repairs. Bărbuceanu (2025: 195) explains this reality clearly: „Furthermore, running AI in schools isn't simple or cheap, schools need reliable infrastructure, ongoing training, constant updates, platform maintenance, making all of this straining budgets, and if the system goes down, learning also pauses. Policy brings its own questions because nobody really knows who actually

owns the data and who is in charge of the AI, moreover the whole debate keeps spinning in circles, with people talking about the need to tackle uncertainty and take responsibility for the ethics of using AI in classrooms". When schools spend their limited funds on maintaining software, they have less money available for direct student counseling.

Modern educational institutions rely on digital early warning tools to monitor student behavior. These programs scan databases to spot attendance problems and falling grades long before a student actually quits. The goal is to alert teachers the moment a student needs help. However, depending entirely on software is risky. If AI tracking tools break down, experience technical glitches, or lack clear maintenance plans, the safety net disappears. Teachers lose sight of struggling students and cannot intervene in time. A technical error can cause a school to miss a critical window for dropout prevention.

Students at risk of dropping out are often the most vulnerable children in the educational system. Using artificial intelligence to monitor them introduces severe privacy risks. Schools face unclear rules regarding who owns student data and how personal information is protected. We also lack clear guidelines on who is ultimately responsible for the decisions generated by artificial intelligence. These automated tracking systems can easily lead to unfair profiling. A poorly programmed system might flag a student based on biased data, creating an unfair permanent record. Technology in schools requires strict ethical rules and active human guidance. Teachers and counselors must always verify automated alerts and make the final decisions on how to support their students.

A historical analysis of school dropout research

School dropout is rarely a sudden decision. It is the final step in a long process of disengagement. Over the past six decades, academic research on this topic has evolved significantly. Early studies focused on the individual traits and backgrounds of students. Today, research focuses on how educational institutions can build better support systems. By examining the history of this research in chronological order, we can understand which interventions work and why they are necessary.

During the initial period of dropout research, scholars treated leaving school as a symptom of a student's personal life. Researchers spent the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s trying to identify the individual characteristics and family backgrounds that correlated with quitting school. Two key papers defined how the academic world viewed the problem during this era.

In 1975, Vincent Tinto published „Dropouts from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research." Tinto introduced the Institutional Departure Model. This model suggested that students drop out when they fail to integrate into their school environment. Integration meant both passing classes and making friends. If a student felt isolated, they were at a high risk of leaving.

Later, in 1987, Russell W. Rumberger published „High school dropouts: A review of issues and evidence." Rumberger summarized the empirical data collected throughout the twentieth century. He mapped out how demographic factors, family structures, and individual academic performance acted as predictors for early school departure. Together, Tinto and Rumberger established the baseline understanding of the dropout crisis. Their era of research measured static background markers, leaving schools with few tools to actually change a student's path.

As the 1990s approached, the academic perspective shifted. Scholars realized that a student's background did not dictate their destiny. Researchers began to view dropping out as a dynamic process of disengagement. Rather than treating a dropout as an isolated

event, they started tracking student behaviors over time to identify early behavioral signals.

In 1989, Jeremy D. Finn published „Withdrawing from school." Finn introduced formal theoretical models explaining the psychological process of leaving school. He showed how early academic frustration and a lack of participation in the classroom gradually turn into emotional detachment. A student who struggles to read in early grades stops raising their hand, then starts skipping class, and ultimately departs from the school system entirely.

This process oriented thinking culminated in a 2007 study by Elaine M. Allensworth and John Q. Easton titled „What Matters for staying on track and graduating in Chicago public high schools." Based on a five year study from the Consortium on Chicago School Research, they proved that schools could predict graduation rates years in advance. They found that tracking specific ninth grade indicators, specifically attendance, behavior marks, and course performance, provided a highly accurate prediction of who would drop out. These indicators became known as the ABC metrics. This research established the foundation for modern early warning systems.

Armed with early warning indicators, the research of the 2010s moved toward evaluating actual prevention programs. Scholars expanded their focus to see how systemic frameworks and targeted interventions could improve retention.

In 2013, Emily E. Tanner-Smith and Sandra J. Wilson published a large review titled „A meta-analysis of the effects of dropout prevention programs on school absenteeism." They reviewed 74 different studies covering primary and high school students to determine if these prevention programs actually helped children attend class more frequently. Their findings provided a clear roadmap for educators. The programs did work, but only when applied correctly. They discovered that prevention strategies work best when they focus directly on students who are already missing a lot of class or struggling with their grades. Treating every student in the building the exact same way proved ineffective.

Tanner-Smith and Wilson found that keeping close track of attendance, talking regularly with families, and offering extra tutoring helped students stay on track. Furthermore, they proved that timing matters. Starting these helpful programs early, in middle school or early high school, brings significantly better results than waiting until a student's senior year.

Adding to this systemic approach, in 2015, Jennifer Freeman and Brandi Simonsen published „Examining the impact of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports on student dropout rates." They demonstrated the effectiveness of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). This model combines universal school climate initiatives with highly targeted behavioral support for students showing early warning signs. By the end of the 2010s, research confirmed that building evidence based support systems offered the most reliable path toward keeping students in school.

In recent years, researchers have continued to refine our understanding of what interventions provide the best return on investment, particularly regarding older students and university retention.

In 2024, Kristoffer Ibsen and Michael Rosholm published a study titled „What works? Interventions aimed at reducing student dropout in higher education." They looked at different ways universities attempt to stop students from dropping out. After evaluating a wide range of rigorous experimental studies, they made several discoveries about which programs actually help students finish their degrees.

Ibsen and Rosholm found that many general, broad scale prevention programs have very little effect on overall graduation rates. Instead, the single most effective approach for keeping students enrolled until graduation is connecting students with teachers through personal mentoring. This one to one connection provides the academic and social integration that Vincent Tinto first wrote about back in 1975.

The 2024 study also evaluated other popular interventions. They found that providing financial assistance to students in need or offering extra academic tutoring does help, but to a much smaller degree than direct mentorship. More importantly, the researchers issued a strong warning about punitive measures. Punishing struggling students with academic warnings or probationary statuses often has the exact opposite effect of what the school intends. Instead of motivating the student to work harder, these warnings push the student to quit school entirely.

Ultimately, Ibsen and Rosholm confirm that educational institutions need clearer evidence when choosing their prevention programs. Schools and universities must focus their budgets and efforts on direct guidance and personal support systems.

The progression of dropout research from the 1970s to 2024 shows a clear evolution in how we understand student success. Fifty years ago, the educational system looked at personal background and demographic data to explain why a student failed. By the 1990s and 2000s, researchers recognized that dropping out was a slow process that could be tracked and predicted using early warning metrics like attendance and course performance. In the 2010s, massive data reviews proved that targeted, early interventions and communication with families were the best tools for high schools. Today, the latest research confirms that human connection remains the most powerful prevention tool. Punitive measures fail, while structured, personal mentorship succeeds. By applying this chronological evidence, modern schools can build effective, supportive environments that guide every student to graduation.

Early school dropout in Romania: Causes, inequalities, and systemic solutions

Romania faces a significant structural challenge regarding school dropout and early school leaving. Statistics provided by Eurostat and the Romanian Ministry of Education indicate that the country consistently records one of the highest rates of early school leaving within the European Union. This rate fluctuates between fifteen and sixteen percent, which sits far above the European Union target of reducing early school leaving to below nine percent. As Serban (2024) notes in analyzing the societal implications of this phenomenon, fully understanding the Romanian educational context requires examining the structural drivers of dropout, the regional and social disparities affecting students, and the modern systematic interventions designed to keep children in school.

Sociological literature and research from the National Institute for Research in Education show that leaving school is rarely a sudden or isolated decision. Instead, it is the cumulative result of continuous social and economic pressures acting upon a student. Zamfir and Mocanu (2020) demonstrate that high poverty levels and the limited educational background of parents severely reduce a student's academic self-efficacy and long-term retention. Consequently, low household income remains the single strongest predictor of early school leaving. While public education in Romania is technically tuition-free, the indirect costs of schooling place a severe and often unmanageable burden on vulnerable families. These daily expenses include paying for transportation from isolated rural areas, purchasing necessary school supplies, and providing adequate

seasonal clothing. For families managing a tight budget, these accumulated indirect costs can make long-term school attendance financially impossible.

Beyond direct financial constraints, low educational capital within the household plays a critical role in student retention. In socioeconomically disadvantaged families, parents may have low literacy levels or incomplete secondary education themselves. This background makes it difficult for them to offer academic support with homework or to navigate the educational system alongside their children. In many of these households, the immediate need for income pushes parents to prioritize seasonal agricultural work or manual labor over the long-term benefits of schooling, leading older children to abandon their classes to help support the family financially.

These family struggles become even worse when the schools themselves lack basic resources. Many under-resourced schools operate without adequate support staff. They frequently lack educational professionals such as school counselors and school mediators. These professionals are essential for identifying early signs of distress and mediating communication between the school and the parents. Without them, learning gaps remain unaddressed, chronic absenteeism goes unnoticed for too long, and struggling students easily slip through the cracks of the administrative system.

The educational landscape in Romania is also characterized by sharp regional and demographic inequalities, with the rural-urban gap being the most prominent. The early school leaving rate in rural communities and small provincial towns is significantly higher than in major urban hubs. As Petre, Teodorescu and Cioclu (2024) highlight in their research on satellite towns and rural communities, daily travel difficulties and the physical distance to school act as direct causes of absenteeism. Rural schools frequently face severe infrastructural challenges and struggle with teacher retention. Many educators make the daily trip from nearby cities and transfer out as soon as an urban position opens, creating a lack of continuity for the students. Furthermore, these rural institutions have limited budgets, meaning they can rarely offer extracurricular activities or remedial tutoring to help students catch up.

Specific vulnerable communities within these regions face even higher risks of educational disengagement. Children from marginalized ethnic minority communities historically experience lower school completion rates due to systemic barriers. Additionally, students living in single-parent households or families where both parents have migrated abroad for work lack consistent adult supervision and emotional stability. The psychological toll of having parents working in other countries often translates directly into lower academic performance and a much higher probability of early dropout.

To address these deep-rooted challenges, the educational system has shifted its approach. Instead of relying on isolated local initiatives, the government now implements systemic, evidence-based frameworks supported by national funding. One major development is the implementation of the Early Warning Mechanism in Education. This digital system tracks early indicators of dropout risk across the student population. By monitoring specific metrics such as chronic absenteeism, sudden grade declines, and behavioral issues, educators receive alerts allowing them to step in and offer support long before a student actually decides to leave school.

Coupled with this tracking system is the National Program to Reduce School Dropout. Funded largely through the Recovery and Resilience Facility, this program provides direct financial grants to thousands of high-risk and medium-risk schools across the country. School administrators use these funds to organize remedial classes, offer socio-emotional counseling, invest in teacher training, and create engaging extracurricular

activities. By injecting capital directly into the most vulnerable schools, the program aims to build a more supportive and attractive learning environment.

Beyond high school dropout: pathways to university success for rural youth

However, preventing high school dropout is only one part of the educational challenge. Encouraging young people from rural areas to pursue and complete a university education requires addressing a different set of structural barriers. As Hatos (2021) observes in his sociological analyses of Romanian educational disparities, these students face economic hardship, socio-cultural expectations that favor immediate employment, and a significant academic transition gap between their rural high schools and higher education institutions. A comprehensive solution to increase university enrollment and graduation rates among rural youth must operate across three distinct levels, focusing on high school preparation, financial security, and on-campus retention.

The first level involves targeted high school transition and awareness programs. Rural students often lack exposure to university life and receive little career guidance, making higher education feel out of reach or irrelevant to their daily reality. Universities can change this perception by expanding summer immersion camps, similar to earlier secondary education projects. Bringing eleventh-grade students from rural areas to spend a week on a university campus makes the academic environment less intimidating. When they stay in campus housing, attend sample lectures, and meet student mentors, university life becomes tangible. Matching these teenagers with current university undergraduates who also come from rural backgrounds provides highly effective peer guidance. Another solution is bringing career counselors directly to rural high schools. These counselors can show students how a degree leads to practical local jobs, such as modern farming or digital technology, making the financial benefits of university clear.

The second level focuses entirely on removing financial and logistical barriers. Economic constraints, including the cost of housing, food, and daily living in major cities, are the primary reasons rural youth enter the workforce early instead of attending university. (Petre, Teodorescu and Cioclu 2024) Universities must guarantee campus housing grants, as rent is often the major barrier. Reserving dedicated, fully funded rooms on campus for rural students with low family income removes a massive financial burden. Furthermore, expanding government allocations for tuition-free state-funded places dedicated specifically to rural students is essential. When combined with monthly financial support funded through European Social Fund programs, higher education becomes financially viable. For those who cannot relocate, universities should develop decentralized extension centers or hybrid learning options for non-laboratory disciplines.

The third level addresses on-campus retention and academic support. Once enrolled, rural students face a higher risk of dropping out during their first year due to academic adjustment and social isolation, a process of institutional departure formally modeled by Tinto (1975). Universities need to offer academic transition and remedial support during the first semester, focusing on academic writing, research methodologies, and digital literacy to close any gaps in high school preparation. Faculty mentoring programs are also crucial. As Ibsen and Rosholm (2024) conclude in their meta-analysis of university interventions, structured student-faculty mentoring is the most effective single strategy for retention. Assigning a dedicated academic advisor to first-generation rural students ensures continuous support. Finally, expanding dual higher education programs combines academic study with paid apprenticeships at regional companies. This

provides immediate income while completing a degree, aligning the need to earn a living with the pursuit of higher education.

At the university level, traditional lectures often feel disconnected from reality. When students fail to see the practical value of their degree, apathy sets in, increasing the risk of university dropout. To keep vulnerable undergraduates engaged, universities must assign projects that carry an immediate social impact.

Connecting academic theory to community needs gives students a clear sense of purpose. Lăpădat and Lăpădat (2025: 15) explain how educational institutions can integrate practical tasks into their programs: „Schools can collaborate with cultural institutions, local nonprofits, or municipal agencies on small language tasks such as translating signage, creating welcome resources, or documenting local histories. Students negotiate scopes, draft and revise with stakeholders, and release their work under appropriate licenses".

By giving students authentic audiences, these collaborative projects make the social value of their digital skills visible. This directly prevents the academic disengagement that leads to leaving higher education prematurely.

Conclusions

School dropout is a gradual process of disengagement driven by profound socioeconomic pressures and institutional resource gaps, rather than a sudden individual failure. Over six decades of educational research confirm that preventing early school leaving requires schools to directly address student isolation, financial difficulties, and academic frustration before the student completely abandons their studies.

Solving this crisis requires a major change, moving away from strict punishments toward proven support systems. Digital tracking tools, such as early warning systems, provide essential data for identifying vulnerable students through frequent absences and falling grades. However, technology alone cannot solve the dropout crisis. Schools must pair digital alerts with real human support, as structured, personal mentorship remains the best way to keep students in school. This human connection is especially critical in poorly funded rural and minority communities across Romania, where hidden school expenses and a lack of support staff act as major obstacles to graduating.

Tackling these deep-rooted inequalities also applies to higher education. Helping rural and marginalized youth move to university requires a complete plan focused on early campus visits, making school affordable, and keeping students enrolled. Universities must make the academic environment feel accessible through introductory campus programs and career counseling that connects degrees to practical regional jobs. Furthermore, educational institutions must remove financial burdens by providing fully funded rooms on campus, free government-funded spots, and monthly living grants. Once students enroll, universities need to offer specific academic help and assign individual professors as mentors to prevent first-year isolation.

Ultimately, keeping vulnerable students in school requires a fully supportive environment. By combining student progress tracking, ongoing financial help, and practical community projects, schools and universities can successfully build a strong sense of belonging and a clear reason to learn. When educators focus on real human connection alongside clear career paths, they give every student the necessary tools to graduate and secure a stable, productive future.

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