

**Delaware Student Forums II:
Students at Risk Discuss
Factors that Influence Dropout Statistics**

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in collaboration with

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Students at Risk Discuss

Factors that Influence Dropout Statistics

Problem Statement

Over one million young people in America fail to graduate from high school every year. (America's Promise Alliance, 2008.) The Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics reports that in the 2004-2005 school year, 1,883 Delaware students dropped out of high school. Only 59% of these Delawareans are likely to join our work force and those who do will make an average of \$380,000 less than a high school graduate over his or her life time. (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, CAEL) Only 12% of those who dropout are likely to return to school. The loss of human potential and state revenue is a concern for Delaware stakeholders who recognize the need to ensure that every child graduates from high school prepared for success in the 21st Century.

Delaware Governor Ruth Ann Minner was determined to address this crisis head-on by joining the efforts led by the America's Promise Alliance in the spring of 2008. Governor Minner joined with the Department of Education and the State Board of Education in committing to focusing statewide attention on dropout prevention and to holding a dropout prevention summit.

Background

Delaware was the recipient of a two-year National Governor's Association (NGA) Honor States Grant for Redesigning High Schools in 2006. A major component of this grant was to develop a communication campaign that would resonate with a variety of stakeholders. A great deal of market research was conducted to develop the communications plan. Interviews and focus groups were conducted across stakeholder groups throughout the state. In addition, Secretary of Education Valerie Woodruff and her staff conducted six regional student forums across the state. Schools from every public high school in the state sent diverse teams of eight to ten students to the forums. The student team represented a variety of subpopulations including multiple ethnic groups, students with special needs, athletes, honor students, band students and others. We asked students about their middle school and high school experiences. They shared with us the characteristics of both their good and bad experiences. They spoke and we listened.

This second round of student forums was designed to focus on the subpopulation of students in Delaware high schools who are struggling. We purposefully targeted students who were at risk of dropping out of high school. The targeted students are considered "at-risk" for a variety of reasons ranging from issues such as low grades, family problems, and discipline/behavior problems.

Methodology

Much of the research on high school dropouts focuses on indicators and intervention strategies. The analysis framework was developed by combining the research from two different studies. The combined framework was the basis for analyzing the student comments. The first body of work utilized in the framework was the Search Institute's "40 Development Assets". The assets are positive experiences and qualities that help influence the choices young people make and help them become successful adults. The assets fall into two categories, internal and external assets. These two categories are further delineated into subcategories. External assets are support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Internal assets are of commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity.

The second source used to develop the framework was the National Center of Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance Institute of Educational Sciences' September, 2008 *Practice Guide on Dropout Prevention*. This guide provided dropout prevention interventions that represent current best practices. The report identified the following five interventions:

- Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out.
- Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance.
- Implement programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills.
- Personalize the learning environment and instructional process.
- Provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and to provide the skills needed to graduate and serve them after they leave school.

Student Participants

Forum participants were students currently enrolled in five comprehensive high schools and two career and technical schools in New Castle and Kent Counties, as well as students from Groves High School (Polytech School District Site), Delaware's statewide adult education high school. Students varied by age, grade, gender, ethnicity, English language skills and socioeconomic status. Additionally, nine young people who had dropped out of school and were not currently enrolled in any educational institutions or programs were interviewed. A total of 88 young adults provided input.

General Characteristics of Participants:

- 45 students currently attending public school that have been identified as being at risk for dropping out and enrolled in a community based in-school dropout intervention program (Communities in Schools, Jobs for Delaware Graduates).
- 17 students who are currently enrolled in public school but who attend evening Groves or "Twilight" programs for credit recovery (Groves "In-School" program).

- 16 students who have dropped out of school and have returned to Groves High School to complete their diploma requirements. Some of these students are more mature learners (up to 45 years old).
- 10 previous students who have dropped out of school and have not pursued any further education.

Forum participants were chosen for their diversity:

- 43 Males and 45 females
- 27 Caucasian, 48 African American and 13 Hispanic students
- 9 Single teen parents and soon-to-be teen parents
- Age range: 16-45
- 9 students with limited English proficiency or English language learners

Participant Selection

Communities in Schools (CIS) and Jobs for Delaware Graduates (JDG), two community-based dropout prevention organizations that operate in multiple school sites throughout the state, identified student participants for the two high school student forums. Mr. Jim Purcell, President of Communities in Schools Delaware and member of the America’s Promise Dropout Summit Planning Committee, volunteered to provide students for the forum. He was asked to provide a diverse group of students that represented various ethnic, gender, age and socio-economic groups. He then charged each site coordinator with the identification of student participants.

Mrs. Maureen Whelan, Director of Adult Education for the Department of Education (DOE) and member of the America’s Promise Dropout Summit Planning Committee also volunteered to provide forum participants. She charged the Groves Adult High School program coordinators to select participants for the two forums held with students in the Twilight Program (students enrolled in high school but making up lost credits at Groves) and the Groves’ Adult Education Program. Once again, coordinators were asked to provide a diverse group of students that represented various ethnic, gender, age and socio-economic groups. This group was very diverse and included immigrants to the United States and students with ages ranging from 19-45 years old.

Dr. Susanna Lee, President of Jobs for Delaware Graduates, charged her field agents to conduct one-on-one interviews with students who have dropped out of high school and have not returned. Ten interviews were conducted.

Forum Locations

The following forums were held:

- Two high school forums
 - William Penn High School September 19, 2008
 - Dover High School September 23, 2008
- Two Groves “In-School” programs
 - Christina Groves “In-School” September 22, 2008

- Polytech Groves “In-School” September 23, 2008
- One Groves High School program
 - Groves High School at Polytech September 23, 2008

Additionally, non-returning high school dropouts were interviewed individually by Jobs for Delaware Graduates staff.

Setting

The forums were held in school settings familiar to the students. The high school forums were half-day events that allowed for more student-to-student interaction and feedback. The credit-recovery and adult education forums were more limited in timeframe thereby providing less opportunity for student-to-student interaction. All sessions began with an introduction and discussion of purpose, goals and process in a whole-group setting. Students were then divided randomly into groups of 8-10 to facilitate open dialogue. Each group was staffed by one facilitator and one recorder. Students were given copies of the questions. The two high school groups were given the opportunity to report out in a whole-group setting. They were told in advance that at the end of the conversation they were to record important ideas on the chart paper provided to facilitate reporting out to the larger group.

Ten high school dropouts who have not yet returned to school were interviewed one-on-one by Jobs for Delaware Graduates Retention Specialists. Specialists spoke with students either at locations in the community or by telephone and recorded their responses.

Group Facilitator and Recorder Training

Prior to the student forums, a meeting was held for forum facilitators and recorders. The questions were reviewed and an explanation of the agenda and logistics were shared. It was emphasized that the intent of the forums was to gather feedback from the various student groups through group-directed frank and honest conversation guided by the questions that were developed for this purpose. Facilitators were explicitly instructed not to lead the discussion or to interject their thoughts or opinions. Their main role was to ensure that the conversations remained focused on the topic/questions and to ask open ended questions to stimulate thought and conversation as warranted. Recorders were asked to capture comments within the groups as accurately as possible. In all but one group, the recorder had a laptop to facilitate recording.

Process

Four sets of questions were developed for the purpose of obtaining the student perspective on the high school dropout issue. The questions were designed to provide a Delaware student perspective regarding the interventions described in the IES Practice Guide and the Search Institute’s 40 Developmental Assets.

The questions for the high school students were developed by a subcommittee of the planning committee. The questions were:

1. Think of a time when you felt motivated to learn. Describe that experience and what about it that motivated you.

2. Has there been an adult in your life who has positively supported your education?
 - a. If so, how did this person support your education? What did they do?
 - b. Who were they (teacher, parent, coach, etc.)?
 - c. If not, what support would you have wanted from an adult? How could they have shown you this support?
3. When you think back on all the years you've spent in school, at what grade do you think students need help so that they want to continue to learn, stay in school and graduate?
4. In your opinion, why do students drop out of school?
5. How can school help students stay in school and graduate?
6. How can your community help students with their education?
7. What other ideas do you have for preventing students from dropping out?

Answer questions 8 & 9 using a scale from 1 to 4 with 4 being HIGH and 1 being LOW:

8. What impact do parents have on kids staying in school?
 - a. What can parents do to support their child in staying in school and graduating?
9. What impact do you think friends have on a kid staying in school?
 - a. What can kids do to support their friends staying in school and graduating?

The questions for the students in the credit-recovery program and the James H. Groves Adult Education Program were developed by the DOE director of adult education and the Governor's education policy advisor. The questions were as follows:

Credit Recovery Forum Questions:

1. Think of a time when you felt motivated to learn. Describe that experience and what about it motivated you.
2. Has there been an adult in your life who has positively supported your education? Who was he/she? How did this person support your education? What did they do?
3. What kind of support can adult offer that would help a kid stay connected to school?
4. Why did you decide to enroll in the In School Credit Program?
5. In your opinion, why do students drop out of school?
6. When should schools start talking to kids about graduating and helping them to stay connected to school?
7. What can your school do better to keep kids connected to learning so that they graduate?
8. What could your community do better to support kids completing high school?

9. What can you and or other students do to help all kids finish high school with a diploma?
10. What effect can parents have on a student's decision to stay in school?
11. What effect can friends have on a student's decision to stay in school?

James H. Groves Adult Education Program Questions:

1. Why did you decide to come back to Groves and finish your studies towards graduation?
2. Are there people in your life who positively supported your education? If so, who are they? How do they support you?
3. Why did you drop out of school?
4. What could your school have done to keep you in school until you graduated?
5. What could your community have done better to help you stay in school until graduation?
6. Based on your experiences, what could you have done differently that would have helped you to stay in school and graduate?
7. When should schools start working with students encouraging them to stay connected and finish school?
8. What effect did your parents have on your decision to leave school?
9. What effect did your friends have on your decision to leave school?

The questions for the students who have dropped out of high school and have not returned were developed by the president of Jobs for Delaware Graduates. The questions were as follows:

1. Tell about a time when you were motivated to learn. Describe that experience and tell me what excited you.
2. Did you have an adult in your life that encouraged you to do well in school? If yes, who were they (teacher, parent, coach, etc.)? How did this person support your education?
3. Why do you think students drop out of school?
4. What could your school have done better to prevent you or other students from dropping out?
5. How could community organizations (churches, boys/girls clubs, YM/YWCA, etc.) support your educational goals?
6. What age or grade is the most important time for time for teachers, communities or parents to start working on making sure that a student has the tools to succeed?
7. What effect can parents have on a student's decision to stay in school?
8. What effect can friends have on a student's decision to stay in school?

Filming

Hearts and Minds Video, a division of Teleducation, Inc., attended every student forum and filmed the process. Sharon Baker, President, attended the forums with a two-man film crew. In addition, several students were interviewed following the group conversations for additional footage. Students were required to sign releases for the use of their images and voices. Parent signatures were required for students under the age of 18 years. The resulting product was a short DVD about the youth perspective of dropping out in Delaware that was unveiled at the summit and will be available on the DOE website to be used in future dropout prevention efforts.

Findings

The IES Practice Guide on Dropout Prevention identified five interventions.

Intervention One: Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out.

The majority of the student comments support this intervention. Adults were often cited as being a contributing factor in student decisions to dropout or remain in school. In some cases the adults were a positive influence, while in other cases, they had no effect or a negative effect on a student's decision to dropout.

Of the 88 students, an overwhelming number clearly expressed the need for adult support. Students identified a variety of adult advocates from parents and grandparents to other family members, mentors or educators. Almost every student identified at least one adult who had either supported or failed to support his or her education. Many described the "24/7" prodding of parents and grandparents or others as their source inspiration and motivation. Many cited relationships with adults who themselves were dropouts and whose lives serve as reminders of the need to stay in school. Several talked about supportive and caring teachers who helped the student to consider the long-term consequences of the decision thereby helping students make carefully thought out choices that often led to students remaining in school. As one student stated, "All it took was Mr. X to sit down with me and talk to me about my options. He showed me that he cared and wanted to help."

While there were many examples of adults as positive influences, many students also discussed teachers who had not taken an interest in them, guidance counselors who said, "You might as well drop out," and disengaged family members.

Intervention One was supported by the following student comments:

"I never had a teacher until this year who wanted me to succeed."

"If your parents don't support you in school and aren't interested, why would you want to do well in school?"

"Teachers are kind of like parents. They need to build us up."

"My dad and my teacher...they don't push me down. They motivate me and help push me toward my goals."

“My shop teacher harped on me. I now realize she didn’t want me to fail myself.”

“Every kid gets excited about their activities, but parents don’t show up, don’t make the effort to find out what’s really going on.”

“Teachers don’t care. They’re getting paid if I pass or fail. Instead of wasting time with a teacher who doesn’t care, kids would rather get a job or turn to friends, even if they’re not the best.”

“I was one of twelve foster kids. I needed someone to take an interest in just me.”

“Adults in the schools needed to listen to me.”

“I wish I had had an adult who showed me that they had faith in me and encouraged me to do well, showed me that they cared. They could have pushed me to stay in school.”

“Some principals encourage you to dropout. They give clues, “If you want to finish your education somewhere else...”

“Be more helpful. I was a year behind and called to see what I could do to stay in my grade and no one called me back. I was supposed to meet with a counselor and they never showed up. The school could have helped me and the counselor could have shown up.”

Intervention Two: Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance

The majority of the student comments support this intervention. A large number of students in all groups felt that daily academic support was critical in helping them to avoid falling behind and developing a sense of hopelessness that often leads to dropping out. Several students identified the need for academic support at transition points, help when they fall behind, smaller class size and an increase in the quantity and quality of counseling services.

Intervention Two was supported by the following student comments:

“In 8th grade they just pass you along even if you don’t know the material. I thought it would be the same in high school. I thought I could get it back at the end of the year.”

“Ninth grade is bigger, harder academically. You feel lost and just want to leave.”

“The transition from middle to high school was hard. Ninth grade was a terrible year...too much change.”

“Guidance counselors are too busy to help. We have to make an appointment. They don’t have enough time for all the kids they have to counsel.”

“My guidance counselor actually advised me to dropout of school.”

“Guidance counselors could help but don’t have enough time for all the kids they have to counsel.”

“I was not doing well in classes and felt like I couldn’t even catch up.”

“There were too many students in the classes. Smaller classes and more one on one would have helped.”

“They should have gotten on me harder...but without disrespecting me...and given me another chance.”

“I think students dropout because there are too many students in the classes. Your voice is not heard. You don’t feel important or noticed as an individual, so you don’t feel the desire to attend.”

“Start in middle school when kids start going through changes. When you’re young you don’t care, but 6th, 7th maybe even 5th grade, that’s when students start figuring out who they are. Smaller classes, but not 5 kids. Thirty in a class is ridiculous. The teacher spends half the year learning your name.”

“There should be connections between teachers so expectations, standards and processes are all the same.”

“Peer tutoring and mentoring can help students succeed.”

Intervention Three: Implement programs to improve students’ classroom behavior and social skills.

This intervention dealt with behavior as a distraction to learning, the effect of disciplinary actions and its consequences and the effect of negatives social interactions such as bullying, on students decisions to drop out of school.

Students expressed the need to be treated with respect, but did not feel they were quite ready to assume the responsibilities of mature adults. They recognized that they were in a sort of “in-between” stage where while some level of independence and responsibility were important, they still felt the need for an adult presence and the structure and direction they can provide. They often talked about respect and acknowledged that it was a “two-way street.” Student comments indicated that both teachers and students should take ownership of this issue.

The effect of disciplinary actions on students’ decisions to dropout of school was a concern voiced by many. Suspensions and detentions can often push students to drop out. Students believed that schools use suspension to punish the symptoms of student problems, but do not address the reasons for the behavior.

The effect of bullying and other negative social interaction on students’ decisions to dropout of school to escape uncomfortable and embarrassing situations was voiced more by students currently in school, and was not seen as a concern amongst those students who dropped out and have not yet returned to school.

Intervention Three was supported by the following student comments:

"It's not just teachers. Sometimes it's us. Give respect to get respect."

"How are teachers going to take time out of their schedules to help us if we disrespect them, cuss them out, show up late?"

"Don't treat us like children. Don't talk down to us."

"We screwed around too much. They should have gotten on us harder. We just wanted to have fun."

"Take an interest in me and the problems I'm dealing with."

"Kids drop out because they get in trouble and can't see their way out."

"Schools are more focused on discipline than helping kids."

"Bullying, gossip, rumors make people want to dropout. Who wants to come to school when people are hateful or bully for no apparent reason? People get threatened; feel suicidal, depressed, and lonely."

"Other kids in the school...kids get on you. Rumors, drama, make you not want to go to school."

"I left because of bullying, teasing, rumors, and sexual harassment from boys. Too much drama!"

Intervention Four: Personalize the learning environment and instructional process.

Students identified personalize the learning and instruction as a very important factor in student success and crucial in keeping them in school. Student participants across all groups overwhelmingly expressed the need for personalization, to be seen, heard and understood.

Intervention Four was supported by the following student comments:

"Teach students as individuals. Learn who we are. Know our names."

"I'm not good at math. Every time I ask my math teacher how do I do this, he just keeps telling me to read it over. I don't want the answer; I just want to better myself."

"Emphasis on testing works against some kids. It doesn't make allowances for individual strengths and can make kids want to dropout of school. They don't see the purpose of daily work and homework."

"Learning needs to be more flexible. If a student can progress faster, develop a way to let it happen while still letting the student who needs more time to get more intensive help."

“Learning needs to be more flexible. If a student can progress faster, develop a way to let it happen while still letting the student who needs more time to get more intensive help.”

“Vary instructional strategies to keep us interested.”

“The school mentality was that either you do the work or you don’t, you succeed or you fail. If you drop out then do it, we don’t care. They could have at least acted as though it mattered. Learn your name; tell you when you’ve done a good job.”

“The school needed to act like they were more interested and motivate us. Teachers should sit down and help, show you how something is wrong.”

“Listen to me. They’re not really that interested in us.”

“The community should open up after school centers with people actually dedicated to helping...trustworthy people.”

“At my church we have a place where kids can come after school to help with homework or to study for tests. We have “report card Sunday” and kids with good grades get to go on trips.”

Intervention Five: Provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning, to provide the skills needed to graduate and serve them after they leave school.

The forum participants supported this intervention, specifically the need for relevance in their education, including a desire for hands-on, experiential learning and a desire to be challenged while at the same time supported by the education community.

Intervention Five was supported by the following student comments:

“Two years ago I’d never been to a college, but I went to a job fair at U.D., and it made me want to go to college that day. Schools need to get you out to the real world.”

“Challenge me. Don’t make me study what I know, make me learn what I don’t know.”

“Challenge me but support me. Make it safe to fail.”

“Teachers are supposed to maximize our potential. Even if you don’t have a 3.0 like someone else, you still want to learn.”

“Explain the relevance of what’s being taught. Why do we need to know something we will never use?”

“I’m not a book learner but prefer hands on learning.”

“More use of technology in instruction. Teachers should have a Myspace page.”

“Students need more help choosing careers. They also need more hands-on, vocational courses because those are the types of jobs that are available in Sussex County.”

“I didn’t see the relevance in school. Kids think they know it all.”

“To prevent me from dropping out they could have made learning more interesting. I am more of a hands-on person.”

Rating of IES Interventions compared to DE Student Comments:

IES Practice Guide on Dropout Prevention Recommendation	IES Rating	Delaware Students
1. Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out.	Moderate	High
2. Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance.	Moderate	Moderate
3. Implement programs to improve students’ classroom behavior and social skills.	Low	Low
4. Personalize the learning environment and instructional process.	Moderate	High
5. Provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and provide the skills needed to graduate and to serve them after they leave school.	Moderate	Moderate

40 Developmental Assets

The Search Institute’s research indicates that Developmental Assets powerfully influence adolescent behavior—both by protecting young people from risky, problem behaviors and by promoting positive attitudes and choices. The Institute believes that these Assets have tremendous power to protect youth from many different harmful or unhealthy choices. (From the Search Institute® website: <http://www.search-institute.org/research/assets/assetpower> & <http://www.search-institute.org/assets/forty.htm>, accessed on 12/11/2008).

Delaware student feedback indicates that the External Asset of “Boundaries and Expectations” and the Internal Asset of “Social Competencies” are the two most relevant in the dropout prevention conversation.

The External Asset: *Boundaries and Expectations* includes setting clear and firm boundaries in families, schools and neighborhoods; the use of positive adult role models; positive peer influences and high expectations for students from both parents and teachers. Boundaries and expectations need to be clear and fairly imposed, according to the students. Students said that they want direction and guidance although at times they may telegraph just the opposite. This proved especially true in cases of teen pregnancy, drug abuse, and incarceration where firmly

established boundaries may have prevented poor choices that had negative effects including impacting a student's decision to stay in school.

This Asset was supported by the following student comments:

"The 'fight' mentality is big in some groups, and you have to be part of it or be an outsider. Getting in trouble is part of life for some groups, some neighborhoods. You can't go against the neighborhood."

"Some parents bring up their kids from a young age more strictly and with more attention to school work and academic success. Later in years, if kids don't have that, they aren't going to make it through high school."

"Some kids' parents don't care what they do, but not everybody is ready for that freedom."

"Adults need to give us role models we can look up to."

"My teacher wants to talk to you when you mess up, and you listen. You don't want to mess up in front of him."

"My grandmother is the most supportive person in the world. She isn't afraid to tell me when I'm doing wrong."

"There should be a club or support team for potential dropouts. They could talk to their coach and get help...like a school mentor."

"I got locked up. That's no joke. I don't want to go through that ever again. I am not that tough. I thought I didn't need anyone's support, but I really did."

"Parents think girls who are pregnant are 'trying to be grown' and throw them out. But we aren't as mature as we think. Instead of dropping us...hold us."

"Make it harder for kids to drop out. They don't require an explanation. Require a sit down interview."

"I missed 42 days of school last year and none said anything. I didn't get ISS, a phone call, nothing. No one said anything to me. No repercussions."

The Internal Asset: *Social Competencies* includes planning and decision making, interpersonal competence, cultural competence, resistance skills, and peaceful conflict resolution. Resistance skills and decision making emerged as key factors that impact students' choosing to remain in school. Peer pressure was also frequently identified as a contributing factor; however, some students spoke of the positive influence of friends in regard to remaining in school.

This Asset was supported by the following student comments:

“Your friends do influence who you are, right or wrong.”

“You do what your friends do to fit in.”

“Friends dictate what you’re doing, how you live your life...basketball, standing on the corner, getting straight A’s.”

“Most kids are torn between parents and friends. Friends often win.”

“The crowd I hung out with was a definite reason that I dropped out. Now I have better friends.”

“If my friends had supported my staying in school, things would have been different. Instead, they encouraged me to drop out with them.”

“Friends are your peers. You tend to follow the path of your friends, so if they stay in school, you will be more likely to stay.”

“Kids drop out if they don’t have friends or get along with the students in their classes.”

“Friends are our own community. I look at my friends and say I can’t be that way.”

“My brother is smart but in jail. It confuses me.”

“Not a lot of kids can handle the stress we have to go through. It’s not that easy.”

Conclusion

Based on student responses to the questions asked and their participation in Delaware’s America’s Promise Dropout Prevention Summit, it is clear that dropout prevention is an important and relevant topic to today’s young people. They are concerned for their futures and for the wellbeing of their peers, siblings and future children. Many of them are parents and expressed a desire not only to be role models for their children but also to take the necessary steps to ensure their children’s future success.

The students expressed a need for equal opportunity to succeed. They want fairness, respect, and challenge in flexible and relevant learning environment. They want support from a caring, responsible adult, and assurances that the education community and others will support them and help them to succeed. In the words of one student, “No blame game...the school, the community, parents and the students themselves need to share the responsibility for helping all students.”

Key messages from Delaware students:

- See me and treat me as a whole individual. Try to understand what makes me tick.
- Provide me with support from both school and family.
- Challenge and encourage me. Help prepare me for a successful future.
- Give me a chance. (...maybe two.)
- Hold me accountable and be accountable.
- Make my environment safe.
- Give me boundaries. Set limits. Expect more of me.
- If I stumble, help me pick myself up.
- Don't give up on me. Do your best to keep me on the right track.

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