

High School Students Need 'Webs' of Supportive Adults, Study Says

By Catherine Gewertz on September 16, 2015 7:18 AM | [1 Comment](#)

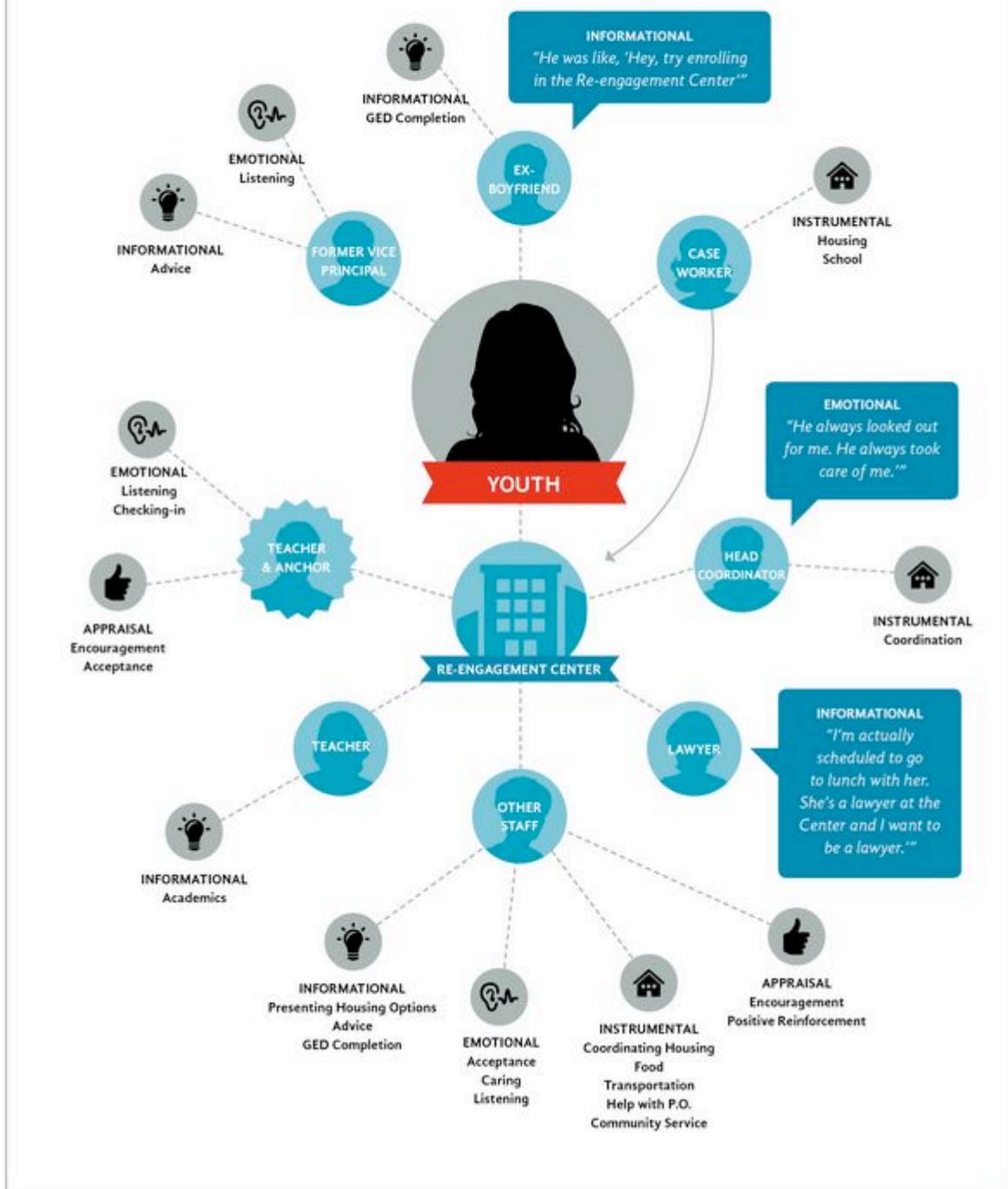
We've long known that adolescents need supportive relationships to help them stay in school through tough times. A new study, published Wednesday, argues that having an "anchor" and a "web" of support—rather than one person to act as a "hero"—can boost adolescents' chances of staying in school.

Like other researchers who have probed the dynamics that prompt students to leave school, [America's Promise Alliance](#) has consistently seen that the presence of caring adults is pivotal. Following up its 2014 report, ["Don't Call Them Dropouts,"](#) the organization decided to focus on finding out more about what students need from those relationships. The result is ["Don't Quit on Me,"](#) released today.

The bottom line? Relationships matter. But the type, source, and intensity matter, too, if they're going to serve as effective buffers against leaving school.

"They told us they need respect, not judgment. They need resources—bus passes, a ride to school, a meal, a job, a chance. They need people to show care through actions, not advice. They need an anchor, not a hero. And they need a web of support, a healthy, supportive community of their own," America's Promise Alliance President and CEO John Gomperts writes in the introduction to the report. The survey is not nationally representative. It's based on an online survey of 2,800 teenagers, about 40 percent of whom had disconnected from school at some point. It also draws on interviews with 120 young people in eight cities. The adolescents who inform the report are a mix of those who had left school and those who hadn't. Some of those who left were re-engaging; others weren't. Among the most powerful predictors of staying in school were the emotional support of parents and of adults in their schools, "instrumental" support from adults in and out of school—tangible help, such as providing babysitting so a student can come to school, or introducing the student to a potential employer—and "informational" support from friends, such as how to apply to college or where to find a job.

Figure 4. Rosita's Web of Support



The report describes an "anchor and web" model of support that distributes a student's needs across friends, parents, adults in school, and adults in the community. A teacher might serve as an anchor for a troubled young student, but a half-dozen or more others in her life also play critical roles in weaving a web of support. "It's not fair to mentors or to parents to put it all on their shoulders," Jonathan Zaff, who oversaw the research for the new report, said during a meeting about it at *Education Week*. "When you put it all on one person, you break that person's back, and the student won't succeed."

The study includes some disheartening data that reflects what we already know about the staggering odds some students face. Their chances of leaving school correlate with the number of "adverse life experiences" they're experiencing, such as major mental health issues, becoming parents, becoming homeless, or feeling unprepared for school. For instance, more than half of the teenagers who left school had experienced five or more such things, compared with only 2 in 10 of those who stayed enrolled.

"It's more the straw that broke the camel's back than one incident that made [students] go off the rails," Gomperts said in discussing the report with *EdWeek* staffers.