

# Addressing Structural Barriers in the Eighth-Grade Transition to High School: Improving Graduation Outcomes

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## Abstract

High school graduation remains a critical benchmark of educational and social success, yet many students, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds struggle to complete high school on time. National and state-level data consistently show that factors such as chronic absenteeism, limited parental engagement, and community-level challenges contribute to persistent graduation gaps. Earning a high school diploma empowers youth to thrive in their communities and the workforce. This quantitative study explored which factors (attendance, transportation, parental involvement, community support, and low socioeconomic

status) predict whether eighth-grade students graduate within four years. Using binomial logistic regression, the study revealed that attendance, parental involvement, and socioeconomic status significantly impact graduation likelihood, while gender and transportation do not. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions that boost attendance and family engagement, especially in low-SES communities. The insights gained can shape effective policies to reduce dropout rates and support student success in both urban and rural settings.

**Keywords:** Graduation rates, student attendance, parental involvement, dropout prevention

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## 1. Introduction

The education system aims to actively engage students, support intellectual growth through effective teaching, and equip learners with skills for lifelong success. Obtaining a high school diploma expands opportunities for postsecondary education and economic stability, while dropping out correlates with increased unemployment and risk behaviors (Zaff et al., 2016). The journey toward graduation begins well before high school, shaped by factors such as attendance, motivation, risk behaviors, and the cultural influence of family and community (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Hammond et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011).

Students who do not graduate from high school face a wide range of challenges unique to their circumstances. Research shows that non-graduates experience significantly poorer life outcomes, including lower employment and income levels, higher rates of criminal activity, poorer health, and reduced civic participation such as voting (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). High school dropouts are 63% more likely to be incarcerated and twice as likely to live in poverty or face unemployment, even during strong economic periods (Alabama JAG, 2023). Each dropout costs the U.S. an estimated \$292,000 over a lifetime due to lost tax revenue and increased reliance on public assistance (Alabama JAG, 2023). These figures highlight the far-reaching social and economic impact of failing to complete high school.

Studies reveal that poor attendance, feelings of alienation, socioeconomic challenges, and limited parental support significantly increase dropout risk (Garcia & Weiss, 2018; Harms & Garrett-Ruffin, 2023;). Many obstacles remain unaddressed by educators and policymakers. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this study examines the dynamic interactions between students and their environments across five interconnected systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Guy-Evans, 2020; Soyer, 2019). Guided by a postpositivist perspective, which views causes as probable determinants of outcomes (Creswell, 2018), the research explores key factors influencing student development. Effective support for high school students depends on understanding their social context—academic performance, socioeconomic status, and parental involvement shape their experiences, while attendance, promotion, graduation, and post-graduation plans reflect their progress (Gayl, 2018). This holistic framework informs targeted interventions that address students' needs within their ecological systems.

## 2. Research Questions

RQ 1: Which combination of variables- attendance, transportation, parent and community involvement, and low socioeconomic status -predicts eighth-grade students' graduation from high school in four years?

SQ1: What is the association between low socioeconomic status and high school students' attendance?

SQ2: What is the association between low socioeconomic status and high school students' transportation?

SQ3: What is the association between low socioeconomic status and parent involvement of high school students?

## 3. Literature Review

Research on high school graduation emphasizes the critical role of factors such as attendance, transportation, parent and community involvement, and socioeconomic status. Freshman-year challenges, including adapting to a more demanding academic environment, limited resource access, insufficient support systems, and increased personal responsibilities, often hinder student success during this pivotal transition (Flannery et al., 2020). This quantitative study aims to identify which combination of these variables best predicts eighth-grade students' likelihood of graduating from high school within four years, providing insight into early indicators of academic achievement and potential intervention points.

### **3.1 Attendance and Its Impact on Academic Success**

School attendance is a complex issue, with chronic absenteeism and truancy defined in distinct ways. Consistent attendance is strongly linked to higher graduation rates and academic proficiency, particularly in critical subjects like math and reading (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Every missed day, whether excused, unexcused, or due to suspension, can negatively affect a student's progress (Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). Chronic absenteeism begins to affect students early, undermining foundational skills crucial for future success (Kearney et al., 2022).

#### **3.1.1. Attendance's Link to Achievement and Graduation**

Chronic absenteeism significantly lowers graduation rates and academic achievement, a problem intensified since the pandemic with absenteeism rates doubling in some areas (National Inventors Hall of Fame, 2024). Absenteeism disproportionately affects males, minority students, low-income families, and children of less-educated parents (Baker et al., 2001). Regular attendance improves academic performance, standardized test scores, and on-time graduation (Garcia & Weiss, 2018). Family involvement and supportive policies are essential in fostering attendance and long-term student success (Groff, 2023; Sosu et al., 2021).

#### **3.1.2. Transportation's Role in School Attendance**

The school bus is a cornerstone of American education, providing reliable transportation for roughly 50% of public school students (about 25 million children) across 480,000 buses nationwide (American School Bus Council, 2023). Reliable transportation is critical; when students face challenges getting to school, it leads to missed instructional time, lower engagement, and poorer academic outcomes (Collegenp, 2023; U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Transportation, 2024;). Beyond academics, transportation difficulties can increase student stress and negatively impact mental health, while dependable school bus services ease family logistics, promoting consistent attendance and safety (Pennsylvania School Boards Association, 2024). Funding for student transportation remains a significant and complex challenge nationwide (Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2022). The high cost of transportation places a substantial burden on families and schools alike; nationally, transportation expenses represent a major portion of household budgets, second only to housing, accounting for approximately 15% of average family spending (Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2022).

#### **3.1.3. Safety and Special Considerations**

In rural areas, limited transportation options often hinder students' access to education, forcing families to navigate unsafe or impractical travel methods (Collegenp, 2023). Walking or biking to school can expose students to road hazards, heightening anxiety for families. District policies addressing safe bus stop placement, such as doorstep pickups for young children, avoiding hazardous zones, and limiting stops near railroad crossings, help balance accessibility and safety (National Center for Safe Routes to School, 2010). Additionally, specialized transportation services are essential for students with disabilities, whose unique needs require tailored support to ensure equitable access to education (O'Neil & Hoffman, 2018).

### **3.2 Parent and Community Involvement**

Parental engagement is a critical driver of student success, strongly linked to higher academic achievement, motivation, and graduation rates (Minshew, 2023; Gray, 2023). Effective involvement spans school participation, supportive home environments, and academic socialization where parents set clear expectations, emphasize education's importance, and help plan for future goals (Cross et al., 2019). Yet, parental involvement remains a complex and often inconsistently defined concept within education.

#### **3.2.1. Engagement at Home and School**

The U.S. Department of Education set ambitious goals to boost parental involvement and support children's social, emotional, and academic growth (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1994). Parental support reduces student anxiety by fostering emotional resilience and reinforcing strengths over weaknesses (Beato & Rosa, 2024; National Institutes of Health, 2019). Conversely, declining family engagement as children advance grades correlates with drops in academic performance and increased dropout risk, particularly among students from less-educated or less-involved families (McFarland et al., 2020; Sempeles et al., 2024). Schools that cultivate inclusive, welcoming environments encourage greater parental participation, which boosts student attendance, motivation, and achievement (Goodall & Montgomery, 2013; Park & Holloway, 2018). Strong community partnerships further create a supportive atmosphere that nurtures students' personal and academic growth.

### 3.2.3. Academic Socialization and Student Outcomes

Parental academic socialization, such as setting high expectations and emphasizing education's value, helps students build motivation, improve attendance, and lower dropout rates (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2023). This engagement fosters life skills, career readiness, and a positive school climate, generating a ripple effect of success that extends into the community. Consistent encouragement from parents and communities strengthens students' preparedness and pride in their achievements (Garbacz, 2018).

### 3.3. Equity vs. Equality in Graduation Rates

Graduation rates vary widely based on students' geographic location, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, reflecting persistent educational disparities. Students in rural areas often face unique challenges compared to urban and suburban peers, including limited access to quality education, resources, and support services, which negatively affect their graduation rates (Thier et al., 2021). Additionally, boys tend to face greater academic and disciplinary challenges, impacting their school experience and success; they are more likely than girls to struggle with meeting academic standards (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

Graduation rates show significant disparities among racial and ethnic groups. National data from 2018–19 reveal that 80% of Black and 82% of Hispanic students graduate on time, below the 86% national average, compared to 89% of White and 93% of Asian students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Economic factors strongly influence graduation rates, and attendance, transportation, and parental involvement are tied to students' economic backgrounds (Swiderski et al., 2025). High school dropouts earn roughly \$10,386 less annually than graduates, and individuals with a bachelor's degree earn about \$36,424 more than those without a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Limited resources hinder educational success and reduce opportunities for higher education (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2025).

School districts nationwide are under increasing pressure to improve academic outcomes and close achievement gaps, especially in under-resourced areas lacking strong curricula (Mizrav & Lachlan, 2020). To stay competitive globally, schools must focus on building academic skills, resilience, and real-world readiness. Expanding access to mentors, community partnerships, and career networks can help students explore future pathways, stay engaged, and make informed decisions about life after graduation.

## 4. Methodology

This study used a predictive research design to examine how factors associated with low socioeconomic status (SES) including transportation, parental involvement, and attendance affected students' likelihood of graduating from high school. Predictive studies focus on identifying patterns and relationships that precede a known outcome (Gall et al., 2015). The study population included all students from two feeder middle schools. A sample of 620 students was analyzed to explore the impact of SES-related factors on graduation outcomes. Data were collected from the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), tracking eighth-grade students from the 2019–2020 school year through their expected graduation in 2023–2024. Archival records included attendance, demographics, and transportation types. Binomial logistic regression was used to analyze how these variables predicted graduation. The dependent variable was high school graduation (0 = not graduated, 1 = graduated). Independent variables were binary-coded **transportation**: 0 = No, 1 = Yes; **parental involvement**: 0 = Low, 1 = High; **attendance**: 0 = Not chronically absent ( $\geq 90\%$ ), 1 = Chronically absent ( $< 90\%$ ); **socioeconomic Status (SES)**: 0 = Not disadvantaged, 1 = Economically disadvantaged.

## 5. Results

Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics of the study sample. The primary research question (RQ1) examined which combination of variables best predicted on-time high school graduation. Sub-questions (SQ1–SQ3) explored how low socioeconomic status (SES) related to attendance, transportation, and parental involvement. These sub-analyses broke the broader issue into focused areas for deeper insight.

Table 2 shows that attendance, SES, and parental involvement significantly predicted graduation outcomes, while gender and transportation did not. The overall model was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(5) = 32.600$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating these factors, when combined, effectively distinguished between students who graduated and those who did not. Students from higher SES backgrounds were 1.93 times more likely to graduate ( $p = .042$ ). Students with higher attendance were 1.59 times more likely to graduate ( $p = .017$ ). Strong parental involvement increased the likelihood of graduation by 3.75 times ( $p < .001$ ). Gender ( $p = .505$ ) and transportation ( $p = .103$ )

did not show significant effects. Given the model's predictive strength, the null hypothesis ( $H_{01}$ ) was rejected, confirming that SES, attendance, and parental involvement play a significant role in graduation outcomes.

Table 3 provides the result of a chi-square test for independence used to examine the relationship between low socioeconomic status (SES) and student absenteeism. Results showed no significant association between SES and attendance,  $\chi^2(1, N = 620) = 0.29, p = .592$ . Fisher's Exact Test confirmed these findings, with  $p = .632$  (2-sided) and  $p = .348$  (1-sided), indicating no statistically meaningful link. These results suggest that, contrary to the initial hypothesis ( $H_1$ ), low SES did not significantly impact attendance rates in this sample. Both statistical tests support the conclusion that SES alone does not explain student absenteeism within this group.

Table 4 provides the results of a chi-square test conducted to examine the relationship between low socioeconomic status (SES) and access to reliable transportation. The results showed no significant association,  $\chi^2(1, N = 620) = 0.03, p = .863$ . Fisher's Exact Test confirmed this, with  $p = .838$  (2-sided) and  $p = .497$  (1-sided). All chi-square assumptions were met, with a minimum expected count of 7.58. These findings support rejecting the hypothesis ( $H_2$ ) that low SES limits students' access to reliable transportation. Overall, the analysis indicates that SES did not significantly affect transportation access within this student population.

Table 5 provides the results of a chi-square test used to examine the relationship between low socioeconomic status (SES) and parental involvement in students' education. The results showed no significant association,  $\chi^2(1, N = 620) = 0.03, p = .860$ . Fisher's Exact Test supported this finding, with  $p = .845$  (2-sided) and  $p = .493$  (1-sided). Chi-square assumptions were met, with all expected cell counts above 5 (minimum = 8.55). These results lead to rejecting the hypothesis ( $H_3$ ) that low SES negatively affects parental involvement. Overall, the analysis found no significant link between SES and parental participation in this student population.

The analysis of all three sub-research questions revealed no statistically significant associations between low socioeconomic status (SES) and attendance, transportation, or parental involvement among the sampled students. Attendance (SQ1): No significant relationship was found between SES and student absenteeism, indicating that low SES did not directly impact attendance rates. Transportation (SQ2): SES did not significantly influence students' access to reliable transportation. Parental Involvement (SQ3): There was no significant association between SES and the level of parental involvement in students' education. These results suggest that within this sample, low SES alone did not explain differences in these key factors often linked to graduation outcomes. While SES, attendance, and parental involvement were significant predictors in the overall model for graduation, their relationships with one another were not statistically significant. This indicates that while each factor contributes to graduation outcomes, they may do so independently rather than being directly influenced by SES.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the impact of socioeconomic status (SES), attendance, transportation, and parental involvement on high school graduation outcomes. While SES was statistically significant in predicting graduation, it was not the strongest factor. Parental involvement emerged as the most influential variable, with students whose parents were actively engaged being 3.75 times more likely to graduate. Attendance also played a critical role—students with regular attendance were 1.59 times more likely to graduate. In contrast, neither gender nor transportation access significantly predicted graduation outcomes in this sample.

### 6.1 Key Predictors: Parental Involvement and Attendance

The results reinforce existing research that highlights family engagement as a powerful driver of academic success (Ndwandwe, 2023). Students with high parental involvement demonstrated consistently better outcomes, aligning with studies showing that supportive home environments foster motivation, academic achievement, and school engagement (Groff, 2023; Schools That Lead, 2024). Similarly, strong attendance patterns directly influenced graduation rates, emphasizing the importance of reducing chronic absenteeism through early intervention and school-wide support strategies.

### 6.2 Role of Socioeconomic Status

Although SES was a statistically significant predictor, its effect was less pronounced than parental involvement or attendance. Students from higher SES backgrounds were 1.93 times more likely to graduate, reflecting broader systemic barriers faced by economically disadvantaged students. However, the study also found that SES alone did not significantly impact attendance, transportation access, or parental involvement suggesting that while SES matters, it operates alongside other more immediate factors influencing graduation.

### **6.3 Transportation and Gender as Non-Significant Factors**

Despite prior research suggesting transportation challenges can hinder academic performance (Cantilina et al., 2021; Edwards, 2024), this study found no significant association between transportation access and graduation. It's possible that transportation influences outcomes indirectly by affecting attendance, but this relationship was not clearly supported in the data. Gender was also not a significant predictor, suggesting that interventions to improve graduation rates may be more effective when focused on engagement and support strategies rather than demographic factors.

### **6.4 Limitations of the Study**

While the findings offer valuable insight, several limitations should be considered. The sample was drawn from two middle schools feeding into a single high school, limiting generalizability to broader populations or different geographic regions. Rural schools often face unique resource constraints that may not reflect conditions elsewhere. Cultural factors, such as discrimination or cultural mismatch in schools, may also influence student engagement and performance but were not fully captured. Additionally, the study relied on school-reported and self-reported data, which may contain inaccuracies or inconsistencies. Other potential influences, such as teacher quality, school funding, extracurricular opportunities, and guidance counseling, were not examined but may significantly affect graduation outcomes.

### **6.5 Recommendations**

High school graduation is a critical milestone with lasting effects on students' futures. This study addresses key barriers to graduation, offering valuable insights for school leaders like principals and district administrators. While it briefly highlights challenges faced by eighth graders transitioning to high school, such as academic readiness and social-emotional struggles, it focuses primarily on understanding graduation obstacles to improve communication and collaboration between middle and high schools. By identifying these barriers and available support systems, administrators can foster stronger school-home partnerships. Understanding student challenges during transitions allows school leaders to develop inclusive, sustained interventions that improve graduation rates and student success over time.

#### **6.5.1. Practical Recommendations for Schools**

Schools should prioritize family engagement programs and parental support initiatives over focusing solely on financial disparities. Given the strong influence of attendance on graduation, schools must implement targeted interventions to promote consistent attendance, including mentorship, attendance incentives, and early identification of at-risk students. Expanding parental involvement through communication workshops and support systems can bridge the gap between families and schools, helping parents become active partners in their children's education.

#### **6.5.2. Policy Implications**

This research underscores the need for policymakers to address systemic barriers to attendance and engagement. Increased funding for reliable transportation, smarter attendance tracking systems, and programs encouraging parental involvement are essential. Policymakers can foster more equitable and supportive school environments by promoting these initiatives, which are critical to closing opportunity gaps and helping all students succeed academically and socially.

#### **6.5.3. Recommendations for Educational Practice**

Educational leaders should adopt proactive strategies based on these findings, such as forming Student Support Teams (SSTs) that use data to identify and assist at-risk students promptly. Expanding transportation services through partnerships with local transit authorities can reduce barriers to attendance. Schools should also embed Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs to build resilience and coping skills in students facing challenges. Establishing family resource centers and Parent Leadership Groups can provide vital counseling and resources, empowering parents to support their children effectively and preventing academic struggles before they begin.

This study powerfully highlights the critical factors influencing high school graduation and provides actionable insights for school leaders and policymakers. By identifying key barriers such as attendance and parental involvement, it offers a clear roadmap for strengthening school-home partnerships and improving student support systems. The findings emphasize the importance of proactive, data-driven interventions, including mentorship programs and enhanced transportation access, to address attendance challenges. Additionally, the study calls for policy changes that promote equity through increased funding and smarter resource allocation.



Overall, this research equips educators and decision-makers with the knowledge needed to develop sustainable strategies that boost graduation rates and ensure long-term student success.

Future research should further explore how school and community-based interventions interact to sustain long-term improvements in attendance and engagement. Longitudinal studies examining the cumulative impact of early warning systems and family outreach initiatives could deepen understanding of what works across diverse contexts. In addition, comparative research across rural and urban districts may reveal nuanced differences in how socioeconomic and cultural factors shape graduation outcomes.

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**Table 1.**

*Descriptive Statistics of Student Characteristics*

Category	Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>Chronic Absenteeism</b>	Not Chronically Absent	190	30.6
	Chronically Absent	430	69.4
<b>Economic Status</b>	Economically Disadvantaged	570	91.9
	Not Economically Disadvantaged	50	8.1
<b>Transportation Use</b>	Uses School Transportation	526	84.8
	Does Not Use Transportation	94	15.2
<b>Parent Involvement</b>	Actively Involved	513	82.7
	No Involvement	107	17.3
<b>Graduation Status</b>	Did Not Graduate	174	28.1
	Graduated	446	71.9

*Note.* Percentages are based on a total sample size of N = 620 students.

**Table 2.**

*Binomial Logistic Regression Predicting High School Graduation*

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for Exp(B) (Lower - Upper)
<b>Gender</b>	0.129	0.193	0.445	1	0.505	1.137	0.779 – 1.660
<b>Socioeconomic Status (SES)</b>	0.656	0.322	4.150	1	0.042	1.927	1.025 – 3.621
<b>Attendance</b>	0.467	0.196	5.675	1	0.017	1.594	1.086 – 2.340
<b>Parent Involvement</b>	1.322	0.320	17.019	1	<.001	3.752	2.002 – 7.031
<b>Transportation</b>	-0.449	0.276	2.659	1	0.103	0.638	0.372 – 1.095

*Note.* N = 620. Logistic regression model predicting high school graduation using SES, attendance, parent involvement, transportation, and gender.

**Table 3.**

*Chi-Square Test for Association between SES and Attendance*

Test	$\chi^2$ Value	df	p (2-sided)	p (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	0.29	1	.592	—
Continuity Correction	0.14	1	.706	—
Likelihood Ratio	0.28	1	.595	—
Fisher's Exact Test	—	—	.632	.348
Linear-by-Linear Association	0.29	1	.592	—
<b>N of Valid Cases</b>	—	—	620	—

**Table 4.**

*Chi-Square Test for Association between SES and Transportation*

Test	$\chi^2$ Value	df	p (2-sided)	p (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	0.03	1	.863	—
Continuity Correction	0.00	1	1.000	—
Likelihood Ratio	0.03	1	.864	—
Fisher's Exact Test	—	—	.838	.497
Linear-by-Linear Association	0.03	1	.863	—
<b>N of Valid Cases</b>	—	—	620	—

**Table 5.**

*Chi-Square Test for Association between SES and Parental Involvement*

Test	$\chi^2$ Value	df	p (2-sided)	p (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	0.03	1	.860	—
Continuity Correction	0.00	1	1.000	—
Likelihood Ratio	0.03	1	.860	—
Fisher's Exact Test	—	—	.845	.493
Linear-by-Linear Association	0.03	1	.860	—
N of Valid Cases	—	—	620	—