

Why We Drop Out: Understanding and Disrupting Pathways to Leaving School

Trisha's Story

Trisha's positive demeanor, toothy smile, and cascade of dark curly hair suggest confidence and maturity beyond her years. Growing up African American in a small and almost entirely white community wasn't easy for her; she was often bullied and excluded. Trisha attributed her school problems to racial tension which, along with her parents separating when she was in middle school, led to anger issues, fights with other students, and academic decline. In addition, she struggled with learning issues, particularly in reading, that she felt set her further apart from her peers. By early high school, Trisha was in a precarious situation and at risk of academic failure.

Early School Years

I always hated school. Well, preschool wasn't so bad because we got to play most of the time. It was more once I got into elementary school – first grade and on. I liked the whole idea of learning, but I didn't like that somebody that I didn't really know was bossing me around. School was never really for me. I got held back in first grade. I had a hard time learning to read, and they – they said that they wanted to make sure that I got down all of the basic skills that every other first grader had because they didn't feel like I did, so that's why they held me back. I had a lot of help in elementary – I don't know how to explain it. It was like I needed a push sometimes. I remember when I was younger I just didn't think I was good in math. I just didn't think I could do it, you know? Like I'd be on one math question, and I'd be like, 'Okay, I have half of it figured out, but I can't think of the rest.' Then, I'd have the teacher there, but – yeah.

I liked reading, but in elementary school, it was definitely more difficult back then for me. But they put me in – I don't know what they called the classes – special education. But a lot of kids I went to school with were in those classes, too, so it wasn't like – nobody made fun of anybody for that. Those classes eventually got me on the right track, and I got a little bit ahead in reading. Then, from like fifth grade on, I was ahead in reading, and it wasn't so hard anymore.

I made lots of good friends in elementary school, but I had to leave them behind when I moved here. It was hard because we moved, and I ended up going to three or four different schools. I did go to one school where there weren't so many other African-Americans like me, so it was – I felt a lot of the time like I was discriminated against. I definitely got discriminated against on my soccer team and stuff when I was little, but that's part of the reason why we moved away from there because I was the only African-American in my grade. My parents wanted to make sure that I didn't have to feel that way--that I was the only kid like me.

Mrs. Jameson, she wasn't like any other teacher I've ever met. She like genuinely, like, actually cared. We had a classroom pet; it was a hamster. She let me take him home for summer break, and she ended up not having room in her new classroom, so she let me keep him. We eventually ended up giving him to my aunt's parents because we ran out of room, so we had to move him in with them. But – third grade was definitely – Mrs. Jameson was my favorite teacher.

In fifth grade we went on a field trip to the State Capitol. We went in all of the buildings, and I thought it was cool because our school rented like the really nice buses and took all the fifth grade classes there, so my favorite part was at the end of the year when we got to go on our big field trip.

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Middle School Challenges

Middle school was hard because you go from a really different environment from an elementary to a middle school, and the kids there are pretty mean, so getting used to that takes a while, I guess, and that distracts you from what else is going on and you need to take care of. I had one special reading class for a term, and that was it. They decided that they didn't want to keep me in those classes, even though I definitely didn't feel like I was ready to not be in those classes. I think like my schoolwork kind of suffered from that. My grades were really good in elementary school, but I'm sure if anyone looked at my grades from then on into middle school you'd see that, once they took me out of those classes, my grades went down. So it's like in elementary I was doing really well. Then, middle school on, not so good. When I got into seventh, it was – it was a challenge, but it wasn't too hard. In eighth grade, it was harder. Then, in high school, it got harder and harder.

Reading was difficult most of the time, but sometimes not. It depended on the grade level book I was reading. Yeah, but it was usually hard, especially when what they do is give everyone a copy of the book, and then somebody reads a section and somebody else reads a section, so we're all reading out loud. I struggled with that, especially without the extra help like I got in elementary school. Writing was always easy. It just came to me. Since I can remember, writing has always come to me. I paid extra attention in history because that was one of my favorites and I liked writing. That was about it. I failed classes in math. In eighth grade it was pre-algebra, but it was just because I wasn't doing my homework and turning it in because I didn't want to. I don't know why. I just didn't. I didn't really like homework in general. It wasn't like I was a rebellious kid or anything. Yeah—I never turned in my work when I was in elementary school. No one was home to help me, so when I didn't understand something or didn't have supplies around to do a project, I just didn't do the assignments. I just followed the same pattern in middle and high school, but then I failed because of it.

It seemed like the middle school had way more students, like at least two times the students than the school could even accommodate, so every classroom was packed full of kids. Honestly, I don't think the teachers really had expectations for anybody other than students that were special to them because there were so many of us that I don't think that they put expectations on each and every one of us. I just felt like they wouldn't have enough time to get to me, let alone everybody else, or even know who we were.

In middle school I was more concentrated on trying to figure out why my dad left. I feel like I was really a confused kid at that point, with my biological dad not being around, so I was more preoccupied with that kind of stuff than I was with school. Also, the bullying started. Once I got into the sixth grade in middle school, there was only one other African-American kid, so it was difficult. I could just brush it off then, but when it was a lot of kids continuing to do it, it got to me. I felt discriminated against by other kids. These girls would call me racial slurs, and they'd poke at me and poke at me. Then ended up getting physical—four girls jumped me a couple times actually—in eighth grade and then in tenth grade. They kind of just really didn't give up bullying me until I left for good.

The school didn't really do anything about the bullying other than suspending us all for a couple days. They told me that they really couldn't do anything without evidence from a teacher, and girls are sneaky. I was actually friends with those girls for a long time, and I don't know what happened. All of a sudden they just didn't like me, and after that is when they started bullying.

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My parents tried to work with the school, but the school didn't really help. So we eventually had to just move schools.

Navigating High School

When ninth grade started, I was doing well. Then, a couple terms in I started getting F's and D's. Then, after that, I just didn't even want to try because I felt like it was too much work to get all my grades up. I mean I didn't really care about school. I would never raise my hand to ask a question. Probably because I was feeling shy. And then the other thing is that, I don't know...it probably was because I didn't have any friends in class. So I was just, like, embarrassed or something like that. I just wanted to hang out with the friends that I did have and do whatever I wanted. I was – I did rebel in high school, but I don't know why I really – I just didn't like going to school. A couple times a week I'd just skip to be with friends. We'd just hang out, go around town.

The school didn't really do anything. They didn't seem like they cared that much because there's so many kids that go to one school. I don't feel like they feel a need to like care about every single student other than what they have to do.

I don't think my parents really knew what to do because I was their only child, and this was the first time that they were going through this. I think they kind of tiptoed and tried not to push me. I was never grounded or anything like that. I don't think they wanted to push me too hard to the point where I wanted to run away or something along those lines. They were disappointed, but my mom said, "You're going to have to learn on your own what you want and what you don't, I'm not going to force you to go to school, because it will hit you when it hits you." And, it definitely did.

In the tenth grade I kept getting bullied. Finally two girls picked a fight with me. They all jumped on me, and we got pulled apart. I got suspended I think longer than them – because I don't think they wanted me to come back to school when they came back because they were scared it was gonna cause another problem. I didn't go back. I tried alternative school instead.

I transferred to alternative school, but I was just – I kind of kept to myself. I wasn't really used to the new school. It was like being an outcast, really. But one teacher there was so nice. Sandra always told me, 'You're a leader. You are beautiful. You're a good person. Don't let what anybody says bring you down.' Stuff like that. I had more of a close relationship with Sandra than any of the other teachers there. It was good at first. I was getting good grades, and then, well – they're too lenient, so then, that made it easier to skip because they were right in the middle of town. Yeah. I was around a whole bunch of kids that were doing it, so at the time, you know, it seems like you should, too. It's hard finding who to hang around with and who not to, I guess. Because at the time you just kind of want to be accepted. They let you leave school for lunch, so I would just not go back after lunch. I would go and hang out with my friends and just do whatever – I don't even know.

I was 17, almost 18 – like six months until I was 18, when the court got involved. A month before I turned 18, they let me off because I was going to be 18, and they couldn't do anything. I just ended it with the alternative school after I turned 18 – just not really going anymore. What was the point? I would stay at home and sleep all day.

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Looking Back, Moving Forward

I just think I was really immature. I just shouldn't have been able to make my own decisions – because I always made bad ones. I didn't like when my parents said they were disappointed in me, and they'd play that card a lot. They tried to do whatever they could to get me to go to school, but I just wouldn't comply. They definitely weren't happy about my choices, but once I grew up a little and figured out that my GED or my high school diploma was really something that I really needed to have, they pushed me and helped me get it. I just think I struggled with a lot of personal problems throughout school. I was too distracted to study or learn. I feel like that's mostly the reason why I didn't really have an interest in school and stopped trying. If I could go back now, I would do things differently. It was just because I think with everything going on I got just kind of mixed up my priorities, I didn't have them straight. I had a lack of focus because of everything going on around school and my life at that point.

I think maybe my parents could have been more strict, but I don't know what to think about schools. Just a lot of them seem like they don't take an interest in a lot of kids that I've seen. Because there are a lot of kids that had similar problems like me, and they didn't really seem to care either about that.

Later I knew I was going get my GED, because at that point I had grown up a little bit and realized that I needed to do something. And I was dead set on getting my GED, and I did. Next I want to go to college for early childhood education and be a preschool teacher. That's my plan so far.