

Factors Behind the High Rate of Student Leavers: Basis for Retention Strategies

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Abstract

This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study examined the factors behind the high student leaver rate at Peñarrubia Integrated School and used those findings to inform retention strategies. Phase 1 consisted of a descriptive survey of 20 learner respondents (10 former students and 10 at-risk students). Phase 2 used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with learners and additional purposively selected informants, 22 teachers, 10 parents/guardians, and 1 school administrator, to explain the survey patterns. Frequency counts and percentages were used for the checklist-based survey, thematic analysis for qualitative data, and document review for contextual triangulation. The most frequently endorsed factors were financial difficulties (16 of 20, 80.0%), lack of interest in studying (16, 80.0%), need to work to support the family (13, 65.0%), and difficulty understanding lessons or poor academic performance (13, 65.0%). Across the 87 total factor mentions, family-related pressures accounted for the largest share (41.4%), followed by personal (28.7%), school-related (20.7%), and community-related factors (9.2%). Qualitative findings showed that household economic precarity, early parenthood, academic struggles, transport constraints, and limited support systems intersected in ways that increased the likelihood of school leaving in the rural Abra context. Because the sample was small and purposive, the findings are best interpreted as school-specific and exploratory. Even so, they provide a clear empirical basis for coordinated retention strategies that combine financial referral, flexible learning

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arrangements, academic remediation, counseling, and stronger school-family-community partnerships.

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1. Introduction

School leaving before completion remains a major equity concern because it interrupts learners' life chances and weakens school and community outcomes. When students exit early, schools lose instructional continuity, families lose a pathway to mobility, and communities absorb the long-term effects of lower educational attainment. In rural public schools, these costs are often exacerbated by poverty, distance, and limited access to services.

Globally, prolonged disruption during and after the COVID-19 pandemic widened educational exclusion. UNESCO reported that millions of learners remained out of school and that the most vulnerable students faced the greatest risk of learning loss and permanent disengagement. In the Philippine context, the problem is equally pressing. National reports cited by Staff (2024) and Marcelo (2023) indicate that a substantial share of learners who begin basic education do not reach the end of junior high school.

National evidence further suggests that a single cause does not drive dropout. The 2019 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey, as cited by Marcelo (2023), identified insufficient family income and lack of personal interest as key reasons for nonattendance. Philippine Business for Education (PBE) also raised concerns about progression without mastery, warning that learners may be promoted despite weak competencies and later struggle to sustain participation. These national patterns underscore the need for school-level studies that do not merely report dropout counts but also explain the conditions that produce them.

Previous research has linked school leaving to intertwined socio-economic, academic, personal, and institutional factors. Financial hardship, weak parental support, low school engagement, academic difficulty, bullying, and limited support services recur across the literature (Balzer, 2020; Luo et al., 2021; Roman et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2024). Yet much of this work comes from urban or better-resourced settings. Less is known about how these pressures converge in rural and under-resourced schools, particularly across both junior and senior high school levels and from the combined perspectives of learners, parents, teachers, and school leaders.

This gap is especially relevant at Peñarrubia Integrated School in Abra, where school records showed persistent learner attrition during the last three school years. The school reported dropout rates of 12.00% in JHS and 4.85% in SHS for SY 2021–2022, 6.78% in JHS and 4.41% in SHS for SY 2022–2023, and 3.85% in JHS and 2.38% in SHS for SY 2023–2024. Although the trend improved over time, the school

remained among the region's schools with a notable dropout rate, underscoring the need for localized evidence to inform action.

Accordingly, this study examined the factors behind the high student leaver rate at Peñarubia Integrated School, with a view to informing retention strategies. Specifically, it sought to describe the profile of learner respondents, identify the most frequently reported dropout factors, explain those quantitative patterns through qualitative accounts, and surface school-based implications for retention. Because the study relied on a small purposive sample, its findings are best read as school-specific and exploratory rather than statistically generalizable.

2. Methodology

The study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. In Phase 1, quantitative survey data were collected to describe the learner respondents and identify the factors they associated with school leaving. In Phase 2, qualitative data were gathered to explain why the most frequently endorsed quantitative factors emerged and how they were experienced within the school's rural context, consistent with the explanatory sequential logic outlined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018).

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct experience of learner attrition. The quantitative phase involved 20 learner respondents: 10 former students who had already left school and 10 current learners identified as at risk of leaving. The qualitative phase drew on these learner participants and additional school-community informants: 22 teachers, 10 parents/guardians, and 1 school administrator. Because the sample was purposive and small, the study was designed for contextual explanation rather than statistical generalization.

Phase 1 used a validated, structured questionnaire that captured learner demographics and household conditions, along with a multiple-response checklist of possible dropout factors grouped into personal, family-related, school-related, and community-related domains. Phase 2 used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to elicit lived experiences, explanatory accounts, and suggested interventions. School records on attendance, academic performance, and dropout incidence were also reviewed to contextualize the findings.

Quantitative data were summarized using frequency counts and percentages. Because the factor instrument functioned as a checklist rather than a Likert scale, frequencies and percentages were the appropriate descriptive statistics; means were not computed. Multiple responses were allowed in the factor checklist, so the percentages in the factor tables are non-additive. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically by identifying recurring patterns, illustrative statements, and points of convergence across learners, parents, teachers, and the school administrator. Findings from the survey, interviews/FGDs, and document review were triangulated.

Ethical safeguards were observed throughout the study. Informed consent was secured from all adult participants, while assent and parental/guardian consent were obtained for minors. Participant identities were anonymized in reporting; quotations

were labeled with generic respondent codes or stakeholder roles; and participants were informed of their right to decline any question or withdraw at any time without penalty.

3. Results

In keeping with the explanatory sequential design, the results are presented in two phases. Phase 1 reports the descriptive survey findings from the learner respondents. Phase 2 then uses interview and focus group data to explain why the quantitative patterns emerged.

3.1 Phase 1: Quantitative Survey Findings

Table 1 shows that the learner respondents were concentrated in the middle-to-late secondary years, with the highest frequencies at ages 15 and 17 (25.0% each). Most cases were clustered in Grade 11 (40.0%) and Grade 10 (30.0%), and male respondents comprised 70.0% of the learner sample. This pattern suggests that vulnerability was concentrated around late junior high and early senior high school, particularly among boys.

Table 1. Demographic profile of learner respondents (n = 20).

Variable	Category	f	%
Age	14	1	5.0
	15	5	25.0
	16	3	15.0
	17	5	25.0
	18	2	10.0
	19	2	10.0
	20	2	10.0
Grade level	Grade 9	4	20.0
	Grade 10	6	30.0
	Grade 11	8	40.0
	Grade 12	2	10.0
Sex	Male	14	70.0
	Female	6	30.0

Table 2 indicates that most learner respondents came from economically constrained households: 75.0% reported a monthly household income of Php 5,001–10,000, and another 20.0% reported a monthly household income of less than Php 5,000. Daily wage labor (80.0%) and farming (65.0%) were the most common livelihood sources, and none reported government assistance or social welfare as a primary source of family income. Parents’ schooling was generally low, with most fathers (75.0%) and mothers (60.0%) only reaching the elementary level. More than

half of respondents lived with both parents (55.0%), but a substantial share lived with relatives (35.0%). Taken together, the survey suggests that many respondents were already negotiating schooling within conditions of economic precarity and limited academic support at home.

Table 2. Household and socioeconomic profile of learner respondents (n = 20).

Variable	Category	f	%
Monthly household income	Below Php 5,000	4	20.0
	Php 5,001–10,000	15	75.0
	Php 10,001–20,000	0	0.0
	Above Php 20,000	1	5.0
Primary source of family income	Daily wage or labor work	16	80.0
	Farming/agriculture	13	65.0
	OFW remittances	1	5.0
	Government/private employment	0	0.0
	Government assistance/social welfare	0	0.0
Father's educational attainment	Elementary level	15	75.0
	Elementary graduate	4	20.0
	High school level	1	5.0
	Vocational	0	0.0
	College level	0	0.0
	College graduate	0	0.0
Mother's educational attainment	Elementary level	12	60.0
	Elementary graduate	4	20.0
	High school level	2	10.0
	High school graduate	2	10.0
	Vocational	0	0.0
	College level	0	0.0
	College graduate	0	0.0
Living arrangement	Both parents	11	55.0
	Single parent	2	10.0
	Relatives	7	35.0

Beyond the 20 learner survey respondents, the qualitative phase included teachers, parents/guardians, and a school administrator to contextualize the learner data. Table 3 addresses the need to situate these additional respondents by presenting their basic characteristics: stakeholder group, analytic role, and primary data source.

Table 3. Composition of qualitative informants and data sources.

Stakeholder Group	n	Analytic Role	Primary Data Source
Former student leavers	10	Learner perspective on completed school leaving	Survey and semi-structured interview
At-risk learners	10	Current vulnerability and persistence barriers	Survey and semi-structured interview
Teachers	22	School-based observation and intervention perspective	Interview and/or focus group discussion
Parents/guardians	10	Family and household perspective	Semi-structured interview
School administrator	1	Policy and school-response perspective	Key informant/focus group discussion

Table 4 provides the quantitative basis for the claims about the most prevalent reasons for school leaving. The most frequently endorsed factors were financial difficulties (16 of 20, 80.0%) and lack of interest in studying (16, 80.0%), followed by need to work to support the family (13, 65.0%) and difficulty understanding lessons or poor academic performance (13, 65.0%). Pregnancy or early parenthood, and a lack of transportation or school accessibility, were each reported by 6 respondents (30.0%). These results show that the dominant pattern was not a purely academic or household problem; rather, it was the overlap of economic strain, declining engagement, and learning difficulty.

At the category level as shown in Table 5, family-related pressures accounted for the largest share of all factor mentions (36 of 87, 41.4%), followed by personal factors (25, 28.7%), school-related factors (18, 20.7%), and community-related factors (8, 9.2%). The category pattern clarifies that household pressure sat at the center of the problem, but it was amplified by personal disengagement and school-based struggle. These descriptive results directly informed the qualitative phase.

Table 4. Frequency and percentage distribution of reported dropout factors (multiple response, n = 20 learners).

Category	Factor	f	%	Rank
Family-related	Financial difficulties	16	80.0	1
Personal	Lack of interest in studying	16	80.0	1
School-related	Difficulty understanding lessons/poor academic performance	13	65.0	3
Family-related	Need to work to support family	13	65.0	3
Community-related	Lack of transportation or accessibility to school	6	30.0	5
Personal	Pregnancy or early parenthood	6	30.0	5
Family-related	Lack of parental support or encouragement	5	25.0	7
Personal	Peer influence (friends not attending school)	3	15.0	8
School-related	Poor teacher-student relationships	3	15.0	8
School-related	Bullying or discrimination	2	10.0	10
Family-related	Family issues or conflicts	2	10.0	10
Community-related	Peer pressure to leave school	2	10.0	10
Personal	Health issues or illness	0	0.0	13
Community-related	Involvement in community activities/responsibilities	0	0.0	13
School-related	Lack of school facilities or resources	0	0.0	13
Personal	Mental health challenges	0	0.0	13
Family-related	Migration/relocation/change of address	0	0.0	13
School-related	Strict school policies or disciplinary actions	0	0.0	13
Community-related	Unsafe environment	0	0.0	13

Table 5. Category-level distribution of reported dropout factors.

Category	Total Mentions	Share of All Mentions (%)
Family-related factors	36	41.4
Personal factors	25	28.7
School-related factors	18	20.7
Community-related factors	8	9.2
Total	87	100.0

3.2 Phase 2: Qualitative themes explaining the quantitative patterns

The interviews and focus group discussions explained why these high-frequency factors clustered as they did. Four interconnected themes were especially salient.

Theme 1. Economic precarity made schooling unaffordable and normalized early work

The survey's strong emphasis on financial difficulty and the need to work was echoed across stakeholder groups. Learners described schooling as competing with day-to-day survival, while parents and teachers described poverty as the condition that made it difficult to sustain transport costs, food, projects, and daily attendance. In other words, learners did not simply leave because they lacked interest; many were pulled away by economic obligation.

"We rely on daily income, and going to school meant I couldn't help my parents earn a living." (Learner, R16)

"I had to work to support my family financially, so I didn't have time for school anymore." (Learner, R20)

*"We just couldn't afford to keep our child in school." (Parent, R2)
These accounts explain why family-related factors dominated the survey and why purely motivational explanations are insufficient for this school context.*

Theme 2. Early parenthood and changed family roles interrupted schooling trajectories

Pregnancy, early parenthood, and early family formation emerged as another pathway out of school. While only 30.0% of learner respondents checked this factor in the survey, the qualitative data showed why it carried outsized consequences: once learners became parents or assumed new household roles, schooling was pushed aside by caregiving demands, shame, or social judgment.

"I got pregnant and decided to focus on raising my child." (Learner, R4/R6/R11)

"I became a parent and needed to take responsibility for my family." (Learner, R19)

"One pregnant student tried to continue, but she was ashamed afterwards, and judgment from others made her quit." (Teacher, R8)

The qualitative accounts therefore, show that early parenthood was not simply another item in the checklist; it functioned as a major turning point that often made withdrawal from school feel permanent.

Theme 3. Academic struggle gradually turned into disengagement and a low perceived value of schooling

The learner survey showed that lack of interest and difficulty understanding lessons were among the most common reasons for leaving. The qualitative accounts suggest that these were not separate phenomena. Struggling learners often begin by finding lessons difficult, then lose confidence, and eventually stop seeing school as valuable or achievable. Parents and teachers observed the same erosion of motivation.

“I cannot cope with my lessons.” (Learner, R7)

“I failed some subjects and got discouraged.” (Learner, R10)

“Our classrooms are overcrowded, and some don’t have electric fans or enough chairs.” (Teacher, R14)

“Some students feel like school is not for them.” (Parent, R6)

These statements suggest that “lack of interest” should be interpreted carefully. In this study, it often appeared to be the consequence of repeated academic struggle, limited classroom support, and weak confidence rather than a purely personal disposition.

Theme 4. Fragile support systems and rural access barriers compounded already difficult situations

The lower-frequency factors still mattered because they compounded already difficult situations. Peer influence, transport constraints, discouraging teacher interactions, emotional isolation, and weak home-school support systems rarely appeared alone; instead, they accumulated around already vulnerable learners. The rural setting made this more visible because access problems and support gaps were harder to buffer.

“There was peer pressure and negative influence that distracted me from studying.” (Learner, R9)

“I felt like no one really understood what I was going through, so I decided it was better to leave.” (Learner, R7)

“When parents, teachers, and students communicate regularly, we can address issues early.” (Teacher, R3)

“Maybe the school can connect families with government aid programs like 4Ps.” (Parent, R4)

These narratives help explain why community-related factors were numerically smaller yet analytically important: they heightened the risks faced by learners who were already struggling economically and academically.

4. Discussion

The integrated findings show that learner attrition at Peñarrubia Integrated School is best understood as cumulative disadvantage. Family-related pressures dominated the survey, but these pressures translated into school leaving only through their interaction with declining motivation, weak academic confidence, and uneven support systems. This layered pattern aligns with Balzer’s (2020) account of students leaving when multiple responsibilities, weak preparation, and limited support converge, and it also echoes Nurmaltasari et al. (2023), who argue that family economics and academic satisfaction interact rather than operate separately.

The study also mirrors national concerns. The prominence of insufficient income and lack of interest is consistent with the 2019 FLEMMS reasons reported by Marcelo (2023). At the same time, the strong presence of difficulty understanding lessons lends local support to PBEd’s concern, also cited by Marcelo (2023), that learners may advance without mastering foundational competencies and later disengage when later-grade demands intensify. In this sense, “lack of interest” in the present study appears less as a simple disposition and more as the endpoint of repeated academic frustration and constrained life circumstances.

Compared with much of the urban-centered literature cited in the introduction, the findings add several rural-specific nuances. Daily wage labor and farming were the dominant livelihoods; none of the learner respondents identified government assistance as a primary family income source, and transport barriers were still reported by nearly one-third of learners. These details suggest that in this rural setting, schooling competed directly with subsistence labor and geographic access in a way that is often less visible in city-based studies. The clustering of cases in Grades 10 and 11 and among boys also resonates with Luo et al. (2021), Roman et al. (2022), and Hassan et al. (2024), but the Peñarrubia evidence adds a distinctly rural combination of farming livelihoods, day-wage dependence, and transport difficulty.

The convergence of learner, parent, teacher, and administrator perspectives strengthens the credibility of the findings, yet the study should still be read cautiously. The sample was small and purposively selected, and the quantitative results are descriptive rather than inferential. The value of the study, therefore, lies not in broad generalization but in producing a school-specific explanation that can guide local action and inform comparable rural schools.

For practice, the results imply that retention efforts should be coordinated rather than piecemeal. Financial referral and social protection linkage are necessary, but they will be insufficient without tutorial support, adolescent-parent reentry pathways, counseling, home visits, transport or meal assistance, and stronger school-family communication. The qualitative data specifically point to the need for a dropout prevention and recovery team, more comprehensive guidance and support, and systematic school-community coordination. A learner who is poor, behind in lessons, and emotionally unsupported is unlikely to be helped by a single intervention alone.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Within this purposive, school-based sample, the most salient dropout factors were financial difficulty, lack of interest in studying, need to work, and difficulty understanding lessons. Family-related pressures constituted the largest share of all factor mentions, but the qualitative data show that school leaving emerged when household strain, weak engagement, and academic struggle overlapped.

The study therefore suggests that learner attrition at Peñarrubia Integrated School is less a single event than a process of cumulative disengagement shaped by rural poverty, early parenthood, uneven support, and barriers to sustained participation. These findings are exploratory and should not be generalized beyond the study context without caution.

Even with that limitation, the evidence provides a practical basis for retention strategies: early identification of at-risk learners, stronger referral to financial and social assistance, transport and meal support where needed, flexible options for working students and young parents, remedial instruction, counseling, and systematic home-school-community coordination through a dedicated dropout prevention and recovery team.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

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