Dropout Nation

The number of high school students who leave before graduating is higher—much higher—than you think. Inside one town's struggle to reverse the tide

By **NATHAN THORNBURGH** SHELBYVILLE

IT'S LUNCHTIME AT SHELBYVILLE HIGH SCHOOL, 30 miles southeast of Indianapolis, Ind., and more than 100 teenagers are buzzing over trays in the cafeteria. Like high schoolers everywhere, they have arranged themselves by type: jocks, preps, cheerleaders, dorks, punks and gamers, all with tables of their own. But when they are finished chugging the milk and throwing Tater Tots at one another, they will drift out to their classes and slouch together through lessons on Edgar Allan Poe and Pythagoras. It's the promise of American public education: no matter who you are or where you come from, you will be tugged gently along the path of learning, toward graduation and an open but hopeful future.

Shawn Sturgill, 18, had a clique of his own at Shelbyville High, a dozen or so friends who sat at the same long bench in the hallway outside the cafeteria. They were, Shawn says, an average crowd. Not too rich, not too poor; not bookish, but not slow. They rarely got into trouble. Mainly they sat around and talked about Camaros and the Indianapolis Colts.

These days the bench is mostly empty. Of his dozen friends, Shawn says just one or two are still at Shelbyville High. If some cliques are defined by a common sport or a shared obsession with Yu-Gi-Oh! cards, Shawn's friends ended up being defined by their mutual destiny: nearly all of them became high school dropouts.

Shawn's friends are not alone in their exodus. Of the 315 Shelbyville students who showed up for the first day of high school four years ago, only 215 are expected to graduate. The 100 others have simply melted away, dropping out in a slow, steady bleed that has left the town wondering how it could have let down so many of its kids.

THE HOLDOUT
Most of his friends have dropped out, and now he faces a fifth year of high school. But Shawn Sturgill, 18, says he will do what it takes to graduate

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"INTRO" (TEACHER READS to Class)