Do We Have What It Takes
To Put All Students on the Graduation Path?

Two years ago a young man named Vic Fenner attended our Baltimore Talent Development High School (BTDHS), an innovation school opened in 2004 through a partnership between Johns Hopkins University and Baltimore City Public Schools. Vic came to BTDHS as a 9th grader with myriad problems. Like many students entering BTDHS, he was performing below grade level in reading and math. He also was alcoholic, homeless, and largely on his own with little positive adult support in his life. But the adults at BTDHS wrapped their arms around Vic, and by the middle of his sophomore year he was engaged in school, making honor roll, and pulling his life together. In February 2007, hearts broke when Vic became Baltimore's 46th homicide victim, gunned down by a young man who had dropped out of high school.[1]

Vic Fenner's story is dramatic and wrenching. So much so, it is tempting to simply sublimate the tragedy into art—write another script for *The Wire* and move on. Vic's life and the way it ended calls on us to pause, however, and hear two important messages for education policymakers committed to ending the nation's dropout crisis.

The first message is that it is possible to create schools that are organized and resourced enough to meet the academic and social needs of students who have multiple risk factors for failure. In our network of Talent Development Schools, and in others across the country, middle and high schools are breaking the mold and beating the odds. After nearly two decades of applied research, development, and practice, there is growing understanding of the kinds of reforms necessary to create high-performing learning environments that promote success for all students. Federal demonstrations and substantial investments by private sector foundations have produced pockets of success, many lessons learned, and a reform movement poised to reach more young people.

The second message of Vic's story, and the lesser-known story of the young man who killed him, is that short-term investment in transforming a few secondary schools is not enough. Getting and keeping *all* young people engaged in learning and on track to graduate from high school ready for

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college and the 21st century workplace is going to require wider, deeper, and more systemic change. Recent policy focus on raising standards for high school graduation and aligning high school curriculum to college entrance requirements have been important first steps to establishing high expectations and engaging students through challenging, meaningful work. We must now turn our sights to other systemic priorities so that students at risk of failure and dropping out can be provided the right supports at the right time so none fall through the cracks. Perhaps, with enough skill and effort, we can reasonably aspire to close those cracks altogether.

Systemic Priorities for Ending the Dropout Crisis

Whether we succeed in ending the nation's dropout crisis will depend on how hard, smart, and collaboratively we work in five areas: 1) identifying the scale and scope of the dropout problem and understanding why students disengage from school; 2) transforming or replacing low-performing schools; 3) installing early warning and multi-tiered response systems that provide comprehensive, targeted, and intensive supports to students in and out of school; 4) establishing supportive policies and resource allocations; and 5) building community will and capacity so positive changes are deeply implemented and sustained.[2]

1

Locate and Understand the Dropout Crisis in Your State and Community

One of the first steps state, district, and community leaders must take to put all students on the graduation path is to get a handle on how many students drop out, who drops out, where they drop out from, and why they drop out.

Traditional dropout statistics have been unhelpful in this regard because they typically offer only a one-year snapshot of students' enrollment status, leaving unmeasured the cumulative dropout rate for a cohort of students over time. Dropouts also often fall through the cracks because they have been coded as a "transfer" to another school or school system without follow-through to determine whether the student actually matriculated into that system.

Measuring precisely how many students drop out of school requires data that uniquely identifies each student and follows students over time, across schools, and across school systems. Though 42 states report use of a unique statewide student identifier, the comprehensive integrated data systems needed to track students well are not yet on line in most states.[3] Lack of perfect data should not inhibit action, however, because it is possible to develop dropout estimates using readily available data and without relying on questionable

dropout statistics that have proved erroneous and misleading in the past.

One way is to track enrollment data for student cohorts as they move through the grades. Figure 1, for example, maps the national enrollment in public schools for the class of 2005. Comparing the number of diploma recipients for a given class of seniors with their 8th grade enrollment figure four years prior can offer a first order estimate of the number of students failing to graduate with their class across the nation. During the past year, we have presented similar data for states and locales in various leadership forums. Participants find tremendous value in learning how many students are falling off track in their community. In many cases, they are relieved to find that the number actually seems manageable and are better able to envision their community successfully addressing the needs of these young people.
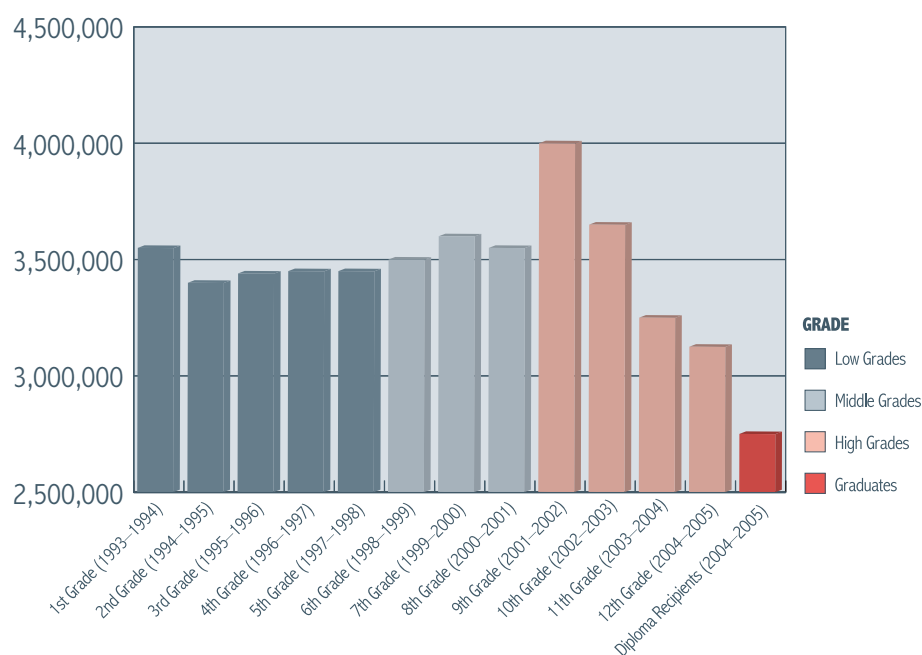

Figure 1. Class of 2005 Grade Enrollments and Graduates for the Nation's Public School Students

Data for states and major cities, including patterns for low income and minority students, can be accessed on www.every1graduates.org, a website of the Everyone Graduates Center based at Johns Hopkins University. Researchers are turning more and more to enrollment data like these as the basis for current best estimates of cohort graduation and dropout rates.

Enrollment data also can be used to identify the schools struggling with the highest dropout rates and lowest graduation rates. By comparing 12th grade enrollments with 9th grade enrollments three years prior, we identified nearly 2,000 high schools across the country that are losing nearly as many students as they are graduating. Though they account for less than 15 percent of all the nation's regular and vocational high schools, these schools appear to produce nearly half of all dropouts. Identifying these struggling schools enables education leaders to target effort and resources and more efficiently address the bulk of challenge.[4]

Readily available data also can provide powerful guides to identifying which students are most likely to drop out. Though data such as low test scores, poverty, and minority status are correlated with dropping out of high school, they are not highly predictive of whether a particular student drops out.[5] Hence they are not helpful guides for intervention, particularly in school systems where the vast majority of students share those characteristics. Fortunately, recent research finds that three indicators—attendance, behavior, and course performance—are powerful predictors of whether students drop out or persist to graduation. A study followed several cohorts of students in Philadelphia from 6th grade through graduation and found that half of future

dropouts could be identified as early as 6th grade using those three indicators. Three-quarters of future dropouts could be identified midway through the 9th grade using just attendance and course performance data.

In Chicago, researchers can identify students off-track for graduation using similar indicators. These indicators (failing more than one course per semester and earning fewer than five course credits during freshman year) are now included in Chicago's high school accountability framework. A growing number of cities and states are pursuing similar analyses to determine the strongest predictors of dropout among their students so they can identify potential dropouts and intervene as early as possible.

Research also sheds light on why students drop out.[6] This is important because not all young people leave school for the same reason and, to be effective, interventions must address root causes as much as possible. Some students experience a disruptive life event; a parent or key guardian dies or moves away, they become homeless, or have a child themselves. Some students simply fade out; they do well in school but are bored and see little reason to persist. Some students are essentially pushed out of school through multiple suspensions, transfers, and expulsion because their presence is, or is perceived to be, detrimental to others in the school. Finally, many students in the lowest performing schools drop out because they experience massive course failure, fall far behind, and their schools are neither organized nor resourced to meet their academic needs or address the social barriers to academic performance.

States and communities can learn a great deal about student needs by

conducting their own surveys to investigate why students disengage from school. This also is important for building awareness and sensitivity to the experience of at-risk students. However concerned and committed, most adults in positions to make policy and marshal resources have limited personal experience with academic failure and the social and economic circumstances that can make it extremely difficult to stay engaged and succeed in school.

2
Transform Your Low-Performing Middle and High Schools

Because students drop out of schools—not districts, communities, or states—ending the dropout crisis must include large-scale transformation of the schools where large percentages of students are falling off the graduation path. States and major school districts have begun to pursue a diversified portfolio approach to secondary education through a combination of comprehensive whole school reform and new school creation.Comprehensive, whole school reform can turn around low-performing high schools by discarding the large, bureaucratic, factory model for a more personalized, flexible, and responsive approach. Small learning communities, interdisciplinary teams, and flexible scheduling enable students to benefit from experiences that demonstrate the connection between school and their future goals, and from efforts that promote student involvement, active learning, and adult support for a manageable number of students.

Comprehensive reform also emphasizes college and 21st century workplace preparation for *all* students, with curricular, instructional, and assessment innovations and appropriate extra help so every student graduates ready

for success. Underpinning the transformation process is a positive culture of collective responsibility developed through distributed leadership, data-driven decisionmaking, continuous reflection and professional development for all school staff, and supportive partnerships with families, local businesses, and community organizations.

New school creation is increasingly being used as a means to provide more supportive and challenging environments to students who are at risk for not graduating from traditional high schools and to transform or replace low performing high schools. Key elements of new schools created for these purposes include smaller school size, student choice of schools, thematic focus, focus on college preparation (often involving early college or dual enrollment strategies), and greater autonomy—the schools sometimes are run by external operators, both national and local, in partnership with the school district. Generally, in return for meeting performance benchmarks, the schools are given latitude to design their own instructional programs, professional development, and organizational structures, such as school schedule, length of day, etc. Many new schools start by adding one grade at a time, which enables them to build a cadre of administrators and teachers who share a common mission.

Comprehensive, whole school reform and new and alternative schools each have their successes, challenges, trade-offs, and pitfalls. Neither approach is a sure road. Implementation is key, and both require substantial amounts of human capital, sustained implementation of research-based programs, and substantial resources. Both

approaches have produced dramatic improvements in school climate and gains in student engagement, achievement, course passing, grade promotion, and graduation. Neither has been pursued at adequate scale, however, and it is unlikely we will make significant inroads on our dropout problem without major investment in secondary school transformation.

But the work cannot stop there. Creating stronger secondary schools with high expectations, engaging instruction, and positive, personalized learning environments will address the needs of many students, particularly those at risk of dropping out because they are bored or experience a temporary set back that requires adult support to negotiate. This work must be expanded, however, to support students who need earlier and more targeted and intensive supports to help overcome academic and social barriers to success.

3
Develop Early Warning and Comprehensive Student Support Systems

To succeed in and stay connected with school, many students need extra supports in and out of school. These supports include a combination of wraparound services; mentors; tutors; adult advocates; enhanced parental involvement; and quality after-school, Saturday, and summer programs. These supports not only need to be available, they also need to be coordinated with each other and linked with the student's school experience. There must also be enough support providers with sufficient capacity so every student can obtain the adult and peer guidance needed to graduate, and be prepared for college, work, and life.

To establish these supports, leaders are:

- Instituting early warning systems that raise flags when students are falling off track so supports can be directed to students as early as possible.[7]

- Developing responses that focus on the ABC's of dropout prevention—attendance, behavior, and course performance.

- Increasing the number of skilled and committed adults to provide student supports.

- Intensifying family involvement initiatives.[8]

- Launching and maintaining communitywide coordinated campaigns to support youth outside of school via health care, child care, housing, and social services to improve all students' attendance, achievement, and advancement in school.

Many organizations and resources now exist to support communities in establishing these systems and putting "boots on the ground" to ensure every young person has adult champions who can spot their academic and personal challenges and access the resources necessary to address them.[9] Coordinating and integrating systems that serve youth in a locale or across a state represents one of the most exciting and challenging frontiers in dropout prevention work.

4
Establish Supportive Policies and Resource Allocations

Policies at the local, state, and federal level can help or hinder communities in their efforts to graduate all their students prepared for adult success. The same

is true for how resources are allocated. Communities must work together at the local level to shape effective policies and resource allocations, while advocating for them at the state and federal level. Policy attention in the following areas is necessary to improve student achievement and graduation:

- Collecting accurate data and making progress toward meaningful improvements in graduation rates part of the state accountability system;

- Raising compulsory school age requirements from 16 to 17 or 18 to reflect shifts in our society and economy requiring a more educated citizenry and workforce;

- Investment in training and technical support from providers with proven track records for raising graduation and college readiness rates to improve leadership, teacher quality, and support school transformation; and

- Coordination of resources across all sectors that focus on youth development to enable the most efficient and effective use of available resources to get and keep all students on the path to high school graduation.

A number of bills currently before the U.S. Congress will, if enacted, provide substantial federal help to local communities in their efforts to end the dropout crisis. These bills include the Graduation Promise Act, the Every Student Counts Act, the Success in the Middle Act, and the Keeping Parents and Community Engaged (PACE) Act.[10] State and local advocacy for federal legislation is needed to secure national attention and investment in this work.

5
Build Community Will and Capacity

The actions described above will not be taken by us writing about them and you reading about them. These critical steps to ending the dropout crisis require organizing at the local and state levels to establish the schools, student supports, data systems, and resources and policies necessary to get the job done.

Building the will and capacity for this work requires identifying leaders, establishing a leadership team and working groups to move forward in specific areas, developing a community Graduation Compact, and laying the groundwork for long term action and success. Read *Grad Nation*, a comprehensive guidebook commissioned by America's Promise Alliance and released just this month, to learn more about how to organize this work in your community or state.[11]

The Costs If We Do Not Act and the Benefits When We Do

In the summer of 2006, *Washington Post* columnist Mark Fisher wrote about a young man named Leslie Sharp who attended *six* different high schools before he finally dropped out of school, got in trouble, and eventually dropped in to prison. Leslie Sharp did not drop out because no one cared. There were individual adults in each of the schools he attended who cared a lot and regularly extended themselves to their students. He did not drop out because he was incapable of succeeding in school; while incarcerated, he excelled in a creative writing program. Certainly Leslie Sharp failed himself, his family, and his community and he bears responsibility for that. But Leslie Sharp also *was failed* by school and civic systems that were neither organized nor resourced to meet his social and academic needs.

There are far too many young people across the nation like Leslie Sharp. Close to 30 percent of all students, and half of minority students, fail to graduate from high school with their peers. Recent studies show that 80 percent or more of those who fall behind end up dropping out, and the consequences dropping out are heartbreaking and expensive.[12] Until the early 1980s, most high school dropouts could find a living wage job. Today those jobs are scarce—and becoming increasingly more so—and pay less than half of what they did twenty years ago. High school dropouts are far more likely to struggle with unemployment, poverty, ill-health, incarceration, and dependence on social services than students who graduate. With more than 12 million students likely to drop out over the next decade, the nation stands to lose trillions and states and locales will lose billions in unrealized revenues and social service expenditures.[13] This is a circumstance we can ill afford as we face an economic crisis of historic proportions.

By converting dropouts into graduates for just one cohort of students, states could see increases in their economies ranging from the hundreds of millions in small states like Vermont to $42 billion in California over the lifetime of each graduating class.[14] According to conservative estimates published in a recent study by education economist Hank Levin, our nation as a whole can recoup 45 billion dollars in lost tax revenues, health care expenditures, and social service outlays over the lifetime of a single cohort of students just

by cutting the number of high school dropouts in half.[15]

In addition to economic benefits, reducing the number of high school dropouts will improve the safety, health, and quality of life for individuals and communities everywhere. High school graduates are far more likely to be gainfully employed, raise children who graduate from high school, participate in civic life through voting and volunteer work, and make positive contributions to the health and welfare of their communities.

If we fail to act, we will continue to diminish the life chances and squander the potential of too many young people. With immediate, concerted, intelligent action, we will help them shine and give ourselves and our nation the chance to benefit from their creativity, productivity, and leadership.

Priorities in Action

This year, the America's Promise Alliance launched a nationwide campaign to end the dropout crisis. Over the next two years, the Alliance is supporting more than 100 state and local dropout prevention summits to increase awareness, encourage collaboration, and facilitate action in states and cities that want to improve graduation rates. Participating communities across the country are organizing forums where civic, business, religious, and government leaders, educators, youth service providers, and the youths themselves are coming together to understand their dropout challenge and determine what they can do about it. Out of these forums are emerging comprehensive plans to put and keep all students on a secure path to high school graduation and ensure they graduate college and career ready. The best of these plans activate and coordinate adults and resources across agencies and sectors on behalf of youth engagement in school, academic achievement, and social and economic advancement.

America's Promise Alliance's campaign is one of a number of national, state, and local initiatives emerging in response to growing awareness of the dropout crisis and the need to graduate more young people ready for success in college and the 21st century workplace.[16]

Will these plans come off the page? Will these initiative work? Is it possible to create systems of secondary education in every state that create success and opportunity for all students, regardless of race, color, creed, or socio-economic status? Is it possible to create civic systems that are so open, so responsive, so resourced, so integrated, and so skillful, that movement toward that ideal becomes inevitable? Whether we are able to answer these questions with a resounding yes will depend on how deeply we hear the messages of Vic Fenner's life, and how much we invest now in our capacity and will to respond. ■

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[16]Others include the National Governors Association's Honor States program at http://www.nga.org/portal/site/nga/menuitem.1f41d49be2d3d33eacdcbeeb501010a0/vgnextoid=8487739a87165110VgnVCM1000001a01010aRCRD.