

# AMERICAN GRADUATE EVALUATION

Civic Enterprises for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting  
In partnership with the Everyone Graduates Center at  
Johns Hopkins University School of Education



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## Executive Summary

American Graduate: Let's Make It Happen, is a long-term, multi-faceted initiative to help the nation address the persistent challenges that confront our most disadvantaged students. The initiative, made possible by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, has successfully increased community capacity to address America's high school dropout crisis, raise awareness of the issue and highlight proven solutions. The initiative has funded and coordinated public media to mobilize a sustained multi-sector response and collective community action toward common goals – a strategy identified by education experts as essential for progress. This Executive Summary provides key outcomes that are described in further detail in the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University report.

# American Graduate Evaluation

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Background and Summary

Communities across America face unprecedented challenges, yet America cannot solve problems it does not understand. Today, more than one million children do not graduate high school with their peers. The consequences of this dropout rate to individual students, society, and our economy are far-reaching. As a result of this trend, more than six million youth (ages 16 – 24) are disconnected from school or work, leaving many of them unable to support themselves, raise families, and give back to their communities.

This disconnection from the two institutions that offer young people hope for the future – schools and workplaces – costs taxpayers \$93 billion per year, which amounts to \$1.6 trillion over the lifetimes of these vulnerable young people. It further widens America’s skills gap, leaving unfilled 3.7 million jobs available at a time of high unemployment. Even though America has always been a land of opportunity, our rates of economic mobility for those in poverty are now lower than many of our European counterparts.

This does not have to be America’s story. The knowledge, resources and tools that children, families, and communities need for economic mobility are available but untapped. Schools and community organizations too often work in isolation, shouldering the burden of educating children and addressing societal problems. Communities require a deeper understanding of the complex factors contributing to the dropout crisis, new ways of thinking about the issue, and an innovative and collaborative approach to addressing the crisis. Public media is uniquely situated to help communities do exactly that. The evaluation of *American Graduate: Let’s Make it Happen!* by the Everyone Graduates Center (EGC) at Johns Hopkins University School of Education shows that public media and local stations serve as trusted communicators, conveners, and capacity builders.

*American Graduate conclusively demonstrates that local public media stations have a vital and unique role in meeting the national priority of ending America’s high school dropout crisis.*

The evaluation examines the work of 25 public media stations in high-need communities and the services of local stations that helped that helped communities better address the issue. The initiative aligned itself to the research-based strategy of the Civic Marshall Plan (CMP)<sup>i</sup> designed to reach the nationwide Grad Nation goal of increasing the national high school graduation rate to 90 percent by the Class of 2020 (from 78.2 percent in 2010<sup>ii</sup>, the most recent data available)—a goal first articulated by President George H.W. Bush in 1990 and supported by every president since.

Public media brings key assets to addressing the dropout crisis including advancing knowledge about key challenges confronting schools, communities and individuals along with solutions to those challenges; providing opportunities for stakeholders (especially youth and educators) to have a voice in solving these problems; ensuring a multi-sector response, and driving collaborative action toward a

common goal. The initiative also focuses on key content areas highlighted in the CMP, such as a focus on the middle grades and connecting education to college/career goals.

## Key Outcomes Achieved

American Graduate: Let’s Make it Happen! conclusively demonstrates that local public media stations have a vital and unique role in helping communities end America’s high school dropout crisis. The evidence from the EGC evaluation shows that the initiative succeeded, in public media stations’ ability to (1) harness station assets and mobilize a community to solve a pressing local issue; (2) build informed, solution-oriented coalitions; and (3) give teachers and youth a voice.

*In all, the initiative engaged hundreds of thousands of parents, teachers, and youth on the ground in over 30 states and nationally reached approximately 10 million broadcast viewers annually.*

- Public media served as a trusted communicator, convener, and capacity builder – all of which are essential elements for a community to address its high school dropout challenge.** For example, the community partners agreed that public media added value to stem the dropout crisis in the following ways:
  - Telling the story of the dropout crisis in a way that enabled more people to become involved (80 percent);
  - Directly reaching out to the community to build knowledge, capacity, and engagement (78 percent); and
  - Facilitating greater collaboration among community organizations working to combat the dropout crisis and improve graduation outcomes (77 percent).
  
- American Graduate laid a strong foundation for ongoing action and long term impact.** The vast majority of community partners surveyed felt that this initiative would have an ongoing and lasting effect. For example, the majority of community partners reported that:
  - Public media provided opportunities that will have a lasting effect on youth (74 percent) and that the media opportunities provided through American Graduate will have an impact on youth at risk of dropping out of school (64 percent); and
  - Public media added significant value to the community’s efforts to address the dropout crisis by directly reaching out to the community to build knowledge, capacity, and engagement (68 percent) and [will] add value to the community’s efforts to address the dropout crisis in the next three years by directly reaching out to build knowledge, capacity, and engagement (85 percent, including 46 percent who say “to a very large extent/quite a bit”).

Additionally, public media served as a catalyst for community-led discussions on education policies, which point toward longer-term impact through policy shifts. These include the consideration of improved statewide policies related to chronic absenteeism as well as programming that influenced community partners’ reflection on school district strategies and the role of future superintendents.

## Strategies that Produced Success

American Graduate: Let’s Make it Happen! achieved the initial successes outlined above through four key strategies defined in the American Graduate Logic Model (see Appendix A). It is important to note that the implementation of these strategies is, in part, a critical outcome in and of itself. In a complicated and ever-shifting education landscape, stakeholders and intervention strategists are increasingly equipped with the knowledge of “what works,” yet accessing and then translating knowledge of powerful interventions into action is often much more difficult.

The four strategies below were identified in support of short-, mid-, and long-term goals related to engaging the community and sustaining the influence to achieve graduation rate improvement. They took into consideration the target audiences of at-risk youth, their families and communities, educators, partners, community members and policy makers, and caring adults. They also sought to leverage the role and value of community-based public radio and television broadcasting stations (e.g. staff, collaborating TV and radio stations, existing and new media); national and public media organizations (e.g. PBS, NPR, national producers including PBS NewsHour; digital media platforms; development and engagement service organizations); and partners (e.g. local corporations, nonprofits and agencies; education institutions).

- **Multi-platform Content:** The creation and distribution of media content was a key means of broadening public understanding of the complexities of the dropout crisis and the most promising ways to address it.
  - More than 1,700 news segments, public affairs programs, documentaries, PSAs and other content were produced, including web, short story/show segments, interstitial, student production, long form, and promo reaching approximately 10 million broadcast viewers annually; and
  - Nearly all (96 percent) of the content was made available online. Two-thirds (63 percent) was specifically aligned with national American Graduate goals and one-third (37 percent) focused specifically on solutions.

The partners felt that the content strategy played a key role in the American Graduate initiative:

- Three-quarters of community partners (75 percent) perceived that American Graduate had “resulted in the creation of media content around the dropout crisis that will be of continued usefulness” and 66 percent reported that public media had added substantial value to their community’s graduation rate improvement efforts by: “creating lasting materials and content (website, toolkits, video content) that could be used in efforts to combat the dropout crisis and improve graduation outcomes.”; and
  - 75 percent reported that American Graduate “resulted in the creation of media content around the dropout crisis that will be of continued usefulness.”
- **Communication:** American Graduate brought together community organizations to strategize, plan, and organize dropout prevention/graduation improvement efforts for the long term. These efforts included regular meetings of established partners as well as meetings of organizations to discuss forming a coalition or other ways to collaborate on an ongoing basis or to plan a particular activity or program. In many communities, smaller work and discussion groups convened

to air ideas, shape the work of larger groups, and inform development of media products related to graduation improvement.

- American Graduate’s solutions-orientation overcame previous negative perceptions of the media, which were rooted in past news stories shining a spotlight on problems, not solutions. American Graduate approached the community with the productive mindsets of “Let us learn what you need,” “Let us tell the story of your students,” and “Let us tell your story to the public,” setting the initiative up for greater success by building community trust. For example, WNET in New York produced American Graduate Day a unique live day-long national broadcast and online event that increased community engagement and volunteering by featuring stories of local work, local partnerships and promising solutions;
- A majority (56 percent) of partner survey respondents asserted that American Graduate had added substantial value to the community’s efforts to address the dropout crisis by “directly reaching out to teachers to build knowledge, capacity, and engagement.” Teachers who participated in the American Graduate Teacher Town Halls reported that they were equipped with a greater range of strategies for improving graduation outcomes in their schools and changed their beliefs about education reporting, gaining a new perspective about public media’s role in building forums and including the teacher’s perspective in this important discussion; and
- American Graduate engaged and supported student voice. For example, APTV in Alabama, working with Birmingham Public Schools on the Student Retention Survey Project, surveyed nearly 8,000 adults and 6,000 students in the Birmingham City Schools on their top priorities, which impacted APTV’s partner strategies and actions going forward.

□ **Training and Resources:** The national American Graduate education resources and curricula were major entry points into districts and schools for many stations.

- More than 20,000 teachers accessed professional development opportunities and conference experiences offered by the stations. For example, WHRO in Norfolk, VA, hosted Tech Trek a weeklong technology training camp for educators to utilize technology to better engage their students. WJCT in Jacksonville, FL, hosted its first annual TEACH Conference, a one-day conference for more than 1,000 educators representing all grades (PreK-12th) and disciplines;
- American Graduate enabled important data collection and data sharing. For example, New Mexico’s KNME and the University of New Mexico’s Center for Education Policy Research mapped the location of dropout crisis in the Albuquerque metropolitan area using geographical information system tools, color-coding risk factors, and early warning indicators, a powerful way to mobilize partners and begin strategic planning; and
- American Graduate education resources and curriculum were major entry points into districts and schools for many stations, including science- and STEM-related professional development, literacy and early learning. CPB-funded education programs and tools include StoryCorpsU (a standards-based college readiness program), Design Squad Nation (an online hands-on engineering program), PBS NewsHour Student Reporting

labs (including a news literacy/digital media curriculum), and RoadTrip Nation (digital resources to help students' map career pathways).

- **Partnership Formation:** Station partnership with community organizations, leaders and educators, and the youth of their communities laid a foundation for sustained effort. Local stations increased and strengthened community partnerships dedicated to ending the dropout crisis.
  - Stations directly engaged tens of thousands of civic leaders, educators, parents, youth, and other community members in dynamic public dialogues, educational opportunities and knowledge-building activities. By April of 2013, the 25 American Graduate public media stations reported partnerships with over 900 different community organizations. Two-thirds of the partner organizations were either local (35 percent) or regional (29 percent). Non-profit organizations represented the largest group of partners at 38 percent followed by schools at 17 percent;
  - Approximately 40 percent of survey respondents indicated their partnership with the local station had not existed prior to American Graduate, highlighting station success at new partner formation during the American Graduate grant period;
  - More than two-thirds of partners reported that American Graduate facilitated greater collaboration among community organizations (67 percent) and that American Graduate created a local collaboration of multiple organizations focused on graduation improvement (66 percent);
  - Over 10,000 parents were engaged through activities sponsored by the station and/or by more than 100 community partners focused on parent engagement; and
  - Over 2000 teachers were engaged through widely broadcast educator forums. These included the 12 Teach Town Halls conducted between November 2011 and June 2012 documented in *Teacher Town Halls: A Summary of Findings and Impact*.



## Conclusion

Ending the dropout crisis will require sustained and coordinated community efforts driven by an understanding of the reasons students drop out and the proven solutions that exist. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting's initiative, American Graduate: Let's Make It Happen, has demonstrated that by combining personal communication with high-quality media products, public media have a critical, unique and valuable role in meeting this national priority. The first phase of American Graduate achieved success by raising awareness of the high school dropout challenge, highlighting research-based solutions, and fostering community collaborations and community action to boost graduation rates. Some stations and markets have laid the groundwork for how public media can be an engine of positive change and productive partnerships in communities across the public media system. The evidence from the first 18 months of American Graduate shows the value of public media's role in helping communities understand and address pressing national challenges. The initial successes set the stage for sustainable on-going work and show that American Graduate has the potential for long-term impact through its public media stations, in partnership with each community they serve. Public media has a vital role to play in helping the nation achieve its high school graduation rate goal.

## Paths Forward

American Graduate: Let's Make it Happen! exemplifies the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's vision for public media as a powerful catalyst for the intelligent changes needed to solve complex social problems. Trends from the evaluation, reinforced by powerful examples from specific stations and communities, demonstrated local public media station's critical and unique valuable role in ending America's high school dropout crisis. These findings also set the stage for increased impact for American Graduate as it begins its third year, as well as laid the foundation for opportunities for public media to embed the thinking, strategies, and actions underlying American Graduate into all future public media work and expanding community efforts to include older youth and their parents. More detailed recommendations to strengthen and grow this collaborative, multi-platform approach are detailed in the full report.

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### About Civic Enterprises

Civic Enterprises is a public policy firm that helps corporations, nonprofits, foundations, universities, and governments develop and spearhead innovative public policies to strengthen our communities and country. Created to enlist the private, public, and nonprofit sectors to help address our nation's toughest problems, Civic Enterprises fashions new initiatives and strategies that achieve measurable results in the fields of education, civic engagement, economic mobility, and many other domestic policy issues. For information about Civic Enterprises, please visit [www.civicerprises.net](http://www.civicerprises.net)

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<sup>i</sup> The Civic Marshall Plan to Build a Grad Nation (CMP) is a plan of action designed by a broad leadership council of national stakeholders that takes the national goal seriously. The Civic Marshall Plan identified research-based interventions, such as the creation of early warning systems that identified the attendance, behavior and course performance in reading and math that indicated whether a student was on-track or off-track to graduate. The CMP leadership council is now a working group of the America's Promise Trustees and includes over 30 national organizations from across the sectors. For additional information on the CMP, please see Balfanz, R., Bridgeland, J. M., Bruce, M., & Fox, J. H. (2013). Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic, Annual Report, February 2013. Civic Enterprises, Every Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University, America's Promise Alliance, and Alliance for Excellent Education. Retrieved August 26, 2012 from <http://www.civicerprises.net/Education>

<sup>ii</sup> Stillwell, R., & Sable, J. (2013). Public School Graduates and Dropouts from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2009–10: First Look (Provisional Data) (NCES 2013- 309). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved August 26, 2013 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013309.pdf>.

## Public Media's Roles in Education

Research has shown that children need on-going support in order to graduate, starting in early childhood. During the past two decades, over 75 public media stations have helped at-risk and low-income communities build a strong foundation in early literacy to narrow the achievement gap. The CPB-PBS Ready to Learn Initiative is conducted in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education. Success depends on a robust ecology of strategies and supports surrounding a student that in turn builds capacity in families, educators, and the community for long-term success.

To expand upon this deep investment in early education, public media began building additional resources in 2002 to help students transition to middle and high school and up through college and career milestones. This continuum of public media education services and engagement in high-need communities coalesced into a national effort called American Graduate: Let's Make It Happen, in collaboration with America's Promise Alliance's Grad Nation campaign. The goal is to bolster the positive pace of improvement in high school graduation rates and help our country reach a 90% graduation rate by 2020.

APT	Alabama Public Television	AL	GPB	Georgia Public Broadcasting	WMHT	Troy, NY
WVAS	Montgomery, AL		WCLK	Atlanta, GA	WCNY	Syracuse, NY
KTOO	Juneau, AK		WTTW	Chicago, IL	WSKG	Binghamton, NY
KBC	Anchorage, AK		WQPT	Moline, IL	WXXI	Rochester, NY
Radio Campesina	Phoenix, AZ		WFYI	Indianapolis, IN	UNC-TV	Research Triangle Park, NC
AETN	Conway, AR		WKYU	Bowling Green, KY	WFDD	Winston-Salem, NC
SoCal	Los Angeles, CA		WMMT	Whitesburg, KY	WFSS	Fayetteville, NC
KLCS	Los Angeles, CA		LPB	Louisiana Public Broadcasting	WTVI	Charlotte, NC
KVCR	San Bernardino, CA		WYES	New Orleans, LA	WUNC	Chapel Hill, NC
Valley PBS	Fresno, CA		KDAQ	Shreveport, LA	CET	Cincinnati, OH
KQED	San Francisco, CA		WGBH	Boston, MA	WGTE	Toledo, OH
KVIE	Sacramento, CA		WGBY	Springfield, MA	WOSU	Columbus, OH
CPT12	Colorado Public Television		DPTV	Detroit, MI	WLCH	Lancaster, PA
KSJD	Mancos, CO		WGVU	Grand Rapids, MI	WHYY	Philadelphia, PA
KUVO	Denver, CO		KMOJ-FM	Minneapolis, MN	WMTJ	Rio Piedras, PR
WETA	Washington, DC		TPT	St. Paul, MN	SCETV	Columbia, SC
WHUT	Washington, DC			Nine Network St. Louis, MO	WSJK & WKOP	East Tennessee PBS
WAMU	Washington, DC		MPB	Mississippi Public Broadcasting	WNPT	Nashville, TN
WFSU	Tallahassee, FL		MPT	Maryland Public Television	WCTE	Cookeville, TN
WUSF	Tampa, FL		NET	Nebraska Educational Telecommunications	KRTS	Marfa, TX
WEDU	Tampa, FL			Vegas PBS	KUHT	Houston, TX
WJCT	Jacksonville, FL			Las Vegas, NV	KLRN	San Antonio, TX
WLRN	Miami, FL		KNPB	Reno, NV	KACV	Amarillo, TX
WDSC	Daytona, FL		KNME	Albuquerque, NM	WHRO	Norfolk, VA
PBA	Atlanta, GA			Thirteen/WNET	KBTC	Tacoma, WA
					MPTV	Milwaukee, WI

## Delivering Results Across More Than 30 States

*American Graduate: Let's Make it Happen* is made possible by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting working with local public media stations, public media producers, and distributors to share resources and community models for increased efficiencies and local success. For every dollar of federal funding invested in public media, local stations are leveraging it six times over to benefit their communities and build an engaged and informed citizenry.

### American Graduate partners and supporters include:

Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University School of Education

America's Promise Alliance

The Alliance for Excellent Education

Civic Enterprises

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Newman's Own Foundation



[www.americangraduate.org](http://www.americangraduate.org)