A 20-year campaign to address America's high school dropout crisis produced unprecedented gains in graduation rates nationwide. Can lessons from this campaign help the nation cross this elusive threshold and inspire action on other social issues?

# graduation nation

BY BOB BALFANZ & JOHN BRIDGELAND

**WEST VIRGINIA IS HOME TO RESOURCEFUL AND RESILIENT CITIZENS, ABUNDANT NATURAL RESOURCES, AND STAGGERING BEAUTY.** But the Mountain State is also near the bottom in GDP, and its citizens have among the highest rates of adult depression, addiction, child poverty, income inequality, and unemployment.

Because of the state's vast inequities, few would have predicted that it would also become an educational success story. When No Child Left Behind (NCLB) laid the foundation for a national graduation campaign by introducing educational-standards testing and accountability to improve high school graduation rates in 2001, West Virginia's graduation rate hovered just above 74 percent. By 2020, West Virginia's graduation rate had risen to above 92 percent—the highest rate in the nation—and its graduation rate for low-income students climbed to 87 percent, the fourth highest in the nation. More than 15 years of the campaign's efforts lifted students' academic success across every income and demographic category.

West Virginia's dramatic increase in graduation rates resulted from the systematic application of proven practices that produced steady, sustained improvement. The overall gains in West Virginia and across the nation were so impressive that some experts even questioned their legitimacy. But we—Bob, the director of the

**Illustration by Ibrahim Rayintakath**

Everyone Graduates Center, an applied-research-and-development group that seeks practical solutions to educational challenges at Johns Hopkins University (JHU), and Bridge, the former director of the White House Domestic Policy Council and CEO of the social-enterprise firm Civic (formerly Civic Enterprises)—had been tracking graduation-rate data in every state for 15 years and knew the data were legitimate. Our analysis of the National Center for Education Statistics' graduation rates and other data related to academic achievement quashed any doubt. Not only were West Virginia's gains as impressive as they appeared, but the state's high schools showed improvement in all four indicators of the Secondary School Improvement Index: eighth-grade national reading and math assessments, advanced placement exam outcomes, and on-time (four-year) high school graduation. Our findings, reinforced by a 2020 study from the Brookings Institution, showed that graduation-rate gains at the state and national levels resulted from accountability-driven improvements, not from gaming the system.

West Virginia was not the only state to make remarkable gains during the 20-year period. Improvements were widespread, though varied in percentage and rate of progress. In contrast with the prior 30 years, when graduation rates were stagnant, the national graduation rate rose from 71 percent in 2001 to 86.5 percent in 2020. These improvements reflect significant gains among Black, Latino, and low-income students, all of whom had graduation rates below 70 percent at the start of the 21st century and had graduation rates above 80 percent by 2020. Overall, more than five million more students graduated, rather than dropping out of school during these two decades.

The collaborative efforts that began in the early 2000s and united into a national high school graduation rate improvement campaign—branded GradNation in 2010—contributed largely to this incredible academic success. The campaign engaged leaders, from US presidents to school principals, and it informed the adoption of effective approaches in low-performing schools and other public high schools with large student populations that had the greatest needs. By 2020, graduation rates in 10 states rose to 90 percent or higher, another 10 states were within one percentage point of the goal, and 15 additional states with smaller populations needed fewer than 1,000 additional graduates to reach 90 percent. (The COVID-19 pandemic briefly interrupted this progress—the national high school graduation rate dropped for the class of 2021, but by less than a percentage point. By the class of 2022, the national graduation rate recovered to prepandemic levels.) We also found that the number of high schools with very low graduation rates—what we call "dropout-factory high schools," defined as having graduation rates of 60 precent or less—fell by two-thirds nationwide. While there are still too many of these schools (about 700; down from more than 2,000 when we started the campaign), these steep reductions demonstrated to us that it is possible to raise graduation rates in any community in America.

States across America achieved these unprecedented graduation gains by implementing the national campaign's reforms and practices, which coalesced around four principles: establish a bold goal and measure of progress for at least a decade; home in on the hot spots; listen to the customer; and nurture and sustain a nationwide, all-sector response focused on proven practices.

In telling the inside story of the national graduation campaign, we intend to share the lessons we have learned—sometimes the hard way—about constructing a campaign of unlikely partners and maintaining it during hyperpolarized times. These lessons, we hope, will inspire renewed efforts to achieve the elusive 90 percent graduation rate and inform other social-issue campaigns.

## NATION, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

In 1981, the Reagan administration established the National Commission on Excellence in Education to determine the problems afflicting American education and to provide solutions. Two years later, the commission released "A Nation at Risk," a report documenting the nationwide low expectations for students, the lack of time spent on schoolwork, the poor quality of instruction, and the insufficient rigor of curricula. Its conclusion about the abysmal state of education in America did not mince words: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."

The report garnered widespread media attention and ignited many reform efforts, such as establishing more academically focused high school curricula, increasing academic accountability, and promoting teacher professionalism. Yet the report made no discernible impact on the nation's high school graduation rate from 1981 through 2000, in part because schools, districts, and states during that period were not held accountable for graduation rates.

At the turn of the 21st century, the dropout challenge posed severe consequences for students, society, and the economy. In 2001, more than a quarter of all students—and a third or more of all Black, Latino, and Native American students—failed to graduate with their class. As the US economy became increasingly knowledge-based in the 1980s and '90s, the consequences of dropping out of high school compounded with every successive year. Dropouts were much more likely than their peers who graduated to be unemployed, live in poverty, receive public assistance, become imprisoned, and parent children who also dropped out. While members of the Greatest and Silent generations could find a path to the middle class without a high school diploma largely through unionized factory employment, the Millennial and Z generations will need not only a high school diploma but some postsecondary education to be eligible for most middle-class jobs. Furthermore, the macroeconomic impact of the dropout epidemic was costing the nation hundreds of billions of dollars annually from the loss of the productive workers our economy needed to drive GDP growth, in addition to the greater costs associated with increased incarceration, health care, and social services.

The combined social and economic toll of the dropout crisis motivated four organizations—Civic, led by Bridge; the Everyone Graduates Center, led by Bob; America's Promise Alliance, led by General Colin Powell, Alma Powell, and Marguerite Kondracke; and the Alliance for Excellent Education, led by former West Virginia Governor Robert Wise—to organize a national graduation

campaign built upon President George W. Bush's 2002 NCLB law, which for the first time held high schools accountable for their graduation rates, even if it would take subsequent formulations to strengthen its impact. The campaign's strategies were also informed by Bob's report *Locating the Dropout Crisis*, published in 2004, and Bridge's report, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, based on surveys conducted in 2004 and published in 2006, which together had raised national attention about the cause.

We initially found few collaborators for a dropout-prevention initiative, since it was not a priority for any education leader, policy maker, or education-advocacy group. Education reformers were focused on elevating academic achievement, not on raising graduation rates. One reason for their strategic focus was that a comprehensive evaluation of federal efforts to lower high school dropout rates in the 1990s found that they had no impact. Another reason was based on 2001 US Census data that reported on high school completion rates, including those who earned general education diplomas (GEDs), but not on-time high school graduation rates with a regular diploma. The census data masked the fact that about one-third of students across the nation were not finishing high school on time. The data were also distorted because, by reporting only national and state rates, the higher graduation rates in affluent suburbs outweighed the lower outcomes in low-income districts. Therefore, by that very broad formulation, no significant crisis to address existed, since high school completion rates were much higher than on-time graduation rates. Despite this lack of concern, we marched ahead on a campaign to highlight the problem accurately and convince partners to collaborate along the way.

## ESTABLISH A BOLD GOAL AND MEASURES

When we began to organize our campaign, the education sector and government statisticians had different measures for high school graduation rates—each containing fundamental flaws. A 2005 Manhattan Institute for Policy Research paper found that government agencies produced "the least plausible" graduation-rate calculations because they lacked a unified and accurate methodology. Federal measures also did not count students in the juvenile-justice system, and some states' calculations did not account for students who left the school district or stopped attending school without officially dropping out. Instead, districts and states coded these students as "whereabouts unknown" and omitted them from their calculations, consequently inflating graduation-rate data.

To address these shortcomings, the National Governors Association launched an effort in 2004 to standardize graduation-rate calculations nationwide. By 2005, all 50 governors agreed to adopt the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR), a rigorous and reliable metric that determined high school graduation rates based on the percentage of first-time ninth graders who earned a high school diploma (and not a GED) on time, within four years of matriculation. A school-transfer verification process further improved accurate counting of where students were newly enrolled and ensured that they were removed from their previous school's register. Finally, the nation agreed to a common calculation of graduation rates so that state, district, and school goals could be compared.

In 2006, we met with then-US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings to urge the adoption of the ACGR as the national measure, and the effort succeeded. In 2008, the federal government made the ACGR the official means of calculating graduation rates nationwide, beginning with the class of 2011. States were also required to set clear and more ambitious graduation-rate goals and establish meaningful annual rates of improvement toward meeting them. Prior to this update to NCLB's graduation-rate accountability regulations, states were allowed to determine how they measured high school graduation rates and, if they chose to do so, establish meager improvement goals. Common measures, combined with substantial improvement goals, enabled real accountability and comparisons across states, districts, and types of schools.

In late 2008, the campaign's four lead organizations—Civic Enterprises, the Everyone Graduates Center, America's Promise Alliance, and the Alliance for Excellent Education—gathered top leaders from education, nonprofits, civil rights groups, business, philanthropy, and government to develop a campaign with a Civic Marshall Plan to address the high school dropout challenge. The plan consisted of state- and school district-level commitments to set clear and measurable goals to improve high school graduation rates, focusing improvement efforts on low-graduation-rate communities, encouraging high academic expectations supported by engaging coursework and increased learning time, fostering training and support for teachers and administrators, implementing early warning and intervention systems, raising compulsory school-age laws, and connecting high school graduation to a postsecondary schooling and training agenda to make diplomas meaningful.

Eighteen months later, the GradNation campaign launched with more than 100 partners that pledged to align efforts to achieve a 90 percent high school graduation rate by 2020.

To generate energy in states and communities across the country, the lead organizations cohosted summits in more than 200 communities, reaching every US state, to share learnings from districts and states that were making the most progress. Civic and the Everyone Graduates Center committed to a decade-long effort to issue an annual report to the nation to keep both our campaign and our country accountable for progress.

That year, in 2010, our partner at America's Promise Alliance, General Colin Powell, shared the first *Building a GradNation* report with President Barack Obama in a televised meeting in the Oval Office. The report showed that some states and school districts were raising their high school graduation rates significantly via the scalable solutions that the GradNation campaign was promoting. Soon after, President Obama officially committed to achieving a national 90 percent high school graduation rate by the class of 2020. It was an ambitious goal, since 31 states had rates in the 70s, 7 in the 60s, and 1 in the 50s, and many large districts were also in the 50s.

In our report, which was based on data from the class of 2008, we observed the start of real progress. Tennessee and New York showed 15 and 10 percent gains in their graduation rates,

respectively, and 29 states boosted their rates from 2002 to 2008. We also reported a 13 percentage point decline in the number of dropout-factory high schools, and 400,000 fewer students enrolled in such schools in 2008, compared with 2002. Some states—like Tennessee, Texas, Alabama, and Georgia—had balanced gains across cities, suburbs, towns, and rural areas, suggesting that progress was possible in any school district. "The nation can end the high school dropout crisis," we concluded in our report.

## HOME IN ON THE HOT SPOTS

The second element for increasing graduation rates was making sure schools with graduation rates of 60 percent or less received greater resources and undertook improvement and accountability efforts. State and federal accountability laws identified low-graduation-rate high schools, which were then given access to additional funding through targeted grant programs for improving school climate, curricula, educators' professional development, and student supports. They were also encouraged to work with external partners who had experience helping low-performing schools. And they were compelled to act because of federal deadlines to show improvement or face sanctions, including replacing school leadership and staff.

In the 1990s, state efforts to improve graduation rates preceded these federal efforts. Maryland was one of the first states to identify its lowest-performing schools and threaten state takeover if no improvement occurred. In 1994, the state declared that Patterson High School was "reconstitution eligible," meaning if it did not significantly improve in three years, the state would assume governance authority over the school.

Patterson is situated in an industrial area of Baltimore. For the 1994-95 school year, it enrolled 2,096 students. More than half of these students were enrolled in ninth grade, and more than half of this figure—600 of the 1,208 freshmen—were repeating ninth grade for the second or third time. Only 235 students were enrolled in 12th grade. Most students entered Patterson High School with sixth-grade math and reading levels. Patterson's graduation rate for the class of 1994 is unknown because no data were collected that year. The only statistic available was its annual dropout rate, which was 19 percent; later analysis by CSOS researchers showed that 64 percent of entering freshmen in 1994 dropped out within four years. Patterson became reconstitution eligible because of these issues, in addition to high absenteeism (three-fourths of the students were chronically absent) and low test scores (only 28 percent passed an eighth-grade functional math test).

The state offered Patterson High School additional funding to support its improvement efforts. In the fall of 1995, Patterson's principal partnered with JHU's Center for Social Organization of Schools (CSOS), an applied educational research and development center where Bob worked, which focused on implementing comprehensive, evidence-based reforms in challenging school environments. They created a ninth-grade academy with its own dedicated space in the school, where all matriculating students began their high school experience being taught by interdisciplinary teams of teachers, whose pedagogy included a focus on improving attendance by creating a welcoming school environment and making schoolwork meaningful to students by connecting it to their futures. The school schedule was changed to a block format, with four 90-minute periods instead of the traditional eight 45-minute periods. Each ninth-grade teaching team consisted of math, English, science, and social studies teachers, who taught the same cohort of 75-90 students throughout the year. Teachers worked with just 90 students, rather than 180, a shift that enabled them to devote more time to supporting their students. The schedule was developed to mitigate the harms effected by the traditional high school program, which was organized by departments, where teachers taught students in different grades throughout the day and students were with a different set of students in each class. Because the traditional schedule did not focus on the social importance of relationship building, students often felt lost and unsupported, especially ninth graders new to high school. Teachers also had the flexibility to change the daily schedule for their cohort of students to enable, for example, the science teacher to have a longer lab period in a week when doing so benefited students.

All ninth graders took a freshman seminar designed to help them build their study and social skills and engage in career and college explorations. The school was also organized into 10th- to 12th-grade career academies. During their second semester of the ninth grade, freshmen selected the career academy they wanted to attend based on their interests, and in them took at least three career and technical training courses. These comprehensive reforms addressed the three primary drivers of dropping out: a feeling of apathy from perceived anonymity ("Nobody knows me or cares about me, so what's the point?"); a sense that graduation has little value ("I'll get the same job whether I graduate or not"); and a fear of being too far behind to succeed ("They tell me I'm at a sixth-grade reading level, so I'll never graduate").

School climate and attendance immediately and substantially improved, resulting in later gains in graduation rates and the Maryland Department of Education's overall school-improvement index, according to analysis of state and district data by CSOS researchers. Teacher surveys conducted by the CSOS team showed

By examining how many high schools had 60 percent or fewer seniors than freshmen three years earlier, they could estimate how many Patterson High Schools there were, where where they were located, and who attended them.

a dramatic change in their perception of student behaviors. Two years after the reforms were implemented, the percentage of teachers who saw student tardiness and absenteeism as serious issues declined from 83 percent to 17 percent and 96 percent to 17 percent, respectively. At the same time, the percentage of teachers reporting lack of student interest in learning declined from 67 percent to 21 percent, and a lack of student career focus dropped from 57 percent to 20 percent. Attendance improved by 15 percent in the ninth grade and by 10 percent for the school. The number of students repeating ninth grade fell from 50 percent to 15 percent, and the number of students reaching their junior and senior years nearly doubled. A 20 percentage point increase in students' passing the functional math test gave Patterson the highest pass rate among all the neighborhood high schools. On the school-performance index, Patterson climbed from the second lowest to the second highest among Baltimore's nonselective schools. Later analysis showed that the class of 2000—the first graduating class to experience the reforms throughout their entire high school experience—had an 18 percent decline in their dropout rate and a 9 percentage point increase in their graduation rate, compared with earlier cohorts who did not experience the reforms.[1]

Patterson High School's initial success generated considerable interest from other schools and districts across the country. Beginning in 2000, Bob and his CSOS colleagues visited several of these schools to explore the possibility of partnering with them to implement the Patterson reforms. Everywhere they went, they encountered problems that looked uncannily similar to those they had addressed at Patterson. This experience led them to ask how many high schools across the nation might be similar to Patterson, with many more ninth graders than graduating seniors. They quickly found that there were no existing federal or comparable state data that would allow them to determine the number of US schools with low graduation rates. Bob and his colleague Nettie Legters were determined to find the answer. They knew that high schools were required to report how many students are enrolled in each grade, so they compared the number of freshmen enrolled in one year with the number of seniors enrolled three years later for every public high school in America. By examining how many high schools had 60 percent or fewer seniors than freshmen three years earlier, they could estimate how many Patterson High Schools there were, where they were located, and who attended them. They released their initial findings at a Harvard Civil Rights Conference in 2001 and updated their analysis with new data in 2004. In short, they were able to map the dropout crisis across America. Putting this work to quick use, they discovered that about 2,000 high schools—15 percent of the nation's public and vocational high schools with more than 300 students—were dropout factories accounting for half of all students who disappeared from the 9th to 12th grades. Their analysis also showed that dropout factories primarily educated students who were low-income and youth of color, and that 40 percent of Black students and 33 percent of Latino students in the United States were enrolled in one of these schools in 2001.

In these dropout factories, students disappeared in an almost mechanical

process. Freshmen already behind in grade-level skills entered large, disorganized high schools where they felt as if nobody knew or cared about them. Absenteeism soared. Missed assignments became zeroes in the teachers' gradebooks and led to course failure. And multiple course failures led to students' need to repeat ninth grade—again under the same circumstances. Most did repeat, but with even more diminished motivation, which led to more failure and then maybe a brief stop at an alternative school before students dropped out. (According to our estimates, approximately 15 percent of students would still drop out of school because of life events, such as needing to work to help support their family, becoming pregnant, experiencing housing instability, or being involved with the juvenile-justice system. Part of the effort to confront the dropout crisis would include the creation of better recovery, second-chance, and alternative-school opportunities for students experiencing these life events.)

The identification of which high schools were driving the nation's dropout crisis, combined with evidence that these high schools could be transformed, spurred policy makers to action. In 2001, the George W. Bush administration launched the Smaller Learning Communities federal grant program to support the conversion of large high schools (with 1,000 or more students) into smaller learning communities, including ninth grade and career academies, as Patterson had done. The Obama administration prioritized dropout factories in its education agenda, requiring all high schools with graduation rates below 60 percent to engage in comprehensive turnaround efforts that involved changing school leadership, staff, and/or governance and implementing evidence-based improvements to school climate, instruction, professional development, and student supports within five years, or face being shut down. The administration allocated billions of dollars in school-improvement grants for eligible schools.

No single path emerged as the best solution. Rather, we observed that different districts found distinct ways to change the dynamics of dropout-factory high schools and give students the supports and learning experiences they needed to stay on the path to graduation.

During this era, no single path emerged as the best solution to transform low-graduation-rate high schools. Rather, we observed that different districts found distinct ways to change the dynamics of dropout-factory high schools and give students the supports and learning experiences they needed to stay on the path to graduation. For example, in the early 2000s New York City closed most of its very large neighborhood high schools (with 2,000 or more students) with graduation rates below 50 percent and replaced them with hundreds of small schools with thematic focuses. Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration determined that opening smaller schools would be more effective than reforming the larger ones. The city's small-high-school movement succeeded to great effect: The city's graduation rate climbed from 54 percent in 2004 to 75 percent in 2015, and pass rates doubled on the state regents test. New York University researchers attributed much of the increase in graduation rates to the replacement of large dropout-factory high schools with much smaller thematic schools.

Chicago took a different approach. In 2007, it put district-wide emphasis on keeping students on track to graduation through the perilous ninth-grade year—where research indicated that the vast majority of students who did not graduate first experienced academic difficulties—with no more than one semester course failure. High school principals were required to monitor ninth-grade on-track rates and use evidence-based strategies, including freshman on-track teacher teams who met weekly to review data, pool insights, and develop and implement solutions to improve ninth-grade on-track rates. Long-term data from Chicago showed how district-wide improvements in these rates correlated strongly with later gains in high school graduation rates, which improved from 49 percent in 2007 to 80 percent in 2019.

In other districts, low-graduation-rate high schools joined with community partners to offer students additional supports on the path to graduation. For example, Daniel Webster High School, a low-graduation-rate high school in Tulsa, Oklahoma, partnered with local nonprofits and saw its graduation rates rise from 53 percent in 2013 to 75 percent in 2016. The nonprofit City Year, which enlists youth in a year of community service, employed a team of 10 recent college graduates to each support about 10 students throughout the school day, greeting them in the morning, sitting in math and English classes with them so they could help the students complete their assignments, and engaging them in after-school activities. The Virginia-based nonprofit Communities in Schools provided a site coordinator who linked students and families experiencing life challenges with nonprofit and social services that could help the students remain on the path to graduation. Students were directed to the appropriate supports through the efforts of an on-site early-warning system facilitator, who engaged teacher teams and the representatives from City Year and Communities in Schools in monitoring student attendance, behavior, and course performance, and collectively devising customized responses to challenges students faced.

Such localized efforts, combined with some parents enrolling their children in schools with higher graduation rates, resulted in the number of dropout factories declining from roughly 2,000 in 2001 to about 700 in 2019. Even more significant, the percentage of Black and Latino students attending dropout

factories fell precipitously—from 40 percent and 33 percent, respectively, to about 15 percent.

## LISTEN TO THE CUSTOMER

When we started the work that led to the national graduation campaign, we knew we needed to learn more about those students who made the decision to drop out so we could understand who those students were, why they dropped out, and what might have kept them in school. Unfortunately, we could not find any national surveys that included the stories from dropouts. In 2004, Bridge and Geoff Garin of Hart Research, working in partnership with Marie Groark of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, conducted a series of youth focus groups and surveys of 467 total former students, ages 16-25, in 25 cities, suburbs, and small towns.

Our survey showed that nearly half of the former students said that classes were not interesting, engaging, or relevant to the paths they had imagined for their lives. Two-thirds commented that they would have worked harder if their teachers had demanded more of them. In our focus groups, students talked about the importance of teachers' knowing their names and interests. "If the teachers had known my name, known what my interests were, known what books I loved," a young woman from Philadelphia shared, "I would never have dropped out."

As Bridge, John DiIulio, and Karen Morison of Civic wrote in their 2006 report on the data they gathered, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, students did not drop suddenly or randomly. Instead, the decision resulted from a slow process of disengagement from school, with plenty of indicators that should have rung alarm bells for teachers, administrators, and parents. (Exceptions to this pattern include students experiencing life events.) In addition, 35 states had no laws requiring students to stay in school until 18 or graduation. When students turned 16, in some states they could just sign a form and leave school forever or simply stop showing up and no one would try to reach out to them.

Upon the report's publication, we wrote every governor in the nation to ask them to make the dropout crisis a priority in their State of the State Addresses, include it in their budget priorities, and stay committed to meeting their graduation-rate goals. For those states that had outdated compulsory school-age laws, Bridge and his Civic colleagues wrote a report that provided templates for action, featuring examples of model legislation from other states, along with information on evidence-based supports for struggling students, including mentoring and tutoring, extra time in reading labs, and ninth-grade academies. As a result, most states raised their school age to 17 or 18 or required students to stay until graduation. Researchers had shown that roughly 25 percent of potential dropouts remain in school because of compulsory school-age laws. (No study exists on the relationship between states that raised such laws and progress they made on increasing high school graduation rates.)

Our efforts to listen to students and locate dropout factories intersected in important ways. Our surveys of students, many of whom had attended dropout-factory schools, showed that when nearly half of the students were dropping out, that trend created a school culture that made doing so acceptable. Some students even talked about how they felt pressure from peers to leave school. Dropping out was normalized in those schools, even though our interviews showed that most students wanted to graduate and saw how important graduating was to securing employment. This twin effort—which humanized the problem with student voices and showed that most high school dropouts could have graduated with the right support, and which identified the very schools that were responsible for half of the nation's dropouts—gave leaders in education, nonprofits, business, and government hope that the dropout challenge was fixable. Our work, in tandem with *The Silent Epidemic*, generated massive public and media attention, including a 2006 *TIME* cover story titled "Dropout Nation," two episodes of The Oprah Winfrey Show, and a Sunday *Washington Post* column by Pulitzer Prize-winning author David Broder. The nationwide awareness from this attention helped to change the narrative about dropping out from its being a personal failing to a consequence of systemic issues in education. Having the dropout challenge so prominently in the public domain for all Americans to see made it easier to build a coalition to do something about it.

## NURTURE AND SUSTAIN AN ALL-SECTOR COALITION

As early as 2004, we worked with our partners at America's Promise Alliance and the Alliance for Excellent Education to build a coalition, starting with listening to those affected most directly by the dropout crisis: students, teachers, administrators, parents, and counselors. Our surveys from 2004 through 2012—not only of students who had dropped out but also of teachers, administrators, and parents—told us they were not fully aware of the scope and impact of the problem. Once armed with knowledge of the problem and evidence, they started to mobilize around proven solutions: implementing early-warning systems to identify students who were off track; monitoring individual student attendance; increasing tutoring and mentoring offerings; creating ninth-grade academies to support the critical transition year to high school; and expanding efforts to demonstrate education's relevance to employment success through dual enrollment, early college high schools, and alternative schools with strong connections to job training.

We tapped student-advocacy nonprofits; the two major teachers' unions (the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association); and associations representing counselors, administrators, and parents for our coalition. Each organization shared our reports and plans with their networks and collaborated with local and state governments to address the challenge. Given the disproportionate impact on students of color, we also partnered with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and National Council of La Raza (now UnidosUS). Many of their chapters held summits to raise awareness about the high school dropout problem and to prompt action.

We engaged major national youth-development organizations with affiliates across the nation—including the United Way, City

We were able to organize such a broad coalition because we demonstrated that working together to address the nation's dropout crisis advanced their own work, since education success is a major determinant in other outcomes for youth.

Year, Communities in Schools, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, and Big Brothers, Big Sisters—to help align their work in keeping students on the path to high school graduation. We also urged the boards of these organizations to make addressing the dropout challenge a top priority. For many of them, focusing on boosting high school graduation rates as part of their missions provided a solid metric by which they could demonstrate to their supporters and funders that their organization was making a tangible impact on students' lives.

We also looked for additional leverage through the media. Riding the tailwinds of the major media coverage, Bridge organized the National Summit on America's Silent Epidemic in partnership with *TIME*, MTV, and the National Governors Association, and supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. That summit led to a partnership with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and sparked CPB's initiative called American Graduate, which mobilized and financed many of the TV, radio, digital, and online public media affiliates to provide extensive coverage of the dropout crisis and convened local leaders from different sectors. CPB also funded Student Reporting Labs, in which students learned how to report and prompt action on the dropout problem in their schools. As part of the American Graduate initiative, the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) covered the issue on its flagship NewsHour program and encouraged its hundreds of member stations to enjoin civic leaders to work together to address the dropout challenge.

The CPB and PBS efforts produced significant, measurable returns on investment. The American Graduate initiative was strongly supported by CPB CEO Pat Harrison and the board, which participated in many of our annual summits. In reporting to the CPB board on results, Bridge shared that in 88 percent of the communities in which CPB and PBS focused the American Graduate initiative, graduation rates increased at twice the national average.

We also worked to mobilize the private sector's interest in high school graduation rates. One of our partners, the Alliance for Excellent Education, produced a report in 2011 showing the significant economic impact of the dropout crisis on individuals, society, and economies at the local, state, and national levels. The economic impact of dropping out became a central issue of our more than 200 summits across America beginning in 2006, and business leaders who attended these summits were inspired to action. One prominent example was AT&T, which launched a massive, $500 million investment over a decade, providing grants to schools, districts, and nonprofits on the front lines of improving high school graduation rates. CEO Randall Stephenson became a strong advocate for improving educational outcomes and workforce readiness and participated in interviews making the case that we would use in our summits.

We were also supported by the public health sector. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared dropping out of high school to be a public health issue, since graduating from high school was one of the strongest social determinants of health. A brigadier general fresh from a tour in Afghanistan showed up at our annual national summit to learn how US Army Junior ROTC programs could support students staying in school. We subsequently partnered with the National Guard Youth Challenge program, which helped students who were not succeeding in the traditional high school setting find paths to productive employment and civic engagement. To continue elevating student perspectives on the dropout crisis that we first cataloged in *The Silent Epidemic*, America's Promise Alliance, under CEO John Gomperts, and the Center for Promise, led by Jon Zaff, issued a powerful report in 2014 on the experiences that led students to leave school.

And, of course, we engaged policy makers at all levels. The campaign worked closely with US presidents, US secretaries of education, and other federal officials across administrations; the National Governors Association; Council of Chief State School Officers; Chiefs for Change; United States Conference of Mayors; National League of Cities; and many other associations. President George W. Bush made education reform a signature priority, and President Barack Obama continued the work with special emphasis on improvement in low-performing schools. Secretaries of Education Margaret Spellings, Arne Duncan, and John King regularly had us brief their education teams and keynoted our summits.

Governors and mayors across parties made boosting high school graduation rates a priority—and frequently were rewarded by voters with reelection for doing so. By showing that progress was possible in red, blue, and purple states, and that governors and mayors ranging from progressives to conservatives were taking action and seeing results, these efforts encouraged others to highlight the dropout challenge in their local communities and embrace reforms and solutions that were having an impact in other localities and states.

Republicans in particular liked how deeply involved the private sector had become in the issue, as CEOs and other business leaders participated in our summits and corporations like AT&T made education a top priority in their philanthropy. Democrats saw how public investments were following evidence-based initiatives and generating better returns on public investments, including increases in graduation rates for disadvantaged students, given that the federal government was disaggregating graduation rates by race, ethnicity, income, disability, and English-language learning, and our annual reports were showing the progress these populations were making.

Foundations also stepped up. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation was a first mover in funding our surveys of students who

dropped out, parents, and teachers, as well as cohosting our first national summit with the National Governors Association, Civic, *TIME*, and MTV. In addition, the foundation mobilized and provided funding to its large network of advocacy and constituent organizations in its efforts to mobilize their audience to address the dropout crisis.

The Raikes Foundation supported our *Hidden in Plain Sight* report and plan, which put the challenge of unhoused students dropping out on the national radar. And the Lumina Foundation, which shared a goal of the national graduation campaign to increase quality postsecondary credentials, became a regular partner in this work to ensure that graduating from high school led to success in postsecondary education and training and preparation for the workforce. Community foundations were also important partners in different areas of the country. In all cases, funders saw a massive return on their investments, with two decades of gains in high school graduation rates that in turn would generate benefits to individuals, society, and the economy. In short, we were able to organize such a broad coalition because we demonstrated that working together to address the nation's dropout crisis advanced their own work, no matter their core issue, since education success is a major determinant in other outcomes for youth.

## BEYOND 90

Despite its many achievements, the GradNation campaign did not ultimately achieve its goal of 90 percent graduation rate nationwide by 2020. The campaign hit challenges that we were not able to overcome. School and district administrators often turned over at an alarming rate, risking the durability of gains spurred by consistent leadership. The student-to-counselor ratios in the large public high schools were often more than 1,000 to one. Increasing high school graduation rates alone did not guarantee a ticket to future success, given that most jobs today and in the future require postsecondary training or education.

Our outside partners waxed and waned too, since their missions were not exclusively focused on the dropout challenge and new leaders each brought their own priorities. New policy makers and administrations often wanted fresh initiatives and lost interest in the dropout crisis. Changes in business and foundation leadership often meant changes in priorities. One major partner even stopped participating because we fell slightly short of our highly ambitious 90 percent goal. Ending the national graduation campaign before we fully reached the national goal was a huge disappointment. And then, of course, came the COVID-19 pandemic, which jolted the entire education system.

Yet the campaign achieved gains on a scale few thought possible. Graduation rates did not rise just because of changing demographics, a greater realization that dropping out was a dead end, or gaming the system. Variability in the timing, pace, and sustainability of progress showed that they rose in communities that recognized the importance of raising graduation rates and worked the problem over time, learning as they went. Our visits to more than 100 high schools over 20 years showed us repeated evidence that classrooms, schools, and districts could in fact create a "culture where every student counts," in the words of an Indiana superintendent whose high school was featured in *TIME*'s cover story and whose efforts would raise graduation rates from 72 percent to 92 percent. And repeated studies showed significant progress all over the United States. After 30 years of flatlining high school graduation rates before the turn of the 21st century, the GradNation campaign showed the country that significant progress could be made and worked across politics, sectors and areas of the country to get the job done.

We cannot stop now. Getting to 90 percent and beyond will require further work in the schools, districts, and states that are lagging. The good news is that evidence shows that any school, district, or state can make progress. As was the case over the past two decades, all sectors will have to join forces, devote leadership and resources, and commit to evidence-based reforms and accountability to advance. Amid an increasingly unforgiving labor market that requires postsecondary training and education, we are working with our partners at Jobs for the Future, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Lumina Foundation to shape a "Future Pathways" initiative that connects K-12 schools, higher education, and businesses to improve the percentage of young people finding decent-paying jobs and being connected in their communities by the age of 25.

Our experience coleading a national campaign with so many extraordinary leaders and institutions across the country gives us faith that progress on seemingly intractable domestic problems is possible, even in times of great political polarization. We encourage leaders in other fields to study the campaign's four-step formula and adapt it to the issues they have dedicated their lives to solving. And we encourage them to be relentless in creating a platform for shared work that taps the ingenuity, creativity, and entrepreneurial spirt of the American people. ○

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NOTES

1 JHU stopped working with Patterson High School in 2000, when the new principal and superintendent believed that they could continue to improve outcomes without an outside partner. The school did continue to improve, but by the 2010s, amid constant leadership churn, fewer and fewer of the initial reforms remained in place. The school's outcomes also began to decline, and it now has a graduation rate in the low 60s. Patterson's importance to our story—besides leading us to the idea of a dropout factory—is not so much that we found the magical set of reforms as that a comprehensive, evidence-based approach showed that positive change was possible. Over time, other schools were able to learn from the Patterson reforms and find ways to make them more sustainable.