

## **The Graduation Rate Crisis and What We Can Do About It-The Federal Role in Secondary School Reform**

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We are at a moment when well conceived action by the federal government can play a catalytic role in ending the nation's dropout crisis and in so doing change the nation fundamentally for the better. Pick the issue you care most deeply about-the nation's competitiveness, equal opportunity, lowering the crime rate, reducing social welfare costs, urban or rural development, social justice, economic growth, or unleashing the full potential of all the nation's citizens and the case can be made the creating a system of public secondary schools which graduate all students prepared for success in college, career, and civic life is your issue. This is within our grasp, we know how to do this and we know what needs to be done to make it happen. Central to this is a focused federal effort to create a federal-state-local partnership which provides the accountability framework, capacity building, technical assistance, research, evaluation, and resources necessary to transform the nation's low performing secondary schools.

Let me explain. I come at this issue from three perspectives. First from what I have learned as a researcher who has studied the causes, consequences, and location of the dropout problem at the national level, as well as the reforms, policies, and resources needed to end it. Second from validating this learning through practice as a whole school reform model developer who has worked with over thirty diverse urban and rural school districts and over 100 high poverty middle and high schools across the nation to implement the Talent Development Middle and High School's comprehensive organizational, instructional and teacher/administrator development/support reforms. Finally, my perspective is informed by first hand experience operating a non-selective, public Innovation High School in West Baltimore which serves a high poverty student population. The Baltimore Talent Development High School is run via a partnership between Johns Hopkins University and the Baltimore City Public School System and has given me the insight which comes from having to help design an instructional program, implement a multi-tiered system of student supports, select and train a teaching staff, get facilities in working order, and do what it takes to prepare students no matter what their entering skill level and motivation for adult success in college, career, and life. From the sum of these experiences here is what I have learned.

### **What we Know**

For the past decade I and my colleagues at the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins and the Philadelphia Education Fund, have studied the dropout/graduation rate crisis at the school level. We have learned that about 15% of the nation's high schools produce close to half its dropouts. These 2,000 high schools are the

nation's dropout factories. They have weak promoting power -- the number of seniors is routinely 60% or fewer than the number of freshmen four years earlier -- and year after year, often for a decade or longer, about as many students dropout as graduate. In the worst cases, four hundred freshmen often produce 150 or fewer graduates.

About half these schools are in northern, Midwestern and western cities; the other half are primarily found throughout the South and Southwest. Whether the national graduation rate has gotten better, worse, or remained static over the last decade is unclear to us. What we do know is that the number of high schools with weak promoting power has nearly doubled in the last decade.

We also have learned that poverty is the fundamental driver of low graduation rates. There is a near perfect linear relationship between a high school's level of concentrated poverty and its tendency to lose large numbers of students between ninth and twelfth grades. In the states we have looked at in more depth, minorities are promoted to 12<sup>th</sup> grade at the same or greater rates as white youth when they attend middle class or affluent high schools in which few students live in poverty.

Relatively few minorities attend these high schools, however. Between a third and two-fifths of the nation's African American and Latino students attend high schools with high poverty and low graduation rates. This is social dynamite because in modern America a good education is the only reliable path out of poverty. The fact that most of these high-poverty, high-minority high schools, do not receive Title 1 funding, *the* federal program designed to help offset the impact of poverty, is deeply problematic.

We also have been able to follow multiple cohorts of students through two major northeastern school districts. Our data show that the majority of dropouts in these cities leave high school with few credits because they failed the majority of their classes. This is not to ignore important sub-groups of dropouts who demonstrate some high school skills, persevere to 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade and leave school just shy of graduation in response to a life event, boredom, or frustration.

We have found, however, that graduation rates in the 50-60% range typical in many cities are driven by students who enter high school poorly prepared for success and rarely or barely make it out of the ninth grade. They disengage from school, attend infrequently, fail too many courses to be promoted to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, try again with no better results, and ultimately drop out of school. Our data show 30-40% of students in these cities repeat the ninth grade but that only 10-15% of repeaters go on to graduate.

Our direct experience working to improve more than 70 high-poverty, non-selective high schools through our Talent Development High Schools program further tells us that the nation's dropout factories are not primarily the result of students, teachers and administrators who do not care or try. Many care and try a lot, but they are often over-matched by the immense educational challenges they face. There are too many under resourced and increasingly economically and racially segregated high schools that lack the tools and techniques needed to meet the challenges they face. In these high

schools it is not uncommon for less than 20% of freshmen to be on-age, first-time ninth graders, with math and reading skills at the seventh-grade level or higher; in short, the type of students high schools have traditionally been designed to educate. Up to 80% of the ninth-graders can be over-age for grade, repeating the grade, require special education services, or have math and reading skills below a seventh-grade level. Yet increasingly, we are asking these students to pass Algebra courses and even exams before they can be promoted to 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

These students have the ability to do this, but they need much more intensive and effective instruction and adult support than our high-poverty, comprehensive high schools, with current levels of resources, typically provide. Schools which beat these odds and have high percentages of students who succeed in challenging courses provide multiple layers of support. Strong instructional programs are matched with a schedule that allowed for double-dosing in these subjects, and extra help from caring teachers within a personalized interdisciplinary team structure. But this is still not enough for all students to succeed, some require summer school and a few need further focused instruction in the fall to earn promotion to the next grade. Pulling off this level of intensive support requires not only committed adults who refuse to give up on their students, but additional time, resources, training, and materials as well.

Finally, our most recent study reveals that many students begin to fall off the graduation track at the start of adolescence. We have been able to identify over half of four major school district's future dropouts as early as the sixth grade by looking at just four variables commonly measured in schools--attendance, behavior, and course failure in math and English. Across these districts high poverty middle grade students with any one of the following risk factors--attending school less than 85-90% of the time, being identified as having behavioral problems, or failing math or English typically had less than a 20% chance of graduating within five years of entering ninth grade.

Hence, one reason that the ninth grade finishes off so many students is that many of them have already been struggling and disengaging for three years or more before entering high school. Along with the recent on-track measures for ninth-graders developed by the Chicago Consortium for School Research, this tells us that there are powerful and accessible indicators that schools can use to identify the overwhelming majority of students who will drop out in time to prevent it, as well as indicating the areas in which these students need supports.

Thus, states and districts can use *currently available* indicators to identify both the high schools that produce the majority of dropouts and the students most likely to drop out. This means resources and supports can be targeted to the schools and students where they will do the most good and are needed the most.

## **What We Can and Must Do**

Our research also points to concrete steps we can take *right now* to address the graduation crisis head on. At least three types of intervention are required:

First, the nation's Dropout Factories need to be fixed or replaced. This cause should unite everyone, the urban North, and the rural South, Civil Rights advocates and policymakers concerned about competitiveness. Transforming these schools and systems is the best shot we have at ending the stubborn grip of concentrated and inter-generational poverty that engulfs too many of our citizens and their communities.

We have the knowledge to do this, but it will not be easy, fast, or cheap. A central feature of dropout factories is that they serve an overwhelming concentration of needy students. Thus, it is essential that federal government, states, districts and foundations bring to bear human and financial resources that are equal to the challenge. We have recently shown that high schools vary considerably in resources. Some struggling high schools can implement proven reforms by re-allocating existing resources, many need modest additional support, and a quarter or more need a substantial increase in resources. Moreover, because reforming or replacing these schools is the educational equivalent of open heart surgery, states and districts need to develop sufficient technical capacity to do the job and/or support third-party intermediaries who can.

Second, investments in more research, development, and invention are needed, particularly in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. High school coursework needs to develop student's intellect and reflect tighter and more substantial connections to higher education and the workplace. It should incorporate significant experiential activities that engage our emerging adults in meaningful activities that build their skills and connections to supportive social networks. It must be adaptable enough to address diverse needs, including the increasing number of adolescents who are English language learners. Assessments need to support and encourage meaningful intellectual development and not limit learning to what is easily testable.

Finally, we must acknowledge the impact of poverty and activate "outside the box" approaches for our most vulnerable students. That means investments in improving and integrating social service and community supports in schools that serve high-poverty neighborhoods and regions. It means providing intensive supports to help students from poverty negotiate the treacherous transitions between educational levels. It means embracing a K-16 framework, but also acknowledging that adolescence (especially combined with poverty) brings its own risk factors and that a secondary approach spanning middle and high schools is needed to keep all students on track toward graduation.

We need to transform the high schools that produce most of the dropouts and the middle grades schools that feed them. With a targeted, inventive, aligned, and integrated approach, we can do this.

### **The Cost of Inaction/The Reward of Well Conceived Action**

We must do this. The social, economic, and individual costs of inaction are high. There is essentially no viable work, work that a successful life can be built around for young adults without a high school diploma. When large numbers of young adults and adolescents from a neighborhood are out of school and out of work the social structure becomes frayed and the under-class becomes self-perpetuating. In our research in Philadelphia we have shown that students who are in foster care, who are abused and neglected, who have a child, or are incarcerated almost never graduate from high school. This creates thousands of dislocated youth within a single city which often leads to tragic results. This year one of the students at our Innovation High School, a student who had dropped out in the sixth grade, whose parents were both in jail, who was a recovering alcoholic and who was on his way to a bright future, having remarked to a visiting reporter that the best thing about our school was positive peer pressure, was tragically shot to death in random street crime perpetuated by other young adults who more than likely had themselves already dropped out of school.

Conversely, the social, economic, and individual returns to ending the dropout crisis and transforming the nation's low performing schools are almost staggeringly high. Recent research by economists at Columbia and Princeton has shown that cutting the dropout rate in half through proven programs and effective efforts would, even after calculating the costs of those efforts, produce 40 billion dollars a year in economic returns via increased tax revenue and decreased social welfare costs. Once we can say to any student entering high school-rather they are from Akron, Baltimore, Worcester, Chicago, New York, Albuquerque, Los Angeles or North Carolina, Georgia, Arizona, or Florida that if you come to school every day and work hard you will graduate prepared for success in college, career and civic life we will have changed American society profoundly for the better and made true to its promise of equal opportunity for all. The students regardless of their circumstances will respond. If you do not believe me, come to Baltimore and I will introduce you to another one of our students-a self described bad boy gone good, he raises himself, while an aunt raises his child, and he has become a consistent honor roll student who pats himself on the back every time he makes it because there is no one else at home to do it. On his way to a successful career in advertising, he tells anyone who asks that the streets outside are mean but his school is heaven.

We can do this, make high school a transformative place for all the nation's students and in particular those who live in poverty. We know which schools need to be fixed or replaced, we know which students within them need multiple layers of continuous academic and social support, we have learned enough about how high schools

can be successfully turned around or started anew to make them fundamentally more successful, and we know what else we have to learn. Its time to get to work.

## **The Federal Role**

What is the federal role? The federal government in partnership with states and local school districts needs to lead the effort to transform the nation's low performing secondary schools. As my friend at the Philadelphia Education Fund likes to say it needs to be the grease and glue that gets the job done. It needs to insure that the accountability framework, capacity building, technical assistance, research, evaluation, and resources necessary to transform the nation's low performing secondary schools are put in place and sustained for the decade it will take. It needs to insure that these efforts are strong enough and directed enough to overcome the obstacles that will stand in the way-lack of will, uneven know how at school, district, and state level, limited or miss-allocated resources, leadership churn, and policy miss-alignment.

One large step in this direction is the Graduation Promise Act recently introduced by Senator Bingaman. This bill provides a means to target what we know works, to the high schools that need it the most, and to insure that in exchange for receiving the resources and support (human and financial) necessary to introduce state of the art reforms, schools and school districts are held accountable for implementing them well and sustaining them over time.

Congress also needs to help the nation get the measurement of graduation rates, right. In the re-authorization of No Child Left Behind, graduation rates must be measured accurately, disaggregated for all groups, and count as much as test scores in accountability systems. In addition when it is re-authorized NCLB at the secondary level needs to be structure so that low performing middle and high schools have the incentive to engage in the comprehensive, whole school reforms they need and are held accountable for implementing and sustaining effective reforms. This will require a set of intermediate on-track indicators, since it can take three to five years for effective whole school reform to show its full impact. Currently to many of the implicit and explicit incentives in NCLB push schools to focus on a few students rather than reforming the entire school.

In addition, there needs to be support for continued invention and discovery. All of my learning and experiences tell me that central to reducing poverty in America will be the creation of grades 6 to 14 combined middle, high, and community college full service (supplying integrated services) open at 8am close at 8pm schools in the nation's most impoverished neighborhoods. So students can enter in at the cusp of adolescence when they are most at risk of becoming disengaged from schooling and falling off the path to graduation and leave fully ready for successful, meaningful, and economically important employment. The Graduation Promise Act sows the seeds for this in Title II by setting aside funds for the development of more effective models of secondary school for struggling students who are over age and under credited but a parallel effort in curriculum

and instruction will also be needed so we can create secondary schools which full engage, educate, and develop the nation's adolescents.

Lastly, and I could no longer call myself a researcher if I did not include this, we need increased investment in knowledge building. The federal government needs to support a program of research designed to establish which educational inputs, implemented in what manner, in which types of schools have the greatest impact. The Graduation Promise Act begins this but over time even more support will be needed. For example, we need to know is it better to increase the school day, the school week, or the school year and if so, how best to use this time, or in fact is increased time not worth the cost and hence lost opportunities to bring to scale more effective reforms. This can only be answered through large scale randomized studies that will cost tens of millions of dollars to run. Currently there is funding for only for small scale randomized studies that cost millions of dollars to run. So we need to increase our nations funding for educational research and development by an order of magnitude. But as any scientist will tell you, change something by an order of magnitude and you change the world. We are at such a moment and with a well conceived federally led plan of action for transforming the nation's low performing secondary schools we can do that.