

# The Silent Epidemic

## *Perspectives of High School Dropouts*

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# An Open Letter to the American People

**T**here is a high school dropout epidemic in America. Each year, almost one third of all public high school students – and nearly one half of all blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans – fail to graduate from public high school with their class. Many of these students abandon school with less than two years to complete their high school education.

This tragic cycle has not substantially improved during the past few decades when education reform has been high on the public agenda. During this time, the public has been almost entirely unaware of the severity of the dropout problem due to inaccurate data. The consequences remain tragic.

The decision to drop out is a dangerous one for the student. Dropouts are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced, and single parents with children who drop out from high school themselves.

Our communities and nation also suffer from the dropout epidemic due to the loss of productive workers and the higher costs associated with increased incarceration, health care and social services.

Given the clear detrimental economic and personal costs to them, why do young people drop out of high school in such large numbers? Almost every elementary and middle school student reports ambitions that include high school graduation and at least some college. Why are so many dreams cut short? And what steps should be taken to turn the tide?

In an effort to better understand the lives and circumstances of students who drop out of high school and to help ground the research in the stories and reflections of the former students themselves, a series of focus groups and a survey were conducted of young people aged 16-25 who identified themselves as high school dropouts in 25 different locations throughout the United States. These interviews took place in large cities, suburbs and small towns with high dropout rates.

A primary purpose of this report is to approach the dropout problem from a perspective that has not been much considered in past studies – that of the students themselves. These efforts were designed to paint a more in-depth picture of who these young people are, why they dropped out of high school, and what might have helped them complete their high school education. We wanted to give their stories and insights a voice, and to offer our own views on next steps, in the hope that this report could be a further wake-up call to educators, policymakers, other leaders, and the public to summon the national will to address the high school dropout epidemic.





# Executive Summary

The central message of this report is that while some students drop out because of significant academic challenges, most dropouts are students who could have, and believe they could have, succeeded in school. This survey of young people who left high school without graduating suggests that, despite career aspirations that require education beyond high school and a majority having grades of a C or better, circumstances in students' lives and an inadequate response to those circumstances from the schools led to dropping out. While reasons vary, the general categories remain the same, whether in inner city Los Angeles or suburban Nebraska.

## Why Students Drop Out

**There is no single reason why students drop out of high school. Respondents report different reasons: a lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; academic challenges; and the weight of real world events. But indications are strong that these barriers to graduation are not insurmountable.**

- n **Nearly half (47 percent) said a major reason for dropping out was that classes were not interesting.** These young people reported being bored and disengaged from high school. Almost as many (42 percent) spent time with people who were not interested in school. These were among the top reasons selected by those with high GPAs and by those who said they were motivated to work hard.
- n **Nearly 7 in 10 respondents (69 percent) said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard, 80 percent did one hour or less of homework each day in high school, two-thirds would have worked harder if more was demanded of them (higher academic standards and more studying and homework), and 70 percent were confident they could have graduated if they had tried.** Even a majority of those with low GPAs thought they could have graduated.

- n **Many students gave personal reasons for leaving school. A third (32 percent) said they had to get a job and make money; 26 percent said they became a parent; and 22 percent said they had to care for a family member.** Many of these young people reported doing reasonably well in school and had a strong belief that they could have graduated if they had stayed in school. These students also were the most likely to say they would have worked harder if their schools had demanded more of them and provided the necessary support.

**It is clear that some dropouts, but not the majority, leave school because of significant academic challenges.**

- n **Thirty-five percent said that “failing in school” was a major factor for dropping out;** three out of ten said they could not keep up with schoolwork; and 43 percent said they missed too many days of school and could not catch up.
- n **Forty-five percent said they started high school poorly prepared by their earlier schooling.** Many of these students likely fell behind in elementary and middle school and could not make up the necessary ground. They reported that additional supports in high school that would have made a difference (such as tutoring or after school help) were not there.
- n **Thirty-two percent were required to repeat a grade before dropping out and twenty-nine percent expressed significant doubts that they could have met their high school's requirements for graduation even if they had put in the necessary effort.** The most academically challenged students were the most likely to report that their schools were not doing enough to help students when they had trouble learning and to express doubt about whether they would have worked harder if more had been expected of them.



**As complex as these individual circumstances may be, for almost all young people, dropping out of high school is not a sudden act, but a gradual process of disengagement; attendance patterns are a clear early sign.**

- n **Fifty-nine to 65 percent of respondents missed class often the year before dropping out.** Students described a pattern of refusing to wake up, skipping class, and taking three hour lunches; each absence made them less willing to go back. These students had long periods of absences and were sometimes referred to the truant officer, only to be brought back to the same environment that led them to become disengaged.
- n **Thirty-eight percent believed they had “too much freedom” and not enough rules.** As students grew older, they had more freedom and more options, which led some away from class or the school building. It was often too easy to skip class or engage in activities outside of school.

**For those students who dropped out, the level of proactive parental involvement in their education was low.**

- n **Fifty-nine percent of parents or guardians of respondents were involved in their child’s schooling,** with only one-fifth (21 percent) “very” involved. More than half of those parents or guardians who were involved at all were involved mainly for discipline reasons.
- n **Sixty-eight percent of respondents said their parents became more involved only when they were aware that their child was on the verge of dropping out.** The majority of parents were “not aware” or “just somewhat aware” of their child’s grades or that they were about to leave school.

**In hindsight, young people who dropped out of school almost universally expressed great remorse for having left high school and expressed**

**strong interest in re-entering school with students their age.**

- n **As adults, the overwhelming majority of poll participants (81 percent) said that graduating from high school was important to success in life.**
- n **Three-fourths (74 percent) said that if they were able to relive the experience, they would have stayed in school** and 76 percent said they would definitely or probably re-enroll in a high school for people their age if they could.
- n **Forty-seven percent would say that not having a diploma makes it hard to find a good job.** They wished they had listened to those who warned them of problems associated with dropping out, or that such voices had been more persistent.

## What Might Help Students Stay in School

**While there are no simple solutions to the dropout crisis, there are clearly “supports” that can be provided within the academic environment and at home that would improve students’ chances of staying in school. While most dropouts blame themselves for failing to graduate, there are things they say schools can do to help them finish.**

- n **Improve teaching and curricula to make school more relevant and engaging and enhance the connection between school and work:** Four out of five (81 percent) said there should be more opportunities for real-world learning and some in the focus groups called for more experiential learning. They said students need to see the connection between school and getting a good job.
- n **Improve instruction, and access to supports, for struggling students:** Four out of five (81 percent) wanted better teachers and three-fourths wanted smaller classes with more



individualized instruction. More than half (55 percent) felt that more needed to be done to help students who had problems learning, and 70 percent believed more tutoring, summer school and extra time with teachers would have improved their chances of graduating.

- n **Build a school climate that fosters academics:** Seven in ten favored increasing supervision in school and more than three in five (62 percent) felt more classroom discipline was necessary. More than half (57 percent) felt their schools did not do enough to help students feel safe from violence. Seven in ten (71 percent) said their schools did not do enough to make school interesting.
- n **Ensure that students have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school:** While two-thirds (65 percent) said there was a staff member or teacher who cared about their success, only 56 percent said they could go to a staff person for school problems and just two-fifths (41 percent) had someone in school to talk to about personal problems. More than three out of five (62 percent) said their school needed to do more to help students with problems outside of class. Seven in ten favored more parental involvement.
- n **Improve the communication between parents and schools:** Seventy-one percent of young people surveyed felt that one of the keys to keeping students in school was to have better communication between the parents and the school, and increasing parental involvement in their child's education. Less than half said their school contacted their parents or themselves when they were absent (47 percent) or when they dropped out (48 percent).

## Policy Pathways

The stories, insights and reflections from this student survey and the focus groups reveal the

**importance of the student voice in the discussion about what must be done to improve high school graduation rates and to prepare struggling students for successful futures. The students have spoken. It is time for us to respond. To help these students succeed, we need:**

### In Schools and Communities

- n **Different schools for different students.** Instead of the usual “one-size fits all” school, districts should develop options for students, including a curriculum that connects what they are learning in the classroom with real life experiences and with work, smaller learning communities with more individualized instruction, and alternative schools that offer specialized programs to students at-risk of dropping out. Teachers should have high expectations for their students and try different approaches to motivate them to learn.
- n **Parent engagement strategies and individualized graduation plans.** Schools and teachers should strengthen their communication with parents and work with them to ensure students show up and complete their work and develop graduation plans that are shared with parents.
- n **Early warning systems.** Schools need to develop district-wide (or even state-wide) early warning systems to help them identify students at risk of failing in school and to develop mechanisms that trigger, and ensure there is follow through on, the appropriate support for the students. One clear step relates to absenteeism. Every day, schools should have a reliable list of the students who failed to attend school and should notify parents or guardians immediately and take appropriate action to ensure students attend school and have the support they need to remain in school.
- n **Additional supports and adult advocates.** Schools need to provide a wide range of supplemental services or intensive assistance



strategies for struggling students in schools – literacy programs, attendance monitoring, school and peer counseling, mentoring, tutoring, double class periods, internships, service-learning, summer school programs, and more – and provide adult advocates in the school who can help students find the support they need. Schools also need to provide appropriate supports to students with special needs, such as pregnant women and students with disabilities, and enhance their coordination with community-based institutions and government agencies.

## In States

- n **A re-examination of the compulsory school age requirements.** Students identified “too much freedom” as a key factor that enabled them to drop out of school, and attendance is a strong predictor of dropping out. States should consider raising the age at which students can legally leave school from 16 or 17 to 18. Together with well-trained staffs, more manageable caseloads, working partnerships with government agencies, and efforts to address the underlying conditions that caused students to leave school in the first place, we believe this action could have a significant effect on reducing dropout rates.
- n **More accurate data from states and school districts.** Schools and communities cannot adequately address the dropout problem without an accurate account of it. There are too many ways to calculate graduation and dropout rates that disguise the problem. The National Governors Association has made good progress in getting all 50 states to agree to a common definition for calculating graduation rates. More work needs to be done to build the data systems that will allow states to collect and publish information on graduation and dropout rates and to monitor progress state by state over time.

## In the Nation

- n **More accurate national data from federal departments and agencies.** Just as all 50 states are working to obtain more accurate data to help schools and communities understand the extent of the dropout problem, the federal government should review the Current Population Survey and other data it collects to ensure that national data also paints an accurate picture of the problem.
- n **Better incentives under federal law.** Low-performing students need more support in school. Schools should have incentives under the No Child Left Behind law to raise both test scores and graduation rates and to ensure there is a balance between the two so that proper attention is given to low-performing students. If schools are only rewarded for raising test scores, the law could have the unintended effect of giving schools an incentive to “push out” low-performing students whose test scores would bring down school averages.
- n **Research on what works and dissemination of best practices.** While states and school districts have instituted many dropout prevention programs, there remains a need for federal evaluations of these programs and the sharing of the most innovative and successful programs that can be brought to scale.

## Next Steps

- n **A national conversation and response.** Educators, policymakers and leaders from various sectors should make addressing the high school dropout epidemic a top national priority. All avenues to invest leaders in a better understanding of the problem and common solutions should be undertaken – including congressional hearings, White House conferences, summits of state and local officials, and public forums in schools and communities. In all cases, the voices of young people who dropped out of high school should be heard.





# The Silent Epidemic

High dropout rates are a silent epidemic afflicting our nation's high schools. The dropout epidemic in the United States disproportionately affects young people who are low-income, minority, urban, single-parent children attending large, public high schools in the inner city. But the problem is not unique to young people in such circumstances. Nationally, research puts the graduation rate between 68 and 71 percent, which means that almost one-third of all public high school students in America fail to graduate.<sup>1</sup> For minority students (black, Hispanic or Native American), the rate at which they finish public high school with a regular diploma declines to approximately 50 percent.<sup>2</sup> Graduation rates for whites and Asians hover around 75 to 77 percent, respectively, with about one-quarter of these students failing to graduate.<sup>3</sup> On average, female students graduate at slightly higher rates.<sup>4</sup> Graduation and dropout rates vary considerably by state and region of the country, sometimes by as much as 30 percentage points.<sup>5</sup> And the dropout problem radiates beyond cities to suburbs, towns and rural areas.<sup>6</sup>

In 2003, 3.5 million youth ages 16 to 25 did not have a high school diploma and were not enrolled in school.<sup>7</sup> There are nearly 2,000 high schools in the country with low graduation rates, concentrated in about 50 large cities, and in 15 primarily southern and southwestern states.<sup>8</sup> In more than 20 of these cities, 75 percent or more of the students attend public high schools where graduating is less than a 60 percent proposition.<sup>9</sup> This tragic cycle has not substantially improved during the past few decades when education reform has been high on the public agenda. Some experts expect the dropout problem to increase

substantially through 2020 unless significant improvements are made.<sup>10</sup>

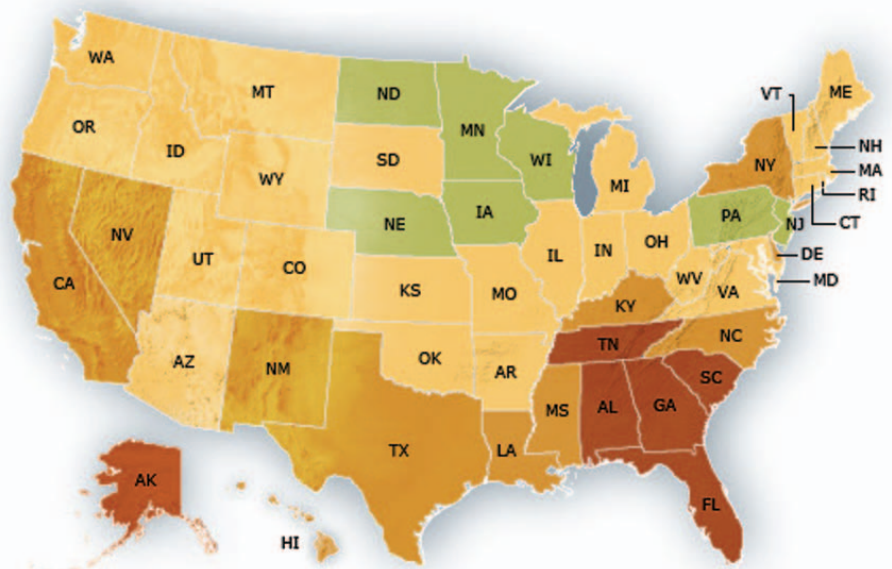
Tragically, the public is almost entirely unaware of the severity of the problem due to inaccurate data – both the underestimation of dropout rates and the overestimation of graduation rates. As a former Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education has observed,

“Many schools in America can't tell us on any given day who's in school and who's not, nor in any given year how many students have successfully made it through their four years of schooling to graduate and how many have dropped out.”<sup>11</sup>

This report is written from the perspective of high school dropouts in the context of what we know from decades of studies about the problem. It paints a picture of who drops out from high school, shares their insights and reflections about why they dropped out and what schools could have done to help them stay in school, and offers ways forward to inform a national conversation on the dropout epidemic in America.

## U.S. Graduation Rates for the Class of 2002

State Graduation Rates: ■ 90-100% ■ 80-89% ■ 70-79% ■ 60-69% ■ <60%



Based on data from Greene, Jay and Marcus Winters (2005). *Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991–2002*. Education Working Paper No. 8. New York: Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute.



## Consequences of our Nation's Low Graduation Rates

The decision to drop out is a dangerous one for the student, particularly in a post-Industrial and technological age in which workers need at least a high school diploma to compete in the workforce. Dropouts are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced, and ultimately single parents with children who drop out from high school themselves.<sup>12</sup>

High school dropouts, on average, earn \$9,200 less per year than high school graduates, and about \$1 million less over a lifetime than college graduates.<sup>13</sup> Students who drop out of high school are often unable to support themselves; high school dropouts were over three times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed in 2004.<sup>14</sup> They are twice as likely as high school graduates to slip into poverty from one year to the next.<sup>15</sup> And there even seems to be a correlation with education and good health: at every age range, the more education, the healthier the individual. Among Americans over 45, college

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graduates are twice as likely as dropouts to report being in excellent or very good health.<sup>16</sup>

The prevalence of high dropout rates not only imperils individual futures but also profoundly impacts our communities and nation due to the loss of productive workers, the earnings and revenues they would have generated, and the higher costs associated with increased incarceration, health care and social services. Four out of every 10 young adults (ages 16 – 24) lacking a high school diploma received some type of government assistance in 2001, and a dropout is more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as a person with at least a high school diploma.<sup>17</sup> Studies show that the lifetime cost to the nation for each youth who drops out of school and later moves into a life of crime and drugs ranges from \$1.7 to \$2.3 million.<sup>18</sup>

Given the clear costs to them and to the country, why do young people drop out of high school in such large numbers? Almost every elementary and middle school student reports ambitions that include high school graduation and at least some college. A poll released by MTV and the National Governors Association in the Spring of 2005 found that 87 percent of all young people want to go onto college.<sup>19</sup> And yet, young people continue to drop out of high school in stunningly large numbers. This report seeks to answer the question of why so many dreams are cut short, and to foster a national conversation about what might be done about it.

## Who is Dropping Out?

To answer this question, we went right to the source—dropouts themselves. This report is based on four focus groups of ethnically and racially diverse 16 to 24-year-olds who did not complete high school and on interviews, primarily face to face, with 467 ethnically and racially diverse students aged 16 through 25 who had dropped out of public high schools in 25 different locations—including large cities, suburbs and small towns—with high dropout rates. We did not attempt to obtain a sample of students that represented the same demographics as the nation as a whole.<sup>20</sup> The methodology we used for surveying students is set forth in more detail in Appendix I.



Our survey, which again we emphasize may not in all cases mirror national statistics, paints a picture of the American high school dropout that may surprise people:

- n 88 percent had passing grades, with 62 percent having “C’s and above”;
- n 58 percent dropped out with just two years or less to complete high school;
- n 66 percent would have worked harder if expectations were higher;
- n 70 percent were confident they could have graduated from high school;
- n 81 percent recognized that graduating from high school was vital to their success;
- n 74 percent would have stayed in school if they had to do it over again;
- n 51 percent accepted personal responsibility for not graduating and an additional 26 percent shared the responsibility between themselves and their school, leaving very few who blamed the schools alone; and
- n Nearly all of the students had thoughtful ideas about what their schools could have done to keep them from dropping out and would counsel students who are thinking of dropping out not to do so.

The young people surveyed appeared thoughtful and honest about their school experiences and their current (and prior) life circumstances and how the two intersected. They talked about their expectations and dreams for themselves, which were generally high; the regrets they had about dropping out of school; how they would counsel others not to make the same mistake; and how they accepted personal responsibility for their decisions.

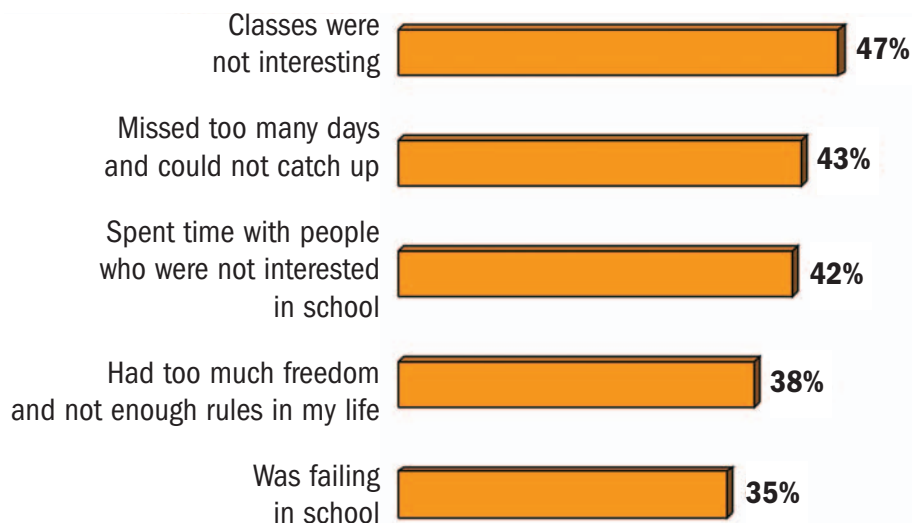
## Why Students Drop Out of High School

Considering that many of these former students understood the importance of education in fulfilling their goals and many had passing grades and only a couple of years to go, why did they drop out? There is no single reason why students drop out of high school. The decision to drop out is complex and relates to the individual student – and their family, school and community.<sup>21</sup> The decision is personal, reflects their unique life circumstances, and is part of a slow process of disengagement from school.

There appear to be, however, clusters of reasons or common responses that emerge relating to the academic environment, real life events, and a lack of personal motivation and external sources of motivation and guidance.

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## Top Five Reasons Dropouts Identify as Major Factors For Leaving School





**There is no single reason why students drop out of high school. Respondents report different reasons: a lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; academic challenges; and the weight of real world events. But indications are strong that these barriers to graduation are not insurmountable.**

## School is Boring

### 47 Percent Said Classes Were Not Interesting

Nearly half (47 percent) of former students surveyed said a major factor in their decision to drop out was that classes were not interesting. Spending time with people who were not interested in school was another major factor in the decision to drop out for 42 percent of our respondents. These were among the top reasons selected by those with high GPAs and by those who said they were motivated to work hard. Still, even this group will need more supports to meet higher standards and to connect what they are learning in the classroom to the skills they will need in the workforce.

When the participants in our focus groups were asked in what areas their high school did not do enough, their highest level of response

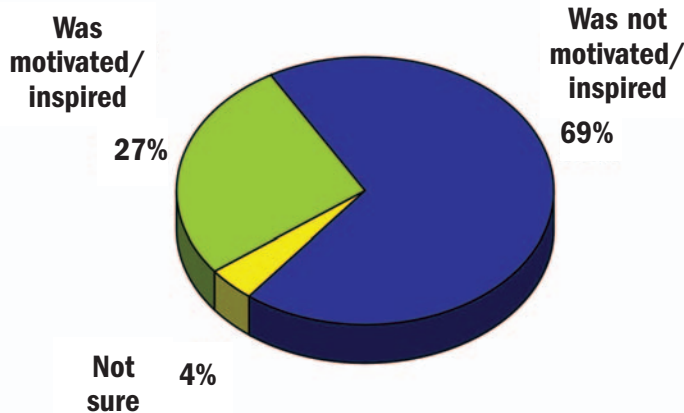
related to “not making school interesting.” Again and again, participants recounted how high school was “boring, nothing I was interested in,” or “it was boring, ...the teacher just stood in front of the room and just talked and didn’t really like involve you.” A female from Baltimore said, “There wasn’t any learning going on,” and another complained, “they make you take classes in school that you’re never going to use in life.” Many felt even their teachers were not engaged in the classes and teachers “only care about getting through their day too.”

## Uninspired Teaching, Unmotivated Students

### Low Expectations Held by Adults for the Students Contrast to the High Expectations Students Have for Themselves

Sixty-nine percent of respondents to our survey also cited not feeling motivated or inspired to work hard, and many indicated they would have liked to have been so inspired. In our focus groups, young adults consistently said that their classes were boring and that their school did not do enough to make them work hard. Students said they went to school because they had to, not because they learned anything. School did

## Dropouts Did Not Feel Motivated Or Inspired To Work Hard



Was not motivated/inspired	
Year dropped out:	
9th-10th grade	75%
11th grade	69%
12th grade	59%
High GPA	
Medium GPA	56%
Low GPA	74%
Whites	
African Americans	79%
Hispanics	63%
Parents involved	
Parents not involved	63%
	78%



not seem relevant and some complained teachers just told them what to do without involving them in the lesson.

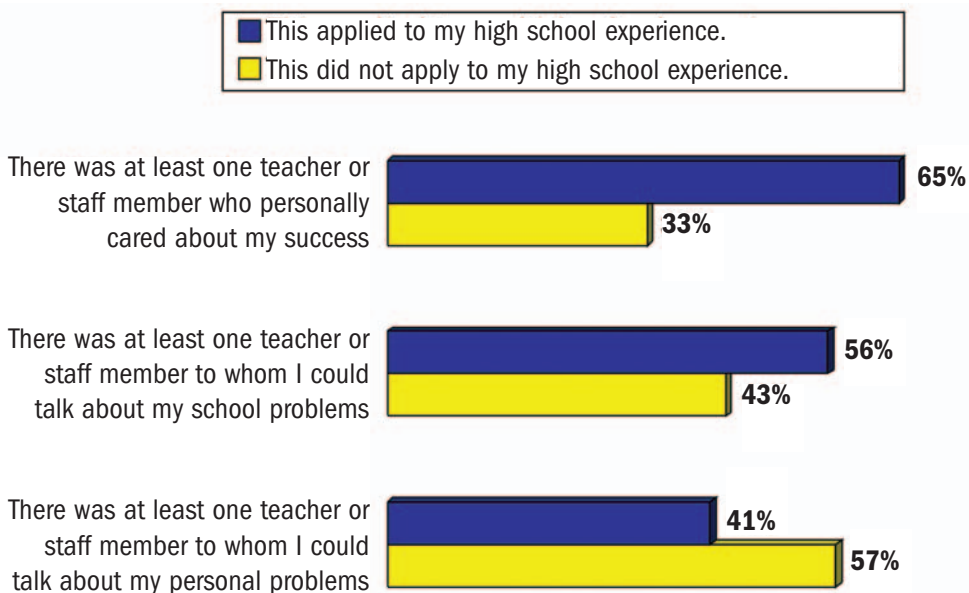
In our focus groups, one young man from Philadelphia reflected, “The work wasn’t even hard... once I figured I wasn’t going to get any learning done in there, there wasn’t any need to go.” Many high schools use a system of tracking that shunt low-performing students to low level classes with unchallenging work.<sup>22</sup> Participants in our focus groups expressed sadness that they were not challenged more and that the classes and teachers were not inspiring. Studies show that the expectations that teachers have for their students has an effect both on student performance and whether they drop out of school.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, our sample indicated that 26 percent did no homework, and, including them, 80 percent of those surveyed did one hour or less of homework each day. Part of this may have been the result of a lack of student motivation and some of it may have been attributable to low expectations their teachers or schools had for them. In our focus groups, participants shared stories that would indicate both. There have been studies showing that students who do little or no homework each week increase their risk of dropping out.<sup>24</sup>

*These low expectations for the students were in stark contrast to the high expectations they had for themselves. Seventy percent of our respondents were confident that they would have been able to graduate.*

These low expectations for the students were in stark contrast to the high expectations they had for themselves. Seventy percent of our respondents surveyed were confident that they would have been able to graduate if they had put forth the necessary effort. While a majority said that their school’s requirements for graduating were difficult, two-thirds (66 percent) said they would have worked harder if more had been demanded of them – higher academic standards and more studying and homework – to earn a diploma. In the focus groups, students sounded disappointed at the lack of challenge. Even a majority of those with a low grade point average thought they could have graduated. While many of

## Teachers Are Doing Well, But Could Be Doing More





these students indicated they would have worked harder if they had been challenged, they also would have needed much more support to meet those higher expectations.

This lack of challenge contributed to students' boredom and problems with attendance. They felt it acceptable to skip class since they could do make-up work and, in the words of one focus group participant, "They just let you pass, anything you got."

### For Some, Real Life Events Got in the Way of School

#### **32 Percent Left to Get a Job; 26 Percent Became a Parent; and 22 Percent Had to Help Their Family**

It may seem natural to assume that high school dropouts are those who are already failing, who leave school so they do not have to admit they cannot do the work. While certainly true of some, the decision to drop out of high school was sometimes affected by a student's personal circumstances, unrelated to school.

Many students suggested a reason other than school prevented them from graduating. For instance, one-third (32 percent) said they had to get a job and make money (36 percent of the young men and 28 percent of the young women

we surveyed); 26 percent said they became a parent; and 22 percent said they had to care for a family member.

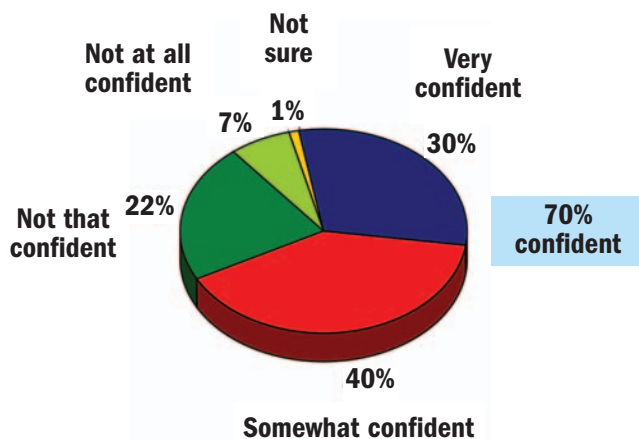
Twenty-six percent of all respondents and one-third of all young women we surveyed said that becoming a parent was a major factor in their decision to leave school. Many young women who became pregnant were unable to juggle the pressures of young motherhood and school, so they dropped out. Others identified personal circumstances in the home – needing to be there to care for siblings or take care of other tasks at home because parents were out working or otherwise unavailable – that had a strong influence on their ability to attend or focus on school.

Many of these young people reported doing reasonably well in school and had a strong belief that they could have graduated if they had stayed in school. Of all of the students we surveyed, these students were the most likely to say they would have worked harder if their schools had demanded more of them and provided the necessary support.

We did not probe in any considerable depth how the schools offered these participants with special needs additional assistance, but it was clear from the data in the survey and the focus groups that students were not aware of such assistance, even if it was present.

## Majority Are Confident That They Could Have Graduated

How confident are you that you would have been able to meet your school's requirements for graduation if you had put in the necessary effort?



Very/somewhat confident	
High GPA	80%
Medium GPA	72%
Low GPA	58%

**66% of dropouts say they would have worked harder if their high school had demanded more.**



**It is clear that some who do not graduate, but not the majority, leave school because of significant academic challenges.**

## Struggling in School and Needing More Help

### **A Third (35 percent) Said They Were Failing In School**

“Failing in school” was one of the top five reasons survey respondents identified for leaving school, chosen by 35 percent of poll respondents. This reason is often more highly ranked by students in national surveys.<sup>25</sup> Three in ten said that they could not keep up with their schoolwork and 43 percent said they missed too many days of school and could not catch up. Many of these students likely fell behind in elementary and middle school and were not able to make up the necessary ground; almost half of dropouts polled (45 percent) said their previous schooling had not prepared them for high school.

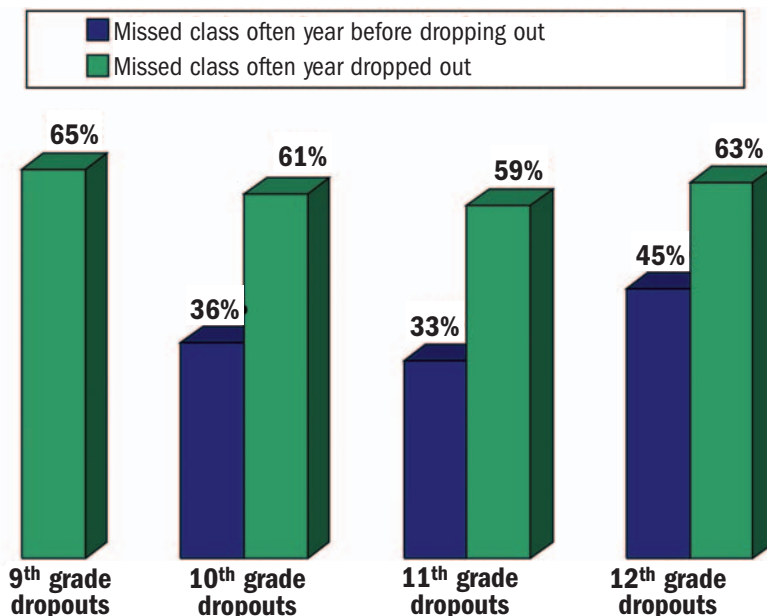
The majority of survey respondents (57 percent) reported that it was difficult to pass from one grade to the next and that the high school requirements for graduating were too difficult. When asked how the high school made it too difficult to pass from one grade to the next, participants indicated that in addition to the tests

being too difficult, teachers were not available to give them extra help, classes were uninteresting, and many of them simply missed too many days to catch up with their schoolwork. In our focus groups, two former students summed up these views – “They [the teachers] don’t put forth that effort to give us the help that we need” and “You see like when I was in 11th grade, everybody in my school, by 11th grade was getting out by... 1:00 p.m. because you didn’t need that many credits. So they [the teachers] were throwing more at us and faster, so we had like a pile of homework that would just stack up...”

Thirty-two percent of respondents were required to repeat a grade before dropping out and 29 percent expressed significant doubts that they could have met their high school’s requirement for graduation, even if they had put forth the necessary effort. The most academically challenged students were the most likely to report that their schools did not do enough to help students when they had trouble learning or understanding the material they were being taught. These students were also the most likely to express doubt about whether they would have worked harder if more had been expected of them.

**As complex as these individual circumstances may be, for almost all young people, dropping out**

## Attendance Is Strong Predictor of Dropping Out





**of high school is not a sudden act, but a gradual process of disengagement; attendance patterns are a clear early sign.**

## Slow Process of Disengagement

### ***Attendance Patterns are a Key Warning Sign***

As complex as these individual circumstances may be, what is clear is that dropping out of high school is not a sudden act, but a slow process of disengagement, often both academically and socially, and is often influenced by a student's perception of the high school's expectations of him or her and his or her early school experiences.<sup>26</sup> Dropping out is not a decision that is made on a single morning. The survey probed students' experiences before dropping out of high school and found that there are clear warning signs for at least one to three years before they drop out that these students are losing interest in school. National studies show that such warning signs appear and can be predictive of dropping out as early as elementary school.<sup>27</sup>

Students described a pattern of refusing to wake up, missing school, skipping class, and taking three hour lunches – and each absence made them less willing to go back. These students had long periods of absences and were sometimes referred to the truant officer, only to be brought back to the same environment that led them to become disengaged. In our survey, 59 to 65 percent of respondents missed class often the year they dropped out and 33 to 45 percent missed class often the year before they dropped out. Consistent with national data, absenteeism is the most common indicator of overall student engagement and a significant predictor of dropping out.<sup>28</sup>

Other warning signs include: low grades, discipline and behavioral problems, lack of involvement in class and in school activities, pregnancy, being held back a grade or more, students who transfer from another school, and those who experience difficulty with the transition year of 9th grade itself.

Respondents report that they started to lose interest in school well before dropping out, with 71 percent saying they lost interest in school in

the 9th and 10th grades. Fifty-eight percent of our survey respondents indicated that they dropped out in the 11th and 12th grades. Nationally, much of the dropping out of school has shifted from the last two years of high school (typical three decades ago) to between 9th and 10th grades today.<sup>29</sup> Still, a plurality of students drop out with less than two years to go in their high school education.<sup>30</sup>

## Too Much Freedom

### ***38 Percent Say Too Much Freedom and Not Enough Rules***

As young adults grew older, they had more freedom and more options, which led some away from class or the school building. It was too easy to skip class or join in activities outside of school. Nearly two-fifths (38 percent) of respondents to the survey cited this as a factor in their decision to drop out of high school. In our focus groups, a young man from Philadelphia told us, “Once you get in high school, it's more like you have more freedom. In middle school, you have to go to your next class or they are going to get you. In high school, if you don't go to class, there isn't anybody who is going to get you. You just do your own thing.”

“Too much freedom” seemed to relate to the most basic conditions in the school – lack of order, discipline and rules, making sure students attended class, and even limiting chaos that made students feel unsafe. Many participants in our focus groups felt that there were many things in their lives that pulled them away from school and the new found freedom of high school made it more compelling to leave than to stay.

In our Philadelphia focus groups, one boy who had just told us that his best days in school were when he worked hard and could talk about what he learned at home, lamented the fact that he only went to school once a week, and highlighted the consequences of too much freedom in the school environment. He said, in response to a question about why he only came to school once a week, the “streets would call you. Being there listening to somebody talking to you all day, writing on the board, and then you start looking outside at the streets.....We got to leave for





lunch in my school. And then once we got out there, smelled that fresh air....”

In our focus groups, participants talked again and again about waking up late for school, skipping classes, hanging out in the hallways with no consequences, and the lack of order and rules for them. For a young man in Baltimore, school became an afterthought and the school let it be so, “Like in the middle of the year, I just started going out with my friends, and I never went to school. It’s like I forgot about it.”

When asked what their high schools could have done to help more students stay in school, three out of the six leading answers related to too much freedom and not enough order and safety – 68 percent cited “keeping students from skipping classes,” 62 percent “maintaining classroom discipline,” and 57 percent “helping students feel safe from violence.”

Some respondents even noted their ability, under state law, to drop out of school either because they reached an age to do so or their parents signed them out. One young man from our Baltimore focus groups told us how he felt right

before he turned 16 – “I can’t wait until my 16th birthday so I didn’t have to come back here no more. I mean, I can’t wait to drop out kind of thing.” A female from Baltimore said, when asked about her decision to drop out, “you couldn’t drop out until like, my parents had to sign me out because it was before I was the age of 16. And there was like a day when we went up to the school and they just signed me out.” We note that in the majority of states, students are only required to stay in school until they are 16 or 17 and many states permit multiple exemptions.

**For those students who dropped out, the level of proactive parental involvement in their education was low.**

### Parents Engaged Too Late

**Often the Impetus for Parental Involvement is Related to Discipline**

Former students describe differing levels of parental involvement, different reasons for their involvement, and different levels of awareness that their child was about to drop out of school. Fifty-nine percent of parents or guardians were

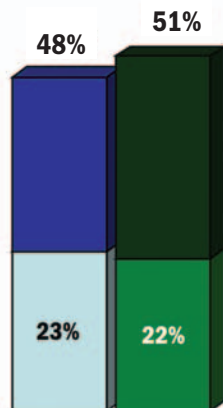
## Parental Awareness

**My parents’ awareness of my school attendance and grades**

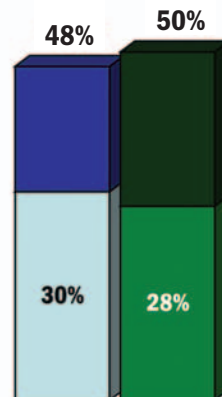
**My parents’ awareness that I was on the verge of leaving school**



47% say their parents’ work schedules kept them from keeping up with what was happening at school.



68% say their parents got more involved when they became aware their child was on the verge of leaving school





involved in their children's schooling, with only one-fifth "very" involved. More than half of those who were involved at all were involved "mainly for discipline reasons."

The majority of parents were "not aware" or just "somewhat aware" of their child's grades or that they were about to leave school. Nearly half of the respondents said their parents' work schedules kept them from knowing more about what was happening at school and 68 percent said their parents got more involved when they became aware their child was on the verge of dropping out.

Respondents who said that their parents were not involved in school were more likely to drop out in the first two years of high school than those who said their parents were involved even when they were not in trouble. Students said their parents were much more involved in middle school but gave them more responsibility and freedom in high school.

Students also needed more supervision at home and in school; only 47 percent of the former students we surveyed said they or their parents would even be contacted by the school if they were absent. This pattern continues after participants drop out, with 48 percent of dropouts saying their school contacted them or their parents to find out why they left school or to encourage them to return. But this means that in the majority of cases, such contact may not even occur.

**In hindsight, young people who dropped out of school almost universally expressed great remorse for having left school and expressed strong interest in re-entering school with students their age.**

## Their Regrets

One 17-year-old male in our focus groups put it simply, "It's important to get an education to do well in life." A 19-year-old female said of dropping out, "I wouldn't make the same decision. I would stay in school." A female from Baltimore put it succinctly, "I think it's one of the worst regrets of my life."

They said they did not think of their future

*"... I would tell him like, I haven't finished high school. I don't have a diploma. I don't have a job. I am broke .... You can't make it without that. You can't go anywhere, for real, on the legal side.... If you go to school, get your diploma, you can do more things the right way. You might succeed."*

when deciding to drop out but wanted freedom or money right then, or gave up on their dreams because graduation seemed far away. This conforms to models of adolescent psychology that have found adolescents have difficulty with long-term planning and delayed gratification.<sup>31</sup>

But as adults, four out of five poll participants said that graduating from high school is very (60 percent) or fairly (21 percent) important to success in life. Seventy-four percent of our survey respondents said they would have stayed in school, knowing what they know today about the expectations of the world, and 76 percent said they would definitely or probably re-enroll in a high school for people their age if they could. At the time of their decision to leave high school, fifty-three percent had planned to go back and graduate. Since that time, however, only 11 percent have actually gone back and graduated.

In the survey, 47 percent said that not having a diploma makes it hard to find a good job. Participants in our focus groups counseled others to stay in school for this reason. For instance, a male from Philadelphia said, "... I would tell him like, I haven't finished high school. I don't have a diploma. I don't have a job. I am broke .... You can't make it without that. You can't go anywhere, for real, on the legal side.... If you go to school, get your diploma, you can do more things the right way. You might succeed."

Participants in the focus groups wished they had listened to those who warned them of the



problems associated with dropping out or that such voices had been more persistent.

**While there are no simple solutions to the dropout crisis, there are clearly “supports” that could be provided to improve students’ chances of staying in school. While most dropouts blame themselves for failing to graduate, there are things they say schools can do to help them finish.**

## What Might Help Students Stay in School

In order to look more closely at what might be done to address the dropout epidemic, one natural question is “who or what is responsible for their dropping out and how can we fix it?” While there are no simple solutions to the dropout crisis, there are clearly “supports” that could be provided within the school and the home that would improve students’ chances of graduating. While most of the dropouts in our survey blamed themselves for failing to graduate and some focus group participants said there was nothing their school could have done to convince them to stay,

others pointed out things schools could have done to help them finish.

Students who are at risk of dropping out can and must be reached, and in order to effectively reach at risk students, we first need to listen to the views, experiences, concerns, life circumstances and ideas for reform of these young people so we can help others in the future. The following recommendations are based on what dropouts themselves told us in focus groups and the survey.

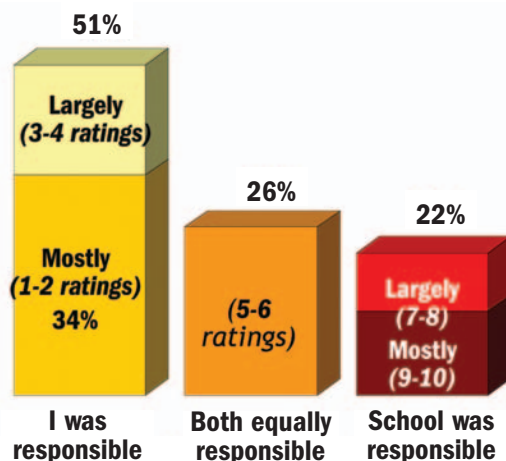
## Improve Teaching and Curricula to Make School More Relevant and Engaging and Enhance the Connection between School and Work

Our respondents had many thoughtful ideas about the specific actions schools could take to improve the chances that a student would stay in high school. Their most common answers related to classroom instruction – making what is learned in classes more relevant to their lives, having better teachers who keep classes interesting, and having smaller classes with more one-on-one instruction, involvement and feedback.

## Young People Accept Responsibility For Not Graduating

Who was responsible for your leaving school: mostly the school, mostly you, or both?\*

\* Ratings on ten-point scale: 10 = I did everything I could to stay in school/the school failed me; 1 = I alone was responsible/school did everything it could to keep me there



Mean Ratings	
All dropouts	4.4
Afr. Americans	4.9
Whites	4.0
Hispanics	4.0
City	4.3
Suburbs	4.9
Small town/rural	4.1



The class work in high school needs to make some connection to students' interests and what they find relevant, especially as seven in ten said their school did not do enough to make learning interesting. One bright young woman who was a leader in her focus group said: "If they related to me more and understand that at that point in time, my life was...what I was going through, where I lived, where I came from. Who knows? That book might have been in my book bag. I might have bought a book bag and done some work."

Eighty-one percent of survey respondents said that if schools provided opportunities for real-world learning (internships, service learning projects, and other opportunities), it would have improved the students' chances of graduating from high school. Outside studies have noted that clarifying the links between school and getting a job may convince more students to stay in school.<sup>32</sup>

## Improve Instruction and Access to Supports for Struggling Students

Four out of five participating dropouts (81 percent) wanted better teachers and three-fourths wanted smaller classes with more individualized instruction. Over half (55 percent) felt that more needed to be done to help students with problems learning. Seventy percent of survey participants believed that more after-school tutoring, Saturday school, summer school and extra help from teachers would have enhanced their chances of staying in school.

While some of the students' best days in school were when teachers paid attention to them, many others had classes that were so big that teachers did not know their names. In our focus groups, participants repeated again and again that they believed smaller class sizes would have helped ensure that teachers maintained order in the classroom and would have provided more individual attention. The problem of large schools and the need for smaller class sizes and more personal instruction emerged more than 12 separate times from the participants in our four focus groups in Philadelphia and Baltimore. Seventy-five percent of survey participants

*"If they related to me more and understand that at that point in time, my life was...what I was going through, where I lived, where I came from. Who knows? That book might have been in my book bag. I might have bought a book bag and done some work."*

agreed that smaller classes with more one on one teaching would have improved students' chances of graduating.

There are studies suggesting that small schools are more likely to promote the engagement of both students and staff that is so critical to reducing the number of dropouts, and that the largest direct effect appears to be in low socioeconomic status schools,<sup>33</sup> although there is debate about the appropriate size of such smaller schools.<sup>34</sup> There is also a body of literature that reveals that small learning communities and interdisciplinary teaming are associated with lower dropout rates.<sup>35</sup> And there is some evidence that alternative schools serving students at risk of dropping out can also reduce dropout rates.<sup>36</sup>

## Build a School Climate that Fosters Academics

Seven in ten surveyed favored increasing supervision in school and more than three in five (62 percent) felt more classroom discipline was necessary. More than half (57 percent) believed their high schools did not do enough to help students feel safe from violence. Students in the focus groups talked about how they could not do homework or pay attention in class because of the many disruptions, including the fear of violence. Seven in ten (71 percent) said their schools did not do enough to make school interesting.



## Ensure Strong Adult-Student Relationships within the School

While two-thirds (65 percent) said there was a staff member or teacher who cared about their success, only 56 percent said they could go to a staff person for school problems and just two-fifths (41 percent) had someone in school with whom to talk about personal problems. More than three out of five (62 percent) said their school needed to do more to help students with problems outside of class. Seven out of ten favored more parental involvement.

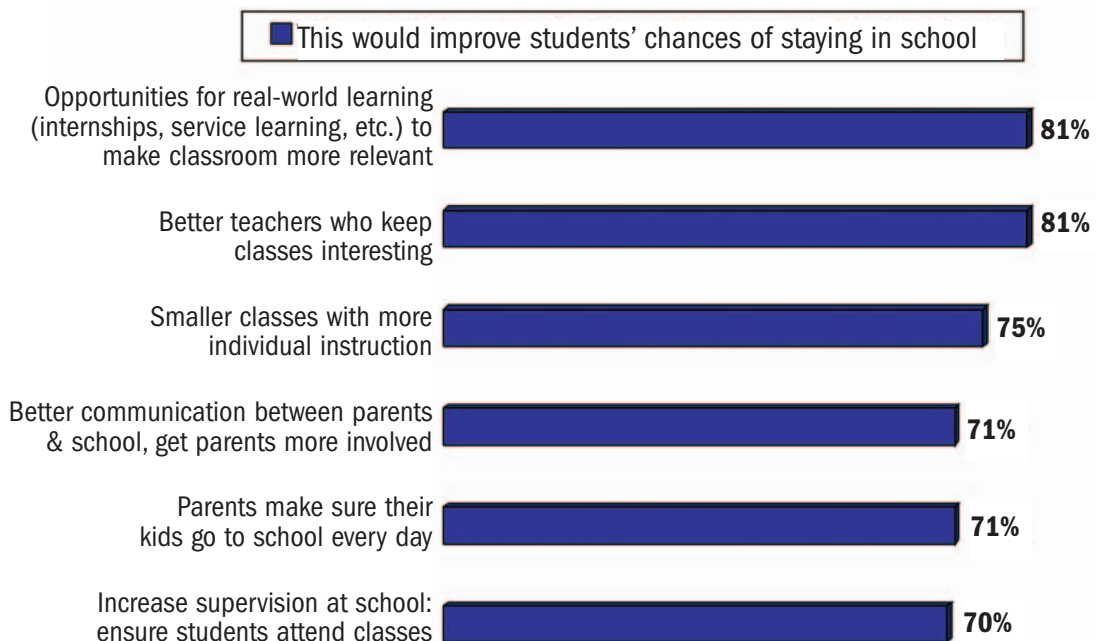
These young people craved one-on-one attention from their teachers, and when they received it, they remembered it making a difference. Participants in the focus groups recounted that some of their best days were when their teachers noticed them, got them involved in class, and told them they were doing well. Studies have shown that if students perceive their teachers to be of a higher quality, there is a lower likelihood that the students will drop out.<sup>37</sup> In our survey, four out of five agreed that better, more qualified teachers who could keep class interesting would improve students' chances for graduating.

## Improve the Communication between Parents and Schools

Seventy-one percent of young people surveyed felt that one of the keys to keeping students in school was to have better communication between the parents and the school, and increasing parental or guardian involvement in their child's education. Less than half said their school contacted their parents or themselves when they were absent (47 percent) or when they dropped out (48 percent). Respondents suggested that increased parental involvement could influence very basic things – such as ensuring students came to school every day and attended their classes.

Studies have shown that students with parents who are engaged in their lives – by monitoring and regulating their activities, talking with them about their problems, encouraging individual decision-making and being more involved in the school – are less likely to drop out of school.<sup>38</sup> The communication links between parents and schools are critical if such involvement is to work effectively to monitor such activities, exchange information about school performance and problems, and ensure that such problems are addressed early and quickly.

## What Dropouts Believe Would Improve Students' Chances





### Policy Pathways

We believe the stories, insights and reflections from our student survey and focus groups can add a new, personal, and urgently needed dimension to a discussion of the dropout epidemic. We offer ideas for reform that relate to what students believe would have helped them. We also offer observations, particularly in the sections “In States” and “In the Nation” below, about various policies, laws and additional work that might be done. We hope that this report will further inform a national conversation on the dropout epidemic in America, and that it will help galvanize policymakers, educators, local and national media, non-profit and foundation leaders, business executives, and concerned citizens to take comprehensive action to address this national crisis.

### In Schools and Communities

#### ***Different Schools for Different Students***

Students in our survey wanted classes to be more relevant to their interests and lives and longed for smaller learning communities with more individualized attention. Great schools learn to treat each student differently, rather than demanding that all students fit into the “one size fits all” format of schooling that is widely used today. In light of the fact that our current educational system produces about one-third of kids who do not graduate, and another one-third who are not sufficiently prepared by the education they have received to be college ready, it is crystal clear that some structural reforms are necessary.<sup>39</sup>

Options offered to students, and supported by the research, can include alternative high schools that offer individualized plans for each student.<sup>40</sup> This model can be an effective way to address the varied needs of potential dropouts. Options can include schools with traditional structures, but with a commitment to providing all students with a rigorous curriculum which prepares them for college or a family-wage job. Theme-based schools, such as ones that focus on science and technology or the arts, are another way to prepare students for their future.

Small learning communities with one-on-one instruction that engage students in their studies and relate the material to their lives and goals, and interdisciplinary teaming of teachers and students have each shown promise in lowering school-wide dropout rates.<sup>41</sup>

What seems clear is that a multitude of choices must be made available, particularly in those school districts that have the highest dropout rates, in an effort to make school more relevant to the lives and goals of the students, to give them the individual attention they need, to have high expectations for them, and to address promptly their special needs and circumstances to keep them on track for graduating.

#### ***Parent Engagement Strategies & Individualized Graduation Plans***

The young people we surveyed believe the communication between schools and parents needs to be greatly strengthened – that schools need to do more to invite parents in and be part of the solutions, and that parents need to do more themselves to be involved. One of the ways this deficit of parent involvement shows up is in truancy, where parents can be more involved by simply making sure their child shows up each day at school. When we asked focus group participants about their school’s follow-up policy for truancy and other acts of student disengagement, more often than not the respondents perceived that the schools did too little, or perhaps were overwhelmed with the numbers of such cases.<sup>42</sup>

Simple things such as teacher feedback to parents about class participation, missed assignments, grades and other issues can be critical to helping keep students on track. Although schools cannot be expected to address and solve weaknesses in the family structure, which our survey shows is a common factor for students who drop out, they need to recognize and develop ways to address different types of family circumstances. This includes ways to bridge other school-family differences, such as in language, culture, educational attainment or reaching a single working parent. When additional educational choices are offered to students, which can include the restructuring of existing schools or the creation of new ones, these schools can incorporate into



their new structure ways to improve parent involvement and school-home communication.

Another way to further strengthen the linkage between school and home is for the schools to develop individualized graduation plans for each student, particularly for those at risk of dropping out. This additional step would help the parents become more aware of the specific requirements for their high school student so they can take the steps necessary to help ensure they are carried out to completion. This knowledge would also help empower the parent further to advocate for their child.

Research from the U.S. Department of Education and others shows that the involvement of family members can have a positive influence on their child's school achievement.<sup>43</sup> It can help improve their student's grades and test scores, as well as help make sure they actually attend school, complete their homework, and have a better attitude overall.

### **Early Warning Systems**

Our student survey and national studies show that dropping out is a slow process of disengagement and that problems predictive of dropping out often emerge early in a student's life. Many of these problems appear to go unnoticed.

Schools need to develop district-wide (or even state-wide) early warning systems to help them identify students who they anticipate are less likely to succeed in the school where they are. This will not only serve those who stay in one school, but will help those students who transfer from school to school to make sure they do not get lost in the various systems in which they are enrolled. Mechanisms need to be developed to ensure such warning systems trigger the appropriate support and provide follow through until the student is back on track. One clear step relates to absenteeism. Every day, schools should have a reliable list of the students who failed to attend school and should notify parents or guardians immediately and take appropriate action to ensure students attend school and have the support they need to remain in school. It is critical that schools address the circumstances that drove students away from the school in the first place.

### **Additional Supports and Adult Advocates**

There are a wide range of supplemental services or intensive assistance strategies for struggling students in schools – attendance monitoring, school and peer counseling, mentoring, tutoring, double class periods, internships, service-learning, summer school programs, and more – that have their strong advocates (and usually some research to back it up) that can make a difference in the lives of students who are at risk of dropping out. Such services, together with intensive, best-practices literacy programs, should be made accessible to low-performing students to ensure they learn to read at grade level and stay on the graduation track. Schools need to enhance their coordination with community-based institutions and government agencies to ensure that students receive the proper support. Schools also need to consider the importance of supports for students with special needs, such as pregnant women and students with disabilities.

The range of programs and supports can be overwhelming and finding the right supports a challenge. Since research shows the value of having an adult at the school who is involved with and familiar with the student, we believe more schools should consider developing adult advocacy programs within the school environment.<sup>44</sup> This could involve teachers or other school staff, including administrative and support staff, coaches, and counselors. Ensuring that there is an adult advocate is particularly important in large schools in districts in which the dropout epidemic is most severe. The National Middle School Association supports such an idea, stating that the system works when “the concept of advocacy is fundamental to the school's culture, embedded in its every aspect. Advocacy is not a singular event or a regularly scheduled time; it is an attitude of caring that translates into action when adults are responsive to the needs of each and every young adolescent in their charge.”<sup>45</sup> The National Association of Secondary School Principals recommends that every high school student have a mentor, or “Personal Adult Advocate,” to help personalize the education experience.<sup>46</sup> This would help identify academic and personal crises earlier, and to head off those things that this survey shows might lead to the student being inclined to drop out.



## In States

### ***Compulsory School Age Requirements under State Laws***

Respondents in the survey and focus groups identified “too much freedom” as a key factor that enabled them to drop out of school. Even some recommended that schools and parents do far more to keep them in school – from getting up on time and ensuring they go to school every day to monitoring their attendance at classes and not letting them roam the hallways or leave the schools. Respondents also noted the importance of the school following up with the students and parents when school was chronically missed. Some participants in our focus groups understood the legal age after which they could drop out of school and talked about how that gave them new found freedom to make choices – choices they would later regret.

We found that no state has a legal dropout age below 16, and that almost nobody drops out of school before entering high school. We also note that in places like Philadelphia and other extreme drop out districts, the process of dropping out does not seem to be remedied by anti-truancy programs, many of which are well designed and well-meaning but are short-staffed and under-funded. We wonder whether anemic state maximum compulsory school age requirements, hollow anti-truancy programs, and the failure to address the underlying conditions that caused students to leave school in the first place are complicit in the fact that so many low-income and minority youth cannot read well and do not graduate. To us, this is not only what common sense would predict, but also what common decency should prohibit.

States set minimum and maximum compulsory age requirements to be in school. While no state has a legal dropout age below 16, the majority of states permit a student to drop out of high school when they turn 16. A list of state compulsory school attendance laws is found in Appendix II. Typically in 10th grade, a 16-year-old student has new found authority under law to make a choice. We question the soundness of this policy, particularly since our nation

guarantees, and provides substantial resources for, a public education through 12th grade. We believe state law should be consistent with this commitment.

Many states already require students to remain in school until age 18. Necessary exemptions from maximum compulsory age requirements are nearly universal for such reasons as physical or mental disabilities, suspension, expulsion, criminal adjudication, and home-schooling and religious education. But so, too, are less desirable exemptions with the school district’s permission related to “parental consent” or employment.

We believe these inter-state differences in school age requirements might embody a natural experiment enabling us to decipher whether higher maximum compulsory school age requirements are associated with lower dropout rates. We recognize that inter-state differences are loaded with other demographic and socioeconomic differences that might confound simple cross-state analyses, and we do not know how states compare in terms of their fidelity to enforcing requirements, the effectiveness of their anti-truancy programs, or conversely, how states compare when it comes to granting waivers or approving exemptions.

Notwithstanding these challenges, we believe our nation should have the conversation about the soundness of having a moral and financial commitment to seeing our students through at least the 12th grade and at the same time not having state laws that reflect student use of that commitment. Our educated guess (and hope) is that raising maximum compulsory school age requirements – specifically raising the legal dropout age to 18 – would, when coupled with well-trained staffs, more manageable caseloads, working partnerships with other government agencies to support parents and guardians who struggle to keep their children in school, and efforts to address the issues that caused students to leave school, have a significant effect on reducing the dropout rate.<sup>47</sup> And we think that, at present, the laws and associated policies may have perverse and unintended consequences of facilitating students dropping out of school even when they have only a year or two before they graduate.





### ***Accurate Data at the State Level***

Schools and communities cannot adequately address the dropout problem without an accurate account of it. Forty-five years ago, a social commentator called the dropout problem “social dynamite.”<sup>48</sup> Oddly, the public is almost entirely unaware of how powerful that dynamite has become because of inaccurate and rose-colored glass reporting of both graduation and dropout rates. Even though there is nearly universal recognition that graduating from high school is a key milestone in a young person’s life and that it has a powerful impact on a person’s economic and social health, obtaining accurate statistical reporting on graduation and dropout rates has not been a national priority, until very recently.

There are many sophisticated ways to estimate the number of students who drop out of high school and some excellent work has been done on this.<sup>49</sup> One sophisticated commentator recently summed up the landscape this way:

[N]o one knows exactly how many students drop out of American high schools because the vast majority of states do not follow individual students over time, but merely report annual enrollments....There are often a number of categories in which students are not counted as dropouts, even if they never graduated. One state counts students who go to jail as transfer students, for example. More commonly, students receiving or studying for a GED are not counted as dropouts, though they have left school and are pursuing a different and much less valuable credential. Schools often have little or no information about what has happened to a student who disappears, and they tend to make optimistic guesses.... Under these circumstances, underreporting is extremely common. It’s not unusual for a school to report a 10 percent dropout rate when the number of graduates is 70 percent lower than the number of ninth graders who enrolled four years earlier.<sup>50</sup>

We also note that there are significant differences in reporting graduation rates between the government and other sources, with the

government often reporting much higher graduation rates.<sup>51</sup>

Policymakers at the federal and state levels recognize the information gap and are trying to do something about it. The passage of the No Child Left Behind law (NCLB) demanded a new focus on graduation rates, although the graduation rate accountability provisions need to be monitored and enforced to fulfill their promise.

In July 2005, the National Governors Association (NGA) announced that 47 Governors from 46 states and one territory and 12 national organizations had reached a common definition to calculate high school graduation rates.<sup>52</sup> By the end of 2005, the NGA had indicated that Governors from all 50 states had adopted that common definition.

Recognizing that the quality of high school graduation and dropout data was insufficient to account for students as they progressed through high school, and that states had wide variations in how they proposed to measure graduation rates under NCLB, the NGA developed five recommendations to develop an accurate, comparable high school graduation measure, together with other indicators of student progress and outcomes from preschool through postsecondary education.<sup>53</sup> The Governors recognize that much more work still needs to be done in the states to implement these recommendations. States also need to do further work to make dropout rates more accurate, tracking students within states and across state lines. And more work needs to be done to build the data systems that will allow states to collect and publish graduation and dropout rates and to monitor progress state by state over time.

### **In the Nation**

#### ***Accurate Data at the Federal Level***

The longest running study of graduation rates (and most widely reported national data in the United States), however, has been done at the federal level through the Bureau of the Census’ Current Population Survey. The literature highlights the benefits and limitations of this national survey. This survey uses a sample of 60,000 households and surveys the civilian non-institutionalized population 16 years and older, and has



good response rates.<sup>54</sup> Concerns have been raised, however, about the exclusion of certain populations (military and institutionalized), the accuracy of counting young minority males, and the inclusion of individuals who may have received a General Educational Development (GED) certificate instead of a regular diploma.<sup>55</sup>

The nation's Governors have convened to move toward more accurate reporting systems and to ensure a certain level of uniformity, accuracy, transparency and accountability in their data collection and reporting. We believe such an effort is merited as it relates to the Current Population Survey, the Common Core of Data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and data from the NCES Longitudinal Studies Program.<sup>56</sup> We also believe it would make sense, in light of the renewed efforts of the Governors, to more carefully determine what the federal role should be in data collection and reporting on these subjects, and how any federal effort could compliment the strengthened state efforts. Does the state by state data collection, with comparable data sets, render the Current Population Survey (CPS) in this regard unnecessary or confusing in any ways? In light of the fact that the CPS is the only source of long-term trends in dropout and completion rates, is there still a role for the Census to play that is complimentary of the new state efforts? Should the Common Core of Data be adjusted in any way? We also note that while the federal government spends \$40 million on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), it is estimated to spend less than \$1 million on dropout statistics.<sup>57</sup> This may be an appropriate breakdown of the federal investment, given the primary role of the states in such efforts, but we would encourage further discussion of what the federal role should be in data collection in these areas since accurate data is so critical to charting progress in addressing the dropout epidemic.

### ***Better Incentives Under Federal Law***

The passage of the No Child Left Behind law prompts public schools all across the country to be increasingly concerned about graduation rates.

For the first time under federal law, schools must demonstrate that they are making "adequate yearly progress" on both academic performance and graduation rates. Including a focus in the law on graduation rates was important as a companion to testing, so that the schools would have incentives to ensure that every child, including those in danger of not graduating, were given the help they needed to succeed. Having additional data to determine if there were disproportionate effects on minority or other groups was important for tracking both annual progress on test scores and annual progress on graduation rates.

There is substantial concern that the regulations implementing the No Child Left Behind law are not fulfilling the promise of graduation rate accountability. Some express concerns that schools and states can set whatever goals they wish for making progress on graduation rates and that there is no requirement to provide graduation data for racial and ethnic subgroups, even though such accountability was central to the law.<sup>58</sup> The overarching concern is that, if this system of federal incentives is not brought in line with the original intent of the law, the law will have the unintended effect of giving schools an incentive to "push out" low-performing students whose test scores would bring down school averages, threatening their demonstration of adequate yearly progress, which eventually carries tough sanctions for failure. If schools are only rewarded for raising their test scores, and the federal rules have no teeth with respect to graduation rates, schools would be expected to focus far more attention on test scores and far less attention on graduation rates. Perverse incentives to "push out" (or rather, we think, not make the necessary effort to support) low-performing students would be created with bad effects. There is always a natural tension between ensuring accountability and providing sufficient flexibility to make programs work. Correcting perverse incentives such as these, however, should be a priority to ensure the schools have the right incentives to close the achievement gap and strengthen student performance, while at the same time raising the graduation rate.



### ***Focusing the Research & Disseminating Best Practices***

After reviewing dozens of studies, reports and articles highlighting promising practices, programs, and policies relating to ensuring that more students graduate from high school and are ready for college, we discovered that federal evaluations (of which there have been very few) that studied more than 100 dropout prevention programs showed that most programs did not reduce dropout rates by statistically significant amounts.<sup>59</sup> We also note that, while the literature recognizes that dropping out of school is a long process of disengagement, there are relatively few longitudinal studies, that is those which follow students over time, or retrospective studies, which look back on the past experiences of students. This concern over the lack of necessary studies was expressed as far back as 1969 and very little has been done about it since that time.<sup>60</sup> The General Accounting Office has said, “while states and school districts have implemented numerous interventions designed to increase high school graduation rates, few of these programs have been rigorously evaluated, and [the Department of] Education has done little to evaluate and disseminate existing research.”<sup>61</sup>

Having said this, there were some programs that did improve some outcomes and a lot of outstanding work has been done to identify some of the essential components of high school reforms that relate to keeping more students in school. We also were encouraged to see efforts that urged a clear focus on the few hundred public high schools in which the problem is severe, and to design comprehensive approaches that address illiteracy and focus on college readiness.

Acknowledging efforts that exist, the amount of sophisticated research on key reforms appears surprisingly thin, given the serious and longstanding nature of the problem. We believe that this has largely been the result of the chronic underreporting of the dropout problem and the fact that alarm bells were not adequately sounded earlier. We also believe that more research should be conducted in carefully tailored areas that strike us as more “policy-relevant” to addressing the problem in a realistic fashion. For example, since

50 percent of the students from low-income, extreme dropout districts are graduating from high school and the other 50 percent with much the same demographic profile are not graduating, what are the differences in the schools that could suggest some meaningful reforms?<sup>62</sup> How, if at all, might relevant policies and programs be changed so as to induce more young people who are at risk of dropping out and often within a year or two of graduating, to stay in school? If some similarly situated students can do it, why not all?

We understand the highly individualistic nature of these cases, which was reinforced by our focus groups and survey work, but we believe that more work could be done to test some of the intragroup differences that might shed further light on the problems and the school reforms that could address them. We also understand that dropout prevention strategies that may emerge must be tailored to the individual needs of the students at risk; be comprehensive in addressing individual, family, peer, school and community dimensions; and should begin as early in a student’s educational life as there are warning signs of trouble. Effective solutions must not be based on unique situations but be broadly applicable. This is a daunting but doable task.

## **A National Conversation and Response**

Educators, policymakers and leaders from various sectors should make addressing the high school dropout epidemic a top national priority. All avenues to invest leaders in a better understanding of the problem and common solutions should be undertaken – including congressional hearings, White House conferences, summits of state and local officials, and public forums in schools and communities. In all cases, the voices of young people who dropped out of high school should be heard. These public forums should seek input from policymakers at all levels of government and leaders in local communities who are struggling with high dropout rates and are proposing innovative ways to keep students in high school. This Silent Epidemic report, together with its policy pathways, and other recent reports highlighting the problem and possible solutions, could provide



a foundation for discussion at these public forums. We hope that upon conclusion of these public forums, plans of action will be put in place summarizing the concrete steps that leaders in communities, educators, policymakers and others will take to ensure more students graduate from high school.

## Conclusion

The dropout epidemic in the United States merits immediate, large-scale attention from policymakers, educators, the non-profit and business communities and the public. We hope that this report, which brings forward the significant perspectives of high school dropouts themselves, will further catalyze efforts to educate the public about how bad this problem is, and what its negative effects are, for the young people who fail to graduate, the schools in which they are failing to learn, the job markets they cannot enter, and the diminished communities in which they live.

We believe policymakers at all levels should use whatever means they have to keep the dropout problem front and center on the national agenda until dramatic progress is made in increasing the percentages of students who graduate from high school ready for college and the workforce.

We also hope that new efforts will be born, and existing efforts given new life, that can help address this problem urgently and over the long term. And we hope that the reflections, insights, and stories shared in this report will help transform how we view these young people – not as problems to be solved, but as potential to be fulfilled.

*The dropout epidemic in the United States merits immediate attention from policymakers, educators, the non-profit and business communities, and the public... And we hope that the reflections, insights, and stories shared in this report will help transform how we view these children - not as problems to be solved, but as potential to be fulfilled.*



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The views reflected in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.



## Appendix I – Poll Methodology

Peter D. Hart Research Associates conducted four focus groups of ethnically and racially diverse 16- to 24-year-olds in Philadelphia and Baltimore in August 2005. In September and October 2005, interviews were conducted primarily face to face with 467 ethnically and racially diverse students aged 16 through 25 who had dropped out of public high schools in 25 different locations in large cities, suburbs and small towns. These locations were selected from high dropout rate areas with a significant degree of geographic and demographic variation. Sixty-seven percent of our sample consisted of city residents and the remainder were from the suburbs (14 percent) or small towns and rural areas (17 percent). Thirty-six percent were white, thirty-five percent were black, and twenty-seven percent were Hispanic. Fifty-two percent were men and forty-eight percent were women. Forty-nine percent of these young people live with one parent and forty-four percent would describe their family income as below average. Seventy-one percent of the respondents reported that at least one of their parents graduated from high school. Almost half of the 25 locations in which we surveyed former students are in jurisdictions with a majority of high schools that have “weak promoting power” in moving classes of students from 9th grade through 12th grade on time.<sup>63</sup>

These data are not a nationally representative sample, but they do offer reflections from a broad cross-section of the very people who are most affected by the silent epidemic of high school dropouts in America.



## Appendix II - Compulsory School Attendance Laws by State

State	Age of Required School Attendance	Exemptions
Alabama	16	Legally and regularly employed under child labor law
Alaska	16	
Arizona	16	14 with parental consent and gainfully employed
Arkansas	17	Must complete school year
California	18	
Colorado	16	Has current age and school certificate or work permit
Connecticut	18	16 with parental consent
Delaware	16	
District of Columbia	18	
Florida	17	May terminate at 16 with parental consent
Georgia	16	
Hawaii	18	15 if employed
Idaho	16	
Illinois	17	Employed and excused by school official
Indiana	18	16 with consent of parent and principal, 14 if parent agrees and State Labor bureau issues a certificate, and must go back to school within 5 days of termination of employment for which certificate was issued
Iowa	16	
Kansas	18	16 and 17 with parental consent
Kentucky	16	
Louisiana	18	17 with parental consent
Maine	17	15 or completed 9th grade
Maryland	16	
Massachusetts	16	14
Michigan	16	
Minnesota	16	
Mississippi	17	
Missouri	16	14
Montana	16	Or completion of 8th grade, whichever is later
Nebraska	18	14 and 16 with parental consent; special legislation for home schooling
Nevada	17	14 and excused by board of trustees; 14 if work is necessary for own or parents' support
New Hampshire	16	
New Jersey	16	



State	Age of Required School Attendance	Exemptions
New Mexico	High school graduate	17 if excused by school board and employed in a gainful trade or occupation or child is in alternative schooling with parental consent
New York	16	17 in cities with 4,500 or more population and union-free school districts
North Carolina	16	
North Dakota	16	Necessary to support family
Ohio	18	16 with parent's and superintendent's permission
Oklahoma	18	16 if excused by written joint agreement
Oregon	18	Or excused by district school board; 16 with consent of school and parent
Pennsylvania	17	16 if regularly engaged in employment with a certificate, 15 if in farm work or domestic service in private home with permit, and 14 if completed elementary school with permit recommended by district superintendent of schools or principal of private school
Rhode Island	18	16 with written consent
South Carolina	17	16 if further attendance is determined by court to be disruptive, unproductive or not in best interest of child
South Dakota	16	Or completion of 8th grade if member of certain religious organizations
Tennessee	18	
Texas	18	
Utah	18	16 and 8th grade completed
Vermont	16	15 and completed 6th grade and services needed for support of family
Virginia	18	Exempt any pupil with parent and principal's consent or superintendent or a court which believes the minor cannot benefit from education at school
Washington	18	16 if parent agrees, or child is emancipated, or has received certificate of competence
West Virginia	16	
Wisconsin	18	
Wyoming	16	

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, data updated as of December 2005.





# Notes

<sup>1</sup> Swanson, Christopher B. (2004). *Who Graduates? Who Doesn't? A Statistical Portrait of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, v. Accessed at: <http://www.urban.org/publications/410934.html>; Greene, Jay P. & Marcus Winters (2005). *Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates, 1991 – 2002*. New York: The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 1. Accessed at [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp\\_08.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_08.htm). These graduation rates are widely referenced by experts and others. Because there are many ways to calculate graduation and dropout rates, however, we note that there are different statistics. We also note that there are concerns that official graduation rates reported by the states and the federal government are believed to be misleading and too optimistic. See Greene, 2 & see also Barton, Paul E. (2005). *One Third of a Nation: Rising Dropout Rates and Declining Opportunities*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 3. Accessed at: [http://www.ets.org/Media/Education\\_Topics/pdf/onethird.pdf](http://www.ets.org/Media/Education_Topics/pdf/onethird.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Swanson, v. Swanson indicates that 2001 graduation rates for blacks, Native Americans and Hispanics were 50, 51, and 53, respectively. Greene cites numbers for 2000 and 2002 that are slightly higher. We also note that there is a study that states that dropout rates are considerably lower for Hispanic youth, since the higher numbers include many immigrants who never attended a U.S. school. See Fry, Richard (2003). *Hispanic Youth Dropping Out of U.S. Schools: Measuring the Challenge*. Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 13. Accessed at: [http://www.pewtrusts.com/pdf/vf\\_pew\\_hispanic\\_dropout.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.com/pdf/vf_pew_hispanic_dropout.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. See also, Greene, Jay & Marcus Winters (2002). *Public Schools Graduation Rates in the United States*. New York: Manhattan Institute, citing very similar graduation rates for the class of 2000 and showing a slight increase for whites from the class of 1998. Accessed at: [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_31.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_31.htm).

<sup>4</sup> Swanson, vi.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid at p. 46-101 for state by state comparisons.

<sup>6</sup> Balfanz, Robert & Nettie Letgers (2004). *Locating the Dropout Crisis: Which High Schools Produce the Nation's Dropouts?* Johns Hopkins University, 9. Accessed at: [http://www.csos.jhu.edu/tdhs/rsch/Locating\\_Dropouts.pdf](http://www.csos.jhu.edu/tdhs/rsch/Locating_Dropouts.pdf); and Barton, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Barton, 40.

<sup>8</sup> Balfanz & Letgers (2004), 23-24.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid at pp. 11-13. Most of the public high schools in St. Louis and Indianapolis, for example, graduate less than 60 or 50 percent of their students, and students in these areas often have no other choice but to attend high schools where graduating is not the norm for a large percentage of the student body.

<sup>10</sup> Kaufman, Phillip et al. (1992). *Characteristics of At-Risk Students in NELS: 88*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 1. Accessed at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs92/92042.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Eugene W. Hickok, former Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, with the authors on November 1, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Rumberger, Russell (revised 2001). *Why Students Drop Out of School and What Can Be Done*. Paper prepared for the Conference, "Dropouts in America: How Severe is the Problem? What Do We Know about Intervention and Prevention?" Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, 2-3. See also; Orfield, Gary, ed. (2004). *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Press, 1-2. Also see; Pietrowiak, Diana M. & Charles M. Novak, ed. (2002). *School Dropouts: Education Could Play a Stronger Role in Identifying and Disseminating Promising Prevention Strategies*. Report to the Honorable Jim Gibbons, U.S. House of



Representatives, U.S. General Accounting Office, 1. Also see; Baum, Sandy and Kathleen Payea (2004). *Education Pays 2004: The Benefits of Higher Education to Individuals and Society*. NY: College Entrance Examination Board.

<sup>13</sup> Doland, E. (2001). *Give Yourself the Gift of a Degree*. Washington, DC: Employment Policy Foundation.

<sup>14</sup> National Center on Education Statistics (2005). *Digest of Education Statistics 2004*. Table 378. Accessed at [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d04/tables/dt04\\_378.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d04/tables/dt04_378.asp).

<sup>15</sup> Iceland, John (2003). *Dynamics of Economic Well-Being: Poverty 1996-1999*. Washington DC: U.S. Census Bureau. Detailed Tables (not in report, but available online) Table 5: Poverty 1996/1997. Accessed at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/sipp96/table059697.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Baum and Payea, 18. Citing data from the 2001 National Health Interview Survey of the National Center for Health Statistics. See also; Rumberger (2001), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Calculations based on Harlow, C. W. (revised 2003). *Education and Correctional Populations. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. Accessed at: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ecp.pdf](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ecp.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Snyder, Howard & Melissa Sickmund (1999). *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report*. Pittsburgh, PA: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency, U.S. Department of Justice. Accessed at: [www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/nationalreport99/toc.html](http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/nationalreport99/toc.html).

<sup>19</sup> PR Newswire (2005). *MTV and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Announce New Joint Effort to Empower Young People to Graduate From High School Ready for College*. Hispanic Business. Accessed at: <http://www.hispanicbusiness.com/news/newsbyid.asp?id=23216>.

<sup>20</sup> The 25 locations were as follows: Baltimore, MD; Boston, MA; Brooklyn, NY; Cleveland, OH; Detroit, MI; Hartford, CT; Hayward, CA; Jackson, MS; Kansas City, MO; Los Angeles, CA; Miami, FL; Milwaukee, WI; Muskogee, OK; Nashville, TN; Oakland, CA; Philadelphia, PA; Phoenix, AZ; Salina, KS; Spartanburg, SC; Springfield, MA; St. Clairsville, OH; St. Louis, MO; Tacoma, WA; Texarkana, TX; and Yonkers, NY.

<sup>21</sup> In national studies, former students report a wide variety of specific reasons for leaving high school – the vast majority of which relate to school, and a much smaller percentage of which relate to family or the need to work. Some of the most often cited reasons include: not liking school, failing school, not getting along with teachers, family reasons (including having a baby), and the need to get a job. Rumberger (2001), 4. Rumberger notes that even these self-reported reasons do not fully reveal the underlying causes of why students quit school. He examines explanations from various social science disciplines and focuses on both individual and institutional (school, family, peer and community) factors.

<sup>22</sup> Oakes, Jeannie (1985). *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*. New Haven: Yale University Press. See also; Goodland, John (1984). *A Place Called School*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

<sup>23</sup> Kaufman, Philip et al. (1992), 39.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-30.

<sup>25</sup> Rumberger (2001), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Several, but surprisingly few, longitudinal or retrospective studies of cohorts of students have analyzed the indicators of dropping out from as early as first grade. See Rumberger (2001), 6-9; Alexander et al. (1997). *From First Grade*



*Forward: Early Foundations of High School Dropout.* Sociology of Education Vol. 70, Issue 2: 98; Garnier et al. (1997). *The Process of Dropping Out of High School.* American Educational Research Journal Vol. 34, Issue 2: 395-419; Roderick (1993). *The Path to Dropping Out.* Westport, CT: Auburn House; Ensminger & Slusacick (1992). *Paths to High School Graduation or Dropout: A Longitudinal Study of a First Grade Cohort.* Sociology of Education 65: 95-113; Morris et al. (1991). *Building a Model to Predict Which Fourth through Eighth Graders Will Drop Out of High School.* Journal of Experimental Education 59: 286-293; Barrington & Hendricks (2001). *Differentiating Characteristics of High School Graduates, Dropouts, and Nongraduates.* Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Center at Wausau, 309-318; Cairns et al. (1989). *Early School Dropout: Configurations and Determinants.* Child Development 60: 1437-1452.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander et al, 87-107.

<sup>28</sup> Rumberger (2001), 8.

<sup>29</sup> Barton, 13.

<sup>30</sup> This slow process of disengagement from school discussed in this paragraph is also reflected in our survey data focusing on class attendance. In 9th grade, 64 percent of our former students attended class more often than not; by 10th grade this number falls to 51 percent; by 11th it is only at 42 percent; and by 12th grade, only 36 percent of our respondents attended their classes always or usually.

<sup>31</sup> Green, Leonard; Astrid F. Fry & Joel Myerson (1994). *Discounting of Delayed Rewards: A Life-span Comparison.* Psychological Science, v5 n1: 33.

<sup>32</sup> Barton, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Rumberger, Russell W. (1995). *Dropping Out of Middle School: A Multilevel Analysis of Students and Schools.* American Educational Journal 32: 583-625.

<sup>34</sup> Rumberger (2001), 15; see also Valerie E. Lee and Julia B. Smith (1997). *Restructuring High Schools for Equity and Excellence: What Works*, which analyzes federal data relating to almost 10,000 students in more than 750 public and private high schools of different sizes, and concludes that size affects such things as a sense of community within the school (negatively if the school is too big) and the ability to offer a solid curriculum (negatively if the school is too small).

<sup>35</sup> Kerr, Kerri A. & Nettie E. Legters (2004). *Preventing Dropout: Use and Impact of Organizational Reforms Designed to Ease the Transition to High School* in Dropouts in America. Edited by Gary Orfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 238.

<sup>36</sup> Dynarski, Mark (2004). *Interpreting the Evidence from Recent Federal Evaluations of Dropout – Prevention Programs: The State of Scientific Research* in Dropouts in America. Edited by Gary Orfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 255-267.

<sup>37</sup> Rumberger, Russell W. & S.L. Thomas (2000). *The Distribution of Dropout and Turnover Rates among Urban and Suburban High Schools.* Sociology of Education 73: 55-56.

<sup>38</sup> Rumberger (1995), 583-625; Rumberger et al. (1990). *Family Influences on Dropout Behavior in One California High School.* Sociology of Education 63: 283-299; Astone & McLanahan (1991). *Family Structure, Parental Practices and High School Completion.* American Sociological Review Volume 56, Number 3: 309-320.

<sup>39</sup> Greene & Winters (2005), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Rumberger (2001), 26-28, in which Rumberger identifies common features of effective programs, such as a non-threatening environment for learning, a caring, committed staff who accepted personal responsibility for student



success, and characteristics related to school culture and structure. He also mentions some of the difficulties with such programs, such as attracting students and school resources to support such programs.

<sup>41</sup> Kerr & Legters, 238.

<sup>42</sup> The numbers of students who are truant from school is often daunting. In Colorado, for example, it is estimated that every day 70,000 students are truant from school and in Philadelphia alone there are an average of 20,000 students truant per day. Truancy is just one area where increased parent involvement can be vitally important and productive. After all, schools can hardly do their job if the child is not in their building. See Harmacek, Marilyn ed. (2002) *Youth Out of School: Linking Absences to Delinquency*. 2nd edition. Colorado: The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2-3; and Street, John F (2001) Interview by Rocky Mountain Public Television, Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

<sup>43</sup> Eagle, E. (1994). *Socioeconomic Status, Family Structure, and Parental Involvement: The Correlates of Achievement in A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*. Edited by Henderson & Berla. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education, 59-60; Henderson, A. T. & N. Berla, eds. (1994) *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education; U.S. Department of Education (1994). *Strong Families, Strong Schools: Building Community Partnerships for Learning*. U.S. Department of Education; Ziegler, S. (1994). *The Effects of Parent Involvement on Children's Achievement: The Significance of Home School Links in A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*. Edited by A.T. Henderson & N. Berla. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education, 151 – 152. We note that an October 2005 study from Education Trust found that parent involvement ranks fifth on the list of factors that help improve California students' test scores in lower income, minority schools. Elements that ranked ahead of that were: linking lessons to state academic standards; ensuring that there are enough textbooks and other teaching materials; regular, careful analysis of student performance; and placing a high priority on student achievement. The good news from this study is that it supports the notion that students can still do well in spite of poverty and other challenges. Wherever parent involvement ranks on the helpfulness scale, it remains one way to help increase graduation rates, but it is not the only way. It will take a multitude of approaches to address this problem successfully.

<sup>44</sup> Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989). *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth For the 21st Century*. New York: The Carnegie Corporation.

<sup>45</sup> National Middle School Association Research Committee (2003). *An Adult Advocate For Every Student in This We Believe: Successful Schools For Young Adolescents*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association: 16-17.

<sup>46</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education (2004). *Alliance for Excellent Education Commends NASSP Report, Breaking Ranks II, for Its Hands on Approach*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.

<sup>47</sup> We note that there are some studies that provide support for raising maximum compulsory school age requirements. Angrist & Kruger (1991). *Does Compulsory School Attendance Affect Schooling and Earnings?* Quarterly Journal of Economics: 979-1014 (in which they suggest that roughly 25 percent of potential dropouts remain in school because of such laws); see also Bhanpuri & Reynolds (2003). *Understanding and Addressing the Issue of the High School Dropout Age*. Illinois: Learning Point Associates, 1 (in which they note that numerous states have recently increased their maximum compulsory school attendance age).

<sup>48</sup> Conant, James B. (1961). *Slums and Suburbs: A Commentary on Schools in Metropolitan Areas*. New York: McGraw Hill.

<sup>49</sup> Orfield, 5; see also Greene & Winters (2005), 5. One recommended method compares the number of graduates



with the number of students from that age group who enrolled four years earlier (recommended by the Congress in the No Child Left Behind Act); another calculates the probability that a student who enters 9th grade will finish high school four years later with a regular diploma (Christopher Swanson, Urban Institute, “Cumulative Promotion Index”); another estimates the number of students who enter a 9th grade class, makes some adjustments for change in population, and divides the resulting number into the number of students who actually graduated with a regular diploma (Greene, Manhattan Institute); yet another analyzes classes of students who move from 9th grade to 12th grade (Johns Hopkins, “Promotion Power”); and still another is the most often cited data of large households that “self-report” (U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, “Current Population Survey”).

<sup>50</sup> Orfield, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Swanson, Christopher B. (2003). *Keeping Count and Losing Count: Calculating Graduation Rates For All Students Under NCLB Accountability*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, iii.

<sup>52</sup> National Governors Association (2005). *Governors, National Organizations Reach Agreement on Graduation Rate*. Washington, DC: National Governors Association.

<sup>53</sup> National Governors Association Task Force on State High School Graduation Data (2005). *Graduation Counts: Redesigning the American High School*. Washington, DC: National Governors Association. The first recommendation of the NGA was to adopt, and begin implementing, a standard four-year, adjusted cohort graduation rate. This rate will look at students who graduate on time in a particular year divided by the number of ninth graders who entered ninth grade four years earlier, including any transfer students who came into that cohort of students and excluding any students who transferred out of such cohort. Students earning General Education Development (GED) certificates are not considered graduates under this calculation, and transfer students and those who are incarcerated must have documentation so that schools can accurately determine their status.

<sup>54</sup> U.S. Department of Labor (2004). *Current Population Survey*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics. Accessed at: [http://www.bls.gov/cps/cps\\_over.htm#overview](http://www.bls.gov/cps/cps_over.htm#overview).

<sup>55</sup> Orfield, 5; see also, Greene & Winters (2005), 2-3.

<sup>56</sup> Swanson, *Keeping Count and Losing Count*, 11. See also; U.S. Department of Education (2005), *Common Core of Data*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Accessed at: <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd>. The National Center for Education Statistics annually collects data on high school completion and dropouts at the state and district levels as part of the Common Core of Data, a data set that is used by experts to make their own calculations of dropout and graduation rates. The Common Core of Data consists of five surveys in approximately 94,000 public elementary and secondary schools in 50 states. We note that the U.S. Department of Education announced in July 2005 that it will publish alongside states’ graduation rates under NCLB an interim estimator known as the “Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate”. See remarks of U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education: Simon, Raymond (2005). *The Arts: A Lifetime of Learning*. Speech at the Commission of the States Launch of the Chairman’s Initiative on Arts in Education, U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>57</sup> Kaufman, Philip (2001). *The National Dropout Data Collection System: Assessing Consistency*. Paper presented at “Dropouts in America: How Severe is the Problem? What Do We Know about Intervention and Prevention?” Civil Rights Project, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, 30.

<sup>58</sup> Losen, Daniel J. (2004). *Graduation Rate Accountability Under the No Child Left Behind Act and the Disparate Impact on Students of Color* in *Dropouts in America*. Edited by Gary Orfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 45-46.



<sup>59</sup> Dynarski, 255-267.

<sup>60</sup> Barrington & Hendricks, 309; citing Fitsimmons et al. (1969). *School Failure Now and Tomorrow*. *Developmental Psychology* 1, 134-146.

<sup>61</sup> Shaul, Marnie S. (2005). *No Child Left Behind Act: Education Could Do More to Help States Better Define Graduation Rates and Improve Knowledge About Intervention Strategies*. Report to Senators Lamar Alexander, Jeff Bingaman, Edward Kennedy, Patty Murray, and Olympia J. Snowe, U.S. Senate.

<sup>62</sup> We note that a recent large-scale survey of California elementary schools took exactly this approach in analyzing why some schools serving largely low-income students score much higher on the state's academic performance index than other schools with similar students. See Williams, Trish et al. (2005). *Similar Students, Different Results: Why Do Some Schools Do Better?* Mountain View, CA: EdSource.

<sup>63</sup> Balfanz & Letgers (2004), 12-13.



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