



GETTING BACK ON THE DIPLOMA TRACK

Re-engaging high school dropouts
is critical to their success—and
the nation's future

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How important is getting high school dropouts back in school? That's tough to quantify overall, but at least some numbers can be found to answer the question.

By one measure, the average high school dropout will cost taxpayers nearly \$300,000 over the course of their lifetime. They will pay lower taxes, receive higher benefits from government and be more likely to be incarcerated—47 times more likely than those who receive a college degree, according to the Center for Labor Market Studies, based at Northeastern University in Boston.¹

The Center also found that nearly 6.2 million young people ages 16 to 24 have dropped out of high school; the population is disproportionately male, black and Hispanic, and low-income. “We can invest in incarceration or we can invest in programs to keep these young people in school and in new pathways to high school graduation and successful careers,” the Center says.²

Illinois State Senate President Emil Jones didn't exaggerate much when he remarked during a 2006 conference on high school dropout problems in Illinois that, “Dropping out of high school was an apprenticeship for prison.”³

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DRAIN ON COMPETITIVENESS

The Center for Labor Market Studies' work is augmented by a report from Job Corps that says more than 1.3 million people drop out of school every year, and only 69 percent who enter ninth grade end up finishing high school in four years. "Gone are the days when manufacturing jobs allowed people without a high school diploma to excel in the workforce and provide a comfortable living for their families," Job Corps says.⁴

As a result, of this group, 54 percent were out of work on average during 2008 compared with only 13 percent of those with a college degree; 40 percent of dropouts were jobless for the entire year, according to the Center for Labor Market Studies. Dropouts under 25 earned a mean \$8,358, one third of what the total population under 25 earned in 2007. Nearly 38 percent of young women who dropped out were single mothers, nine times as many as those who achieved college degrees.⁵

"All of these disparities have only been aggravated by current economic conditions," according to the Center's report. "Without a high school diploma, you cannot earn enough money to make ends meet and certainly not enough to reach the American dream of raising a family and buying a home."

That individual pain is felt at the national level, as America's economic competitiveness is compromised by the number of dropouts. The U.S. ranks 20th out of 28 industrialized democracies when it comes to high school graduation rates, according to a report from the National Governors Association.⁶ Ten states have graduation rates below 66 percent, and none has a rate above 88 percent. In the late 1960s, America's graduation

rate peaked at 80 percent, the best in the world. Since then, the rate has fallen four or five percentage points while the rest of the world has improved.

More than half of America's dropouts come from about 2,000 so-called "dropout factories," often located in high-poverty areas, that do not promote at least 40 percent of ninth-graders to the 12th grade within three years, the NGA says.⁷ A combination of academic failure, lack of engagement that leads to poor attendance, problematic behavior and life events—like becoming pregnant—typically combine to convince young people that school is not for them.

But many Americans have misconceptions about the makeup of the dropout population, according to Jobs for the Future.⁸ Contrary to what many people believe, young Americans of all socioeconomic groups drop out of school, socioeconomic status predicts the likelihood of dropping out much more accurately than race, most dropouts work very hard to attain a diploma—and 60 percent succeed in doing so. Furthermore, 44 percent enroll in college, but only 10 percent finish.

"Due to multiple factors, the nation is facing a crisis-level deficiency in skilled workers," according to Job Corps.⁹ "The population in the rest of the world is growing larger, younger and more educated; technological change and global competition are demanding more of our workers; and high school dropout rates are alarmingly high."

FEDERAL PROPOSALS AND INITIATIVES

The Obama administration showed recognition of the national implications of the dropout issue in announcing a \$900 million federal investment in March



2010, notes Jobs for the Future. The president termed the nation's graduation statistics "a problem we cannot afford to accept and we cannot afford to ignore."¹⁰

The federal government could also implement the proposed \$2 billion Hope & Opportunity Pathways Through Education Initiative (HOPE USA) to re-enroll 480,000 dropouts every year, suggests the Center for Labor Market Studies.¹¹

This federal matching incentive grant program would prompt state and local school districts to establish comprehensive programs to encourage dropouts to earn a high school diploma. Among the initiatives would be small schools, with approximately 80 to 150 students apiece, that would include after-school and summer components.

The Center for Labor Market Studies also recommends greater funding for re-enrollment of dropouts as part of the Obama administration's Race to the Top initiative as well as the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind. And the center proposes a \$5 billion initiative to expand year-round and summer youth employment.¹²

Perhaps the broadest existing federal initiative is Job Corps, which educates and trains more than 60,000 at-risk students annually, boasting at least a \$2 return on every \$1 spent. Founded in 1964, the U.S. Department of Labor program has served more than 2 million students since its inception and currently

has a budget of \$1.7 billion to serve youth out of 123 centers in 48 states and the District of Columbia. More than half of the participants (52 percent) are African American, 17 percent are Hispanic and 25 percent are white.¹³

"Job Corps is the primary program for effectively reaching disadvantaged kids and providing them with skills they can use to find work and further their education," according to Management and Training Corporation, which manages 26 sites in 19 states on contract with the Department of Labor. "Serving at-risk kids—the ones who have traditionally been left behind—is what Job Corps does best."

More than three-quarters of those who enter Job Corps, 76.5 percent, are high school dropouts. Most graduates of the program, some 78 percent, complete their high school diploma, GED or industry-recognized certificate, leading to college, the military or launched careers in the skilled trades.¹⁴

IMPACT ON INDIVIDUAL LIVES

Anecdotal examples include Laranda Clanton of Kansas City, Kansas, who dropped out in ninth grade but completed her GED in four months of study through Job Corps and began attending a community college paralegal/pre-law program on her 17th birthday.

Then there's Ryan Frazier of New Orleans, who graduated from high school but failed the exit test, never got around to retaking it, and then moved



to Atlanta abruptly after Hurricane Katrina hit; he received his GED, went to work as a correction detention officer with the DeKalb County Sheriff's Department and had plans to start college.¹⁵

Another national effort is the National Guard's Youth ChalleNGe program, which re-engages mostly male dropouts into a 17-month program with a 22-week residential component that includes tough military training.

Washington Post columnist Jay Matthews, who wrote about the program after its launch in 2009, said initial data has shown 57 percent of those who complete the program have found jobs, 27 percent have enrolled in postsecondary education and 12 percent have joined the military.¹⁶

Although comprehensive longitudinal data is not yet available, Shearwater Education believes "a major success of this program seems to be its ability to take youth who are not in school, and have them stay engaged and show positive performance in such a highly structured environment." As such, Matthews' commentary "is a true testimony to the resilience and extraordinary abilities of young people who drop out of school but make the decision to come back and graduate so they and their families can have a brighter future," Shearwater Education believes.

One mother's testimony in reaction to Shearwater's postings about the program is unequivocal: "This is an amazing program!" wrote Jackie Durkee. "My son just graduated from Youth Challenge in Louisiana...He had just dropped out on his 16th birthday. He was in the 7th grade instead of 10th grade and making all F's."¹⁷

"YCP helped him get his GED, brought him from a 7.8 to 12.1 grade level and made him stronger and having [sic] greater self-esteem. He now has a part-time job and is attending a technical college to get a degree in electronic technologies."

STATE LEVEL EFFORTS

At the state level, the NGA recommends that governors assign responsibility for dropout prevention and recovery, target youth at risk of dropping out through early warning data systems, employ outreach strategies to re-engage out-of-school youth—including re-entry programs for juvenile offenders—and focus on turning around low-performing schools that have been identified as "dropout factories."¹⁸

Federal regulations adopted in 2008 require that states more precisely count dropouts while holding districts and schools more accountable, notes Jobs for the Future (JFF). "In addition, encouraging developments over the past decade have put major improvement within reach: better data collection and analysis; promising research showing that a small

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set of school-based variables are highly effective in predicting future dropouts; and pioneering prevention and recovery strategies in cities with the highest concentrations of dropouts.”¹⁹

The group cites North Carolina, Texas and, to some extent, Mississippi as being leaders in enacting comprehensive policies to boost graduation rates. Overall, JFF says 32 states have moved forward with some combination of requiring districts to report dropout counts, establishing goals to keep students in school, or implementing better systems to identify at-risk students. By later this year, 33 states will be calculating graduation rates based on the “four-year cohort” method endorsed by the National Governors Association. Since No Child Left Behind passed in 2002, 36 states and the District of Columbia have enacted laws to improve graduation rates.

JFF says competitive grants and similar funding mechanisms should be used to create and sustain “Back on Track” initiatives to re-engage dropouts. “In a handful of states, competitive grant programs support districts and, in some cases, nonprofits or postsecondary institutions to develop or enhance models designed to recover dropouts,” the report says. “And in two states—North Carolina and Texas—nimble and strategic public-private initiatives are implementing innovation on a large scale and with consistent quality and efficiency.”²⁰

North Carolina reported its dropout rate in 2009-10 was 3.75 percent, down from 4.27 percent the previous year, the lowest ever recorded in the state. African American, Hispanic and American Indian males recorded the highest rates, between 5 percent and

6 percent.²¹ The state legislature in 2011 directed the state Board of Education to award pilot grants to four districts working on dropout recovery through partnerships with either nonprofit or for-profit entities.

In Texas, the longitudinal dropout rate for the class of 2010 Grade 9 cohort was 7.3 percent, a decrease of 2.1 percentage points from the class of 2009.²² The state has partnered with private entities since at least 2003, when Texas put \$65 million toward the Texas High School Project—matched by \$65 million from the Dell Foundation, Gates Foundation and Communities Foundation of Texas—to increase high school graduation and college-going rates.²³ In 2007, the Texas legislature allocated \$104 million to establish several dropout prevention and recovery programs and allowed people up to age 26 to attend public schools for the purpose of re-engaging dropouts.²⁴

JFF further recommends that higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates be given equal weight alongside test scores in determining school and district performance, creating new pathways to college in low-income communities by intervening in low-performing schools and/or creating new schools, and reaching out to dropouts through “recovery” programs that recognize and build on their existing knowledge of the higher-level skills they need to succeed in the 21st century.²⁵

To more accurately count dropouts, JFF says states will need to invest in longitudinal data systems such as the one developed by The Data Quality Campaign that tracks individual students from high school to college and then to the workforce. The new pathways to college could include small schools or charters,



which are not a panacea but can be helpful especially when replacing large, low-performing attendance-area schools; although states and districts should not neglect working to turn around those schools when possible, JFF says.²⁶

In Illinois, the Task Force on Re-enrolling Students Who Dropped Out of School, created in October 2005, conducted a series of 27 public hearings about the impact of the dropout crisis and what could be done about it. The group recommended creating a Re-enrolled Student Program that would annually return 24,800 dropouts to school by the year 2013, roughly the number who dropped out in 2005-06.²⁷

Under the task force's recommendations, the state's 45 Regional Offices of Education would develop plans that include "comprehensive full-time programs, part-time programs, online classes, dual enrollment courses for high school and community college credit, and GED preparation classes," with an emphasis on "small, community-based alternative programs." The task force also recommended issuing an annual report on re-enrolled students, developing performance standards for programs serving re-enrolled students and tracking those students through the Illinois State Board of Education's Student Information System.

The task force reported that currently only 8.15 percent of dropouts are re-enrolled each year, and for every \$100 spent by the state for enrolled high school

students, only 59 cents is spent for those who drop out. Given that 47 percent of dropouts are unemployed and 70 percent of men in prison are dropouts, among other statistics, spending roughly the same amount per student on dropout programs could save Illinois between \$37 million and \$51 million per year for between 8,000 and 11,000 students, the task force reported.²⁸

'ON-RAMPS AT THE GRASSROOTS'

Lastly, states and districts must work to design "on-ramps" for dropouts, focusing on community colleges because of their accessibility and relative affordability. Given that few dropouts currently succeed in such institutions, state policymakers should encourage that more of them offer GED programs—which increases the odds of student success—while also exploring how postsecondary certificate programs might play a role in creating pathways of their own aimed at dropouts.

Districts, municipalities and nonprofit education organizations have attempted to re-engage dropouts using a variety of methods at differing breadths of scale.

The National League of Cities has recommended that municipal leaders work to increase the range of pathways for those who have dropped out or who are at risk of doing so. The League's Institute for Youth, Education and Families in April brought together

In Chicago, the Alternative Schools Network has supported such second-chance schools throughout the city while providing a range of its own programming designed to fill in the gaps.

cross-system teams from six cities to discuss best practices to re-engage “disconnected youth,” defined as those ages 16 to 24 who are neither in school nor working.²⁹

“Focus areas for the meeting included improving the use and sharing of data, developing strong convening structures—including ‘backbone’ intermediaries or lead agencies—and applying techniques such as youth master planning and results-based accountability to the development of citywide disconnected youth strategies,” the league reports.

Several urban school districts, including New York and Boston, have ramped up their efforts to provide a genuine second chance to these youth by combining funding streams to create and design flexible programs to meet the “family and economic responsibilities and the interests of older learners,” according to JFF. “Our analysis supports the wisdom of moving in this direction.”³⁰

In Chicago, the Alternative Schools Network has supported such second-chance schools throughout the city while providing a range of its own programming designed to fill in the gaps, from career education to a variety of counseling services to substance abuse prevention information and activities.³¹

Perhaps the most impactful programs in re-engaging dropouts are the Re-Enrolled Student Project, which aims to re-enroll more than 800 dropouts in 21 alternative high schools across the city and saw a 74 percent retention rate from 2006-10; the Youth Scholars, Skills, Service (YS3) program, which

re-enrolled 464 older foster care youth into one of 17 alternative schools with the goal of earning a diploma, and which saw 66 percent of them continue to the next grade in 2009-10; and Youth Experiencing Success, which serves 350 to 400 students annually with intensive case management and mentoring.³²

On a wider geographic scale is the Gateway to College National Network, which targets students aged 16 to 21 with an average grade-point average of 1.6 and less than half the credits they need to earn a diploma. Created at Portland Community College in 2000, the program caught the attention of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and has received funding to evolve into a national network of 30 colleges in 16 states that partner with more than 100 school districts.³³

Operating within the context of a community or technical college—or as a charter school on the college campus—the program gives students insights on how to succeed in school through a college skills class. Students earn a high school diploma and progress toward a college degree or certificate, focusing on a “pathway” that aligns with both high school and college completion requirements. Classes are offered both during the day and in the evening.

The Gates Foundation has provided an additional \$7.28 million starting in January 2010 to enable the network to expand to 15 more community colleges while continuing to hone its methods of delivering remedial education. The Foundation says the program has shown results such as 75 percent passing rates in developmental classes and 88 percent attendance rates on average.³⁴

Groups like the Center for Labor Market Studies, Jobs for the Future and the National Governors Association recommend a mix of greater funding and innovative reforms to ensure that the nation's teenagers and young adults are prepared for the collegiate and labor markets that await them in the 21st century.

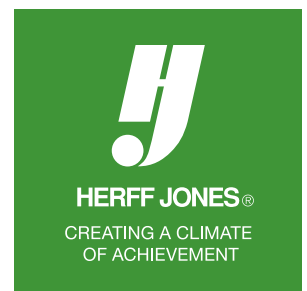
Many efforts are underway to tackle the dropout crisis. Nationwide programs like Job Corps and the Gateway to College National Network, certain states like North Carolina and Texas, and local initiatives like the Alternative Schools Network in Chicago are cited for their success in re-engaging this population. Individual students and their parents can tell heartwarming and very substantive anecdotes of how such programs got their lives back on track toward success.

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