

## **The Graduation Rate Crisis We Know and What Can be Done About It Education Week Commentary, July 12, 2006**

By Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters

The debate over how best to measure the nation's Graduation Rate is important. We need to know who graduates and who does not. Yet in the midst of questions about measurement and data quality we must not lose sight of what lies plainly before us and is loudly calling for immediate action.

For the past decade we and our colleagues, Ruth Neild at the University of Pennsylvania and Liza Herzog at the Philadelphia Education Fund, have studied the dropout/graduation rate crisis at the school level. We have learned that about 15% of the nation's high schools produce close to half its dropouts. These 2,000 high schools are the nation's dropout factories. They have weak promoting power -- the number of seniors is routinely 60% or fewer than the number of freshmen four years earlier -- and large numbers of their students are not making steady progress to graduation.

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

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

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

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

We have found, however, that graduation rates in the 50-60% range typical in many cities are driven by students who enter high school poorly prepared for success and rarely or barely make it out of the ninth grade. They disengage from school, attend infrequently, fail too many courses to be promoted to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, try again with no better results, and ultimately drop out of school. Our data show 20-40% of students in these cities repeat the ninth grade but that only 10-15% of repeaters go on to graduate.

Our direct experience working to improve more than 70 high-poverty, non-selective high schools through our Talent Development High Schools program further tells us that the nation's dropout factories are not the result of students, teachers and administrators who do not care or try. They care and try a lot, but they are often over-matched by the immense educational challenges they face. There are too many under resourced and increasingly economically and racially segregated high schools that lack the tools and techniques needed to meet the challenges they face. In these high schools it is not uncommon for less than 20% of freshmen to be on-age, first-time ninth graders, with math and reading skills at the seventh-grade level or higher; in short, the type of students high schools have traditionally been designed to educate. Up to 80% of the ninth-graders can be over-age for grade, repeating the grade, require special education services, or have math and reading skills below a seventh-grade level. Yet increasingly, we are asking these students to pass Algebra courses and even exams before they can be promoted to 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

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

Finally, our most recent study reveals that many students begin to fall off the graduation track at the start of adolescence. We have been able to identify over half of a major district's future dropouts as early as the sixth grade by looking at just four variables commonly measured in schools--attendance, behavior, and course failure in math and English. Students with any *one* of these risk factors had less than a 20% chance of graduating within five years of entering ninth grade.

Hence, one reason that the ninth grade finishes off so many students is that many of them have already been struggling and disengaging for three years or more before entering high school. Along with the recent on-track measures for ninth-graders developed by the Chicago Consortium for School Research, this tells us that there are powerful and accessible indicators that schools can use to identify the overwhelming majority of

students who will drop out in time to prevent it, as well as indicating the areas in which these students need supports.

Thus, states and districts can use *currently available* indicators to identify both the high schools that produce the majority of dropouts and the students most likely to drop out. Our research also points to concrete steps we can take *right now* to address the graduation crisis head on. At least three types of intervention are required:

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

We have the knowledge to do this, but it will not be easy, fast, or cheap. A central feature of dropout factories is that they serve an overwhelming concentration of needy students. Thus, it is essential that federal government, states, districts and foundations bring to bear human and financial resources that are equal to the challenge. We have recently shown that high schools vary considerably in resources. Some struggling high schools can implement proven reforms by re-allocating existing resources, others need additional support, and a quarter or more need a 25% to 33% increase in resources. Moreover, because reforming or replacing these schools is the educational equivalent of open heart surgery, states and districts need to develop sufficient technical capacity to do the job and/or support third-party intermediaries who can.

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

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

We need to transform the high schools that produce most of the dropouts and the middle grades schools that feed them. With a targeted, inventive, aligned, and integrated approach, we can do this. We must do this. It is time to get to work. (Research cited in this commentary can be found at our web site [www.gradgap.org](http://www.gradgap.org).)

*The authors are Research Scientists with the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University, and Directors of the Center's Talent Development High Schools program.*