



Building a Grad Nation

**Progress and Challenge in Ending
the High School Dropout Epidemic**

**Executive Summary
November 2010**

A report by
**Civic Enterprises
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Open Letter to the American People

The United States is turning a corner in meeting the high school dropout epidemic. For the sake of our young people, society, economy, democracy, and even national security, it is not a moment too soon.

Over the last decade, our nation has taken important steps to reform education, understand the dimensions of the dropout problem, and begin to fashion a targeted approach to solving it. All 50 governors created a common definition of high school graduation rates, later improved and adopted by the U.S. Department of Education, to chart our progress and challenges across schools and states.

Two seminal reports, *Locating the Dropout Crisis* and *The Silent Epidemic*, brought the dropout crisis to the attention of policymakers and the public. The first report uncovered the fact that in the early part of this decade, half of all dropouts were concentrated in just 15 percent of the nation's schools, enabling a targeted response. The second report shared the perspectives of high school dropouts, giving the nation hope that most dropouts could have graduated from high school and gone on to college and productive work. Reports on the perspectives of teachers, principals, and parents showed a clear understanding among these three vital groups of the causes of and solutions to the high school dropout problem and a strong willingness to address it. A national summit prompted action from federal and state policymakers, and more than 100 summits in all 50 states armed communities with the best research and latest tools to confront their local dropout challenges.

Although by 2008 there were fewer dropout factories and fewer minority students attending them than in the first part of the decade, at least one-fourth of all public high school students and close to 40 percent of minority students (African American, Hispanic, and Native American) continue to fail to graduate with their class. Of our nation's high school graduates, too few are prepared for the rigors of college and the workforce. We must do more to understand what factors have enabled some communities to experience breakthrough improvements and apply what is working to communities that are still languishing.

The report that follows shares some hopeful signs of tangible progress in boosting high school graduation rates, highlighting the gains we are making in communities, states, and the nation. The report also provides a sober assessment of our remaining challenges and launches a "Civic Marshall Plan" to build on the successes of the last decade and the momentum of the Grad Nation campaign launched this year to mobilize America to end the high school dropout crisis and prepare young people for college and success in the 21st century.

We hope this report both shows that significant progress is possible and sounds the alarm to rally educators, policymakers, other leaders, and the public to keep America's high school dropout crisis as an urgent national priority. The stakes are higher than ever — for our children, families, and prosperity as a nation — in a globally competitive world.



General Colin Powell



Alma J. Powell

Executive Summary

The central message of this report is that some states and school districts are raising their high school graduation rates with scalable solutions in our public schools, showing the nation we can end the high school dropout crisis. America made progress not only in suburbs and towns, but also in urban districts and in states across the South.

Progress in states and school districts has often been the result of rising to a standard of excellence — with clear goals and expectations from the state to the classroom, by challenging all students with a more rigorous curriculum to obtain a meaningful diploma that prepares them for college and work, and through a targeted approach sustained over time that provides extra supports to the school leaders, teachers and students who need them the most. Progress was not the result of a magic bullet, but a weave of multiple reform efforts, sustained, integrated, and improved over time.

Important progress is being made on a range of reforms, policies, and practices at all levels that will help ensure more students graduate from high school, ready for college and productive work. Although this is producing real results, including an increase in the national graduation rate, the pace is too slow to meet the national goal of a 90 percent high school graduation rate by 2020.¹ We must calibrate our educational system to the greater demands of the 21st century through a Civic Marshall Plan to make more accelerated progress in boosting student achievement, high school graduation rates, and college- and career-readiness for our nation to meet national goals and fulfill the promise of the next generation.

¹ In his State of the Union Address on February 24, 2009, President Obama set the goal that by 2020, all Americans would have committed to at least one year or more of higher education or career training and that America would once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. In March 2010, America's Promise Alliance launched its Grad Nation campaign with the goal of mobilizing America to end the dropout crisis and prepare young people for success in college and the 21st century workforce. This report is written with the plan of increasing the high school graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020 to enable our efforts to begin in elementary school to ensure that these graduates are ready for college and their careers, and to reach the President's goals and strengthen our nation.





The National Picture

High school graduation rates over the last decade have shown significant improvements as state and local reforms begin to take hold, and the number of dropout factory high schools is declining. Some states, school districts, and schools have made real progress, thus shattering the myth that only incremental gains are possible. The overall national picture is still troubling, with more than one million public high school students still failing to graduate with their class every year.

- **The number of dropout factory high schools fell by 261, from a high of 2,007 such schools in 2002 to 1,746 schools in 2008.** This 13 percent decline is important, given that these schools produce half of the nation's dropouts every year. **According to the U.S. Department of Education, the national graduation rate increased from 72 to 75 percent between 2001 and 2008. An additional 120,000 students earned a high school diploma in the Class of 2008 compared to the Class of 2001.²**
- **Tennessee and New York led the nation in boosting high school graduation rates, with breakthrough gains of 15 and 10 percentage-points, respectively.** Ten other states had gains ranging from about 4 to 7 percentage-points. These gains were in states that had graduation rates in 2002 that were above, near, and below the national graduation rate, indicating that improvement is possible regardless of starting point.
- **More than half of the nation's states — 29 in total — increased high school graduation rates.** Eighteen states had rates that remained essentially the same, and three states — Arizona, Nevada, and Utah — experienced noticeable declines in their graduation rates.
- **The rate of progress over the last decade — 3 percentage-points — is too slow to reach the national goal of having 90 percent of students graduate from high school and obtain at least one year of postsecondary schooling or training by 2020.** Over the next 10 years, the nation will need to accelerate its progress in boosting high school graduation rates *fivefold* from the rates achieved through 2008.

² The graduation rate refers to the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate calculated by the U.S. Department of Education. Dropout factories are defined as high schools in which the ratio of 12th grade enrollment to 9th grade enrollment three years earlier is 60 percent or less. Low graduation rate schools have a ratio between 61 and 75 percent. This ratio is called promoting power in this report. Grade level enrollment data comes from the Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics. These calculations were made using data from 2008, the last year for which data is available.

- **Accelerated progress over the next decade is possible.** For the first time, graduation rates will be measured accurately across all schools, and all states and districts will be accountable for making meaningful and sustained improvement; the federal government is investing in school transformation; early warning systems are coming online; the nation's governors and mayors have become engaged in the challenge; national non-profits have directed their efforts toward ending the dropout crisis; states are adopting Common Core State Standards to prepare students for college and careers; and a civic awakening to the costs of and solutions to the dropout crisis has spurred concerted action.

A Deeper Look

A deeper look shows progress and challenge by racial and ethnic groups, region, and locale.

- **Ninety-one percent of Asian, 81 percent of White, 64 percent of Hispanic, 64 percent of Native American, and 62 percent of African American students graduated in 2008,** according to the U.S. Department of Education.
- **The largest city school districts in the nation show success in meeting the challenge of the dropout epidemic.** New York City and Chicago show that urban areas are capable of decreasing the percentage of students attending dropout factories, showing a 28 and 19 percentage-point reduction in the number of students attending these high schools, respectively. Los Angeles and Las Vegas both regressed with a 5 and 32 percentage-point increase, respectively, in the number of high school students attending a dropout factory.



We Know What Works

- **Most of the decline in dropout factory schools occurred in the South, with 216 of the net decline of 261 schools (about 83 percent of the total decline) found across 9 southern states, led by Texas and Georgia with 77 and 36 fewer dropout factory schools, respectively.** The West, largely driven by increases in Nevada and California, saw a net gain of 21 dropout factory schools.
- **Certain states, like Tennessee, Texas, Alabama, and Georgia, had balanced improvement across locales, potentially signaling the significance of statewide efforts.** Tennessee and Texas experienced a decrease in dropout factories in suburbs, towns, cities, and rural areas. Alabama and Georgia experienced progress in three out of four such locales.
- **Nationwide, 400,000 fewer students (a 15 percent decline) were enrolled in dropout factories in 2008 compared to 2002,** with 7 states accounting for 71 percent of the decline (Texas, New York, California, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, and Ohio).
- **Most of the decline in dropout factories from 2002 to 2008 (205 of the 261 total net decline, or 79 percent) occurred in suburbs and towns.** School districts within cities or urban fringe experienced a net decline of 38 dropout factory schools, while school districts in rural areas saw a decrease of 18 such schools.
- **Still, some urban districts, which typically have the highest concentration of students in dropout factory schools, are showing success. Twenty-two states had a decline of 127 such schools in urban areas from 2002 to 2008.** Eight states stand out for their improvements in urban areas — Texas (-31 dropout factory schools), New York (-14), Louisiana and Illinois (-8), and New Jersey, Florida, Wisconsin, and Tennessee (-7), collectively accounting for 95 of the 127 net decrease in such schools in urban areas. Improvements in these states were partially offset by an increase in dropout factories in urban areas in other states.
- **In states and districts that are showing the way forward — like Tennessee; Alabama; Richmond, IN; and New York City — strong leadership, multi-sector collaboration, innovation, and support and technical assistance for research-based solutions are increasing graduation rates.** Rigor and high expectations make a big difference. Committed governors, legislators, and mayors; state and local superintendents and school boards; and principals and teachers are working with teachers unions, the broader community, youth serving organizations, and higher education institutions to set a vision, raise expectations for progress, and build clear pathways to college and career. They are ensuring that policies and practices are aligned, and that evidence-based reforms are supported, effectively implemented, and continually improved. They are also ensuring that schools have the resources and conditions needed to bring effective efforts to scale.
- **Despite real progress, and breakthrough success in some states and communities, the challenge is still large.** In 2008, more than 2 million students still attended a high school in which graduation was no better than close to a 50/50 proposition. Additionally, nearly all of the high-poverty urban school districts that have improved still have graduation rates below the national average. Too many graduates are still unprepared for the needs of college and high-wage employment. With the exception of a few states and communities, solutions have not been found for high-poverty, low-performing rural high schools, which often have only one high school in their district.

Confronting the Epidemic

Over the past decade, America has started to understand the magnitude of its dropout epidemic and take important steps to measure and address it. Educators, administrators, community leaders, policymakers, social entrepreneurs, students, parents, and others have been active at the school, state, and national levels to ensure dropout prevention and recovery and college readiness are part of a comprehensive educational improvement strategy tailored to local conditions. Below is an update on important progress in recent years and challenges that remain.

- **Quality Education as a Top Priority.** National Assessment of Educational Progress results for 4th and 8th grades allow state performance to be compared, the federal No Child Left Behind law mandates improvements, and many states passed extensive reforms in order to compete for the federal Race to the Top grants. Many states are working to establish their high school diploma as proof that students have mastered a high level of knowledge and skills by passing more rigorous graduation requirements and stronger assessments that measure a high level of student achievement. At the same time, they are taking steps to ensure that greater high school demands do not lead to more dropouts by providing more training for educators and greater support for students.
- **Accurate Data.** In 2005, all 50 governors agreed to a common calculation of high school graduation rates, using a “four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate” that divides the number of on-time graduates in a given year by the number of first-time entering 9th graders four years earlier, making adjustments for transfers in and out of schools. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education tightened the calculation set forth by the governors and adopted it. By the end of 2010, 33 states will be using this calculation. The federal government will require the states to use this calculation for the 2010-2011 school year and be held accountable for their progress based on this calculation for the 2011-2012 school year. In order to receive stimulus funds, all of the states agreed to build statewide longitudinal data systems that follow individual students from early childhood through high school, postsecondary education, and into the workforce. This will allow states to track student progress into college to determine what programs earlier in a student’s education had the best results for college readiness.
- **Early Warning and Intervention Systems.** Research shows that potential dropouts can be identified as early as late elementary and middle school with the warning signs of poor attendance, behavior, and course performance. Louisiana, South Carolina, and Alabama are leaders in testing statewide early warning systems. Diplomas Now, a school turnaround model organized around early warning data, combines the Talent Development secondary school transformation model with Communities in Schools and City Year, two organizations that provide community-based supports and interventions for off-track students in middle and high schools. Diplomas Now is currently working in 10 large city school districts and will expand to 60 more schools. Early results show significant declines in absenteeism, poor behavior, and course failure. Students cannot learn if they are not in school so communities have begun to organize to establish the norm that every student should be in school each day. The federal government and states and districts need to track chronic absenteeism, not just aggregate attendance.
- **High Expectations.** Until recently, a majority of states permitted students to drop out of high school at the age of 16, reflecting laws that were passed in the early 20th century. Since 2002, 12 states have raised their compulsory school age from 16 to 17 or 18, now ensuring that 32 states set the expectation that students will graduate from high school. In some states, like Tennessee and West Virginia, students must remain in school until they are 18 to keep their driver’s license. Educators, in many schools, are developing school climates with the expectation that all students will graduate high school completely college-ready.
- **Higher Standards.** At least 38 states have adopted Common Core State Standards in English language arts and math, which will standardize learning expectations across elementary and secondary schools and enable comparisons of student achievement across districts and states. Work is now underway on matching assessments and teacher tools to help ensure students are helped to reach these new standards. Also, many states have raised their graduation standards, requiring students to take more rigorous classes, especially advanced math and laboratory sciences, and replacing low-level general basic skills tests with assessments demanding higher levels of knowledge and skills, often as end-of-course exams tied to specific classes.

- **Teacher Effectiveness.** Research shows the importance of having highly effective teachers in student academic achievement. Studies have found that teacher effectiveness has a greater impact on student achievement than any other reform under a school's control. Teacher effectiveness is one of the key strategies for the next decade, building on the past decade's emphasis on leadership and organizational reforms. Current research is examining the qualifications, professional development, preparation, and support in the forms of induction, mentoring, and coaching that help create and retain effective teachers. Research also delves into teachers' perspectives on the dropout challenge, their beliefs about what their students can achieve, the connections between teacher qualities and student achievement, and the incentives that will attract and reward highly effective teachers in lower-performing schools. Districts are working on ways to improve teacher effectiveness.
- **Parent Engagement.** Research shows that students with involved parents, regardless of family income or background, are more likely to do better in school, graduate from high school, attend college, and find productive work. New research shattered the myth that low-income parents of students trapped in low-performing schools do not want to engage in their child's education and provided practical guidance to schools on how they can more effectively engage parents. Some states, like Florida, have comprehensive family engagement laws that incorporate parental involvement in changes being made at the school and district levels and have given parents access to critical data on how students are performing. Districts and schools are experimenting with innovative strategies to engage parents, including utilizing text messaging, establishing parent centers, and recruiting television stations to keep parents informed.
- **New Education Options Based on Student and Community Needs and Interests.** Over the last decade, public education leaders and policymakers, social entrepreneurs, youth-serving organizations, foundations, and others have transformed the traditional high school experience, making schooling more personalized and relevant, while developing stronger pathways to college and the workforce. Different organizations and formats for teaching and learning have been tried, including public charter schools, early college high schools, theme-based schools (with STEM and high-quality career focuses), well-designed small schools, computerized virtual schools, and schools with special hours for working students. Forty-seven thousand students are enrolled in 208 early college high schools in 24 states that enable students to earn up to two years of transferable college credit. To date, these newly formed early college high schools — though still educating a very small percentage of the nation's 15 million high school students — have achieved an average 92 percent graduation rate. Eighty-nine percent of all early college high school graduates — compared with 66 percent of students nationally — went on to pursue some form of postsecondary education the following fall. Additionally, a number of districts, including New York City, Cincinnati, Baltimore, Atlanta, and Oakland, have worked to systematically increase student choice and replace large low graduation rate high schools with smaller and more focused secondary schools, often in partnership with external reform or support organizations.
- **Graduation Pathways and Dropout Recovery for Over-Age and Under-Credited Youth.** Nationally, there are more than 6 million people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are high school dropouts. Dropout recovery models, such as the U.S. Department of Labor's Job Corps and YouthBuild USA, have had success in re-enrolling dropouts and allowing them to earn a high school diploma or GED while gaining work and community service experience. New York City's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation has achieved significant success in returning youth in this age group to the graduation pathway with a combination of learning, work, and personal, academic, and social support systems. Recently, the federal government has allocated \$50 million — 10 times more than the historic amount — for dropout prevention and re-entry programs in high schools with dropout rates higher than state averages. At the same time, schools need to be careful about the academic quality of these programs and that students are held to the same levels of rigor as those in traditional instruction.
- **New Community Coalitions Supporting Graduation.** Over the last few years, the America's Promise Alliance convened more than 100 dropout summits in all 50 states and produced the Grad Nation Guidebook to share best research and practice. It has also provided follow-up assistance to 12 communities, including technical assistance workshops and access to leading education experts. More than 30,000 individuals, from governors and state superintendents to teachers and students from dropout factory and low graduation rate high schools, attended these action-

promoting summits, and nearly 1,700 organizations developed dropout prevention and recovery plans. Leading national non-profit youth service organizations, such as Boys & Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Communities in Schools, City Year, and the United Way of America, have now made addressing the dropout crisis a top priority for their organizations. They now have the opportunity to take this a step further by linking concern for graduating with graduating to high levels of academic knowledge and skills. Community coalitions can help schools establish high expectations that all students graduate prepared for college and high-wage careers and insist that schools maintain advanced levels of rigor.

- **Research on What Works.** The What Works Clearinghouse, established in 2002 by the U.S. Department of Education, made key recommendations to reduce dropouts: utilize data systems to obtain an accurate picture of students who drop out and those at risk of doing so; assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out; provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance; implement programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills; personalize the learning environment and instructional process; and provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and provide them with the skills they need for postsecondary success. Research and development organizations like Mass Insight Education, Jobs for the Future, and the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University have shown how research on what works and what is needed can effectively inform practice and shape policy. At the state level, the California Dropout Research Project is one example that links research with a coalition of state and local policymakers and practitioners working to raise the state's high school graduation rate and to eliminate differences in rates among ethnic and gender groups. At the district level, the Consortium on Chicago School Research and recent consortia that are emerging in Baltimore, Newark, and New York City have demonstrated the power of a sustained research effort aimed at improving the educational outcomes within a large city.





Civic Marshall Plan to Build a Grad Nation

In the aftermath of World War II, Secretary of State George C. Marshall instructed George Kennan and his policy planning staff to “avoid trivia” in developing their plan to help rebuild Europe. A coalition of leading institutions has adopted this same approach in developing a “Civic Marshall Plan” to end the dropout epidemic and reach the national goal of having 90 percent of our students graduating from high school and obtaining at least one year of postsecondary schooling or training by 2020. Our Civic Marshall Plan will not be focused on creating infrastructure, but on the strategic deployment of human resources to help school districts and states accelerate improvement. To succeed, it will need to be community based and locally organized, but supported at the state and national levels with human resources paired with evidence-based strategies, guiding research, and accountability structures that propel continuous improvement. What follows is an initial plan, intended to be further informed by the coalition, other interested parties, and the American people. We believe that ending the dropout epidemic is possible because we now know which students are likely to drop out, absent effective interventions, and where these students go to school. We also know that evidence-based solutions exist. Thus, we are left with an engineering problem of getting the right supports to the right students in a timely fashion at the scale and intensity required. To meet this challenge, we need to take a targeted and phased approach, driven by our understanding of where the challenge is greatest and where concerted efforts can have the largest impact.

The Call to Action & Leadership

Goals and Accountability. By 2020, high school graduation rates for those in the 3rd grade today will be 90 percent nationally, mindful of the larger goal that by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. States and school districts, as part of federal accountability, will set targets for continuous and substantial progress in raising graduation rates and increasing college- and career-readiness. Communities and non-profits must work collaboratively with them to reach these goals.

Civic Marshall Plan Leadership Team. A leadership team of organizations with institutional reach into school districts, states, and national advocacy is working together to develop and carry out this plan. In partnership with America's Promise Alliance's Grad Nation campaign, this leadership team will further develop this Civic Marshall Plan and coordinate leadership, expertise, and assets in the targeted school districts, states, and at the national level.



Strategic, Tiered Approach

Dropout Factory and Related Schools. We will first target and help build the capacity of the states and school districts to transform or replace the remaining 1,746 dropout factories and their feeder elementary and middle grade schools that account for half of the nation's dropouts. The plan will also focus on the 3,000 additional high schools with graduation rates between 61 and 75 percent, which account for an additional 35 percent of the nation's dropouts. To reach the high school graduation goal of 90 percent by 2020, 23 states will need to equal the rate of growth achieved by Alabama (7 percentage-points every six years), 9 states will need to equal New York (10 percentage-points every six years), and 7 states will need to equal Tennessee (15 percentage-points every six years). Nevada is the only state that will need a sustained rate of growth in increasing graduation rates greater than Tennessee. If the nation's dropout factories and the 3,000 high schools with graduation rates between 61 and 75 percent collectively increase their graduation rates by 20 percentage-points by 2020 — which amounts to an average of a 2 percentage-point increase per year — the nation will achieve its 90 percent graduation rate goal.

Initial Benchmarks. The Class of 2020 needs to earn 600,000 more high school diplomas than the Class of 2008 (holding population growth constant). To ensure that happens, we will establish a phased approach with clear goals for 2012 — substantially increase the number of struggling students reading at grade level by 5th grade; reduce chronic absenteeism; and conduct needs and capacity assessments of targeted schools. The benchmarks for 2013 include early warning and intervention systems in every targeted school district and state; re-design of middle grades as necessary to foster high student engagement and preparation for rigorous high school courses; and the placement of a trained non-profit school success mentor for every 15–20 students with off-track indicators. The benchmarks for 2016 include transforming or replacing the nation's dropout factories and providing transition supports for struggling students in grades 8–10 in all schools with graduation rates below 75 percent; providing all students (including those who have dropped out) with clear pathways from high school to career training and college; and the compulsory school age being raised to 18 in all states. All of these efforts, while targeted for the Class of 2020, will be done in the context of improving achievement for all students.



Take Action Within Low Graduation Rate Communities

Start with Early Reading. Dropping out is a process that begins long before a student enters high school. Research shows that a student's decision to drop out stems from loss of interest and motivation in middle school, often triggered by academic difficulties and resulting grade retention. Research also shows that a major cause of retention is failure to master content needed to progress on time, which in many cases, is the result of not being able to read proficiently as early as the 4th grade. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, more than 80 percent of low-income students failed to score proficiently on national exams in 2009. Half of all low-income 4th graders did not reach the basic level. When children make it to 4th grade without learning to read proficiently, they are being put on a dropout track. In order to reach the national goal of a 90 percent high school graduation rate, we must ensure that all students, including those for which English is not their first language, are reading on grade level.

Focus on the Middle Grades. Most future dropouts begin to disengage from school during early adolescence, and during the middle grades achievement gaps often grow. By the time these students enter high school, they have one foot out the door and are not prepared to succeed in a rigorous college- and career-readiness high school curriculum. We should start with the feeder middle grade schools to dropout factory and low graduation rate high schools and ensure all students not only stay on track to graduation during the middle grades, but also are engaged in meaningful learning activities that leave them well prepared for high school.

Turn Around or Replace the Nation's Dropout Factories. We need to build on the emerging momentum and continue our efforts to turn around or replace all of the nation's dropout factory high schools. The federal School Improvement Grants program has targeted high schools with graduation rates below 60 percent. We need to build state, district, non-profit, and community capacity to finish the job, building on evidence-based practices, while supporting continued innovation for some of the toughest challenges, such as single high school districts with low graduation rate high schools located in rural or extremely low-income communities.

Harness the Power of Non-Profits to Provide Expanded Student Supports. In dropout factory and low graduation rate high schools and their feeder elementary and middle schools, as well as associated alternative schools, there are often hundreds of students in need of intensive supports from caring and committed adults. Often there simply is not enough

manpower in high-needs schools to provide these supports at the scale needed. We must call on, and systematically organize, national and local non-profits that can bring skilled and committed young and older adults, community members, and trained social service providers into the lives of all students who exhibit off-track behavior in such schools in a consistent and committed way. National service efforts, like those pioneered by City Year, need to be expanded, as do the mentoring supports provided by Big Brothers Big Sisters, the extended learning supports like those provided by Boys & Girls Clubs and Citizen Schools, and the integrated student supports and wraparound services provided by organizations like Communities in Schools, Children's Aid Society, and Community Schools. Non-profits, in turn, need to commit to using common "on-track-to-graduation metrics" and to being held accountable for improving student outcomes and working collaboratively to integrate their efforts in a strategic and supportive manner with schools.

Link Researchers to Practitioners and Policy. Secondary schools in partnership with colleges and universities should create research consortia that enable practitioners to inform and take advantage of high-quality research. Research should be conducted to, among other issues: understand which high-poverty dropout factory schools and statewide strategies have made the greatest gains in boosting student academic achievement and high school graduation rates; enable communities to develop a fine-grained analysis of who dropouts are, when and why they dropout, and what they need to get back on track in their communities; devise a cost/benefit analysis of the impact of the length of the school day, week, and year on student academic achievement and progress in school; and understand the promise and potential of reducing gang involvement, juvenile crime, teenage pregnancy, and health costs by building strong prevention, intervention, and recovery efforts to keep additional students on the graduation path. Finally, Solution Competitions, modeled on the recent U.S. Department of Education awards for consortia of states to design next-generation assessments, should be implemented in areas where more demonstrations of what is possible are needed, such as pushing high-poverty urban graduation rates above 80 percent and transforming rural, low graduation rate high schools.

Build and Enable State and District Capacity to Improve Graduation and College Readiness Rates

Build Early Warning and Intervention Systems. States, school districts, and schools should collect individualized student data to track early warning indicators of potential dropouts as early as elementary and middle school with regular reports to administrators, teachers, school counselors, and parents to identify students who are off track and need regular or more intensive supports. They also should monitor what students are falling behind on academic knowledge and skills and provide extra help so they will be college-ready by graduation. Schools should collaborate with community-based and national service organizations to provide students with the supports they need inside and outside of school. Interventions can include mentoring and tutoring, targeted literacy and math curricula support, 9th grade academies, extended school time, and a wide range of community-based supports to address academic, social, medical, and mental health needs.

Create a Multi-Sector and Community-Based Effort. The community bears the costs of the dropout crisis and should be deeply involved in its solution. Existing evidence indicates that states and school districts that have made the most progress built multi-sector collaborations that have included significant involvement and support from governors, mayors, legislators, non-profits, and community organizations. Often, the business community, which has the power to highlight the economic impacts of low high school graduation rates and help education become a data-driven enterprise, has also been involved. The United Way has made reducing the nation's dropout rate in half by 2018 one of its top goals, and it and other locally based and nationally supported organizations like Communities in Schools need to play a key organizing role, assisted by the efforts of the America's Promise Alliance on a national level.

Enhance High School and College Graduation Rate Data. School districts, states, and the nation will be required to report by the 2011-12 school year accurate high school graduation rates, disaggregated by gender, race, and ethnicity, as defined by the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate. States and school districts should be held accountable for increasing high school graduation rates and student performance data as part of state and federal accountability efforts. Similar data and reporting systems should be built, with accurate tracking of transfers, for colleges, community colleges, and technical schools, with on-time reporting of graduation rates and job placement rates to potential students and the public.

Develop New Education Options Based on Student and Community Needs and Interests. School districts and states should continue to provide and re-develop innovative alternative learning environments to engage students who have fallen off the path to high school graduation and reenroll students who have already dropped out of high school to place them on a pathway to postsecondary success. Educators should collaborate with the community to develop, monitor, and improve these effective pathways, while taking steps to ensure their academic rigor. Business leaders and associations should also provide students with opportunities for career exposure, exploration, internships, and other opportunities that connect the high school experience to the workforce. Researchers should continue to study these alternative pathways, including charter schools, early college high schools, theme-based programs and schools, back-on-track programs, online education, and other models to determine what is effective and scalable and then share best practices.

Develop Parent Engagement Strategies. School districts should develop parent engagement strategies based on research of what will meaningfully engage them. Such practices should be responsive to cultural differences and include prompt notification of academic, behavioral, attendance, or other problems; earlier contact throughout middle school and in and beyond 9th grade on what constitutes success in high school; a single point of contact at the school; information on high school graduation and college admission requirements, including financial aid and assistance every step of the way in negotiating the roadblocks on the way to college; individualized student plans; homework hotlines; access to learning centers within schools; and flexible schedules for parent-teacher conferences. The U.S. Department of Education and other partners should make information from the Parental Information and Resource Centers more widely available to dropout factory and low graduation rate schools.

Elicit Perspectives of Students, Educators, and Parents. Research shows that students, educators, and parents have different perspectives on the causes of dropout, the role of high expectations, and the interest and engagement of parents and the community in student achievement. School districts with dropout factories, low graduation rate high schools, and their feeder elementary and middle schools should host regular dialogues among these vital constituencies about the causes and cures of high school dropout and involve these constituencies in the development of dropout prevention and recovery plans.

Reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Congress should reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and, in the process, build upon good legislation that has emerged in recent years to address the dropout challenge. This includes the Graduation Promise Act, the Graduation for All Act, the Success in the Middle Act, the DIPLOMA Act, the Keeping PACE Act, and provisions from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. There are also key provisions in ESEA relating to graduation rate accountability, adequate yearly progress, the provision of School Improvement Grants, and other issues that will continue to help confront the dropout crisis. Congress should also support funding for the Education Corps within the Serve America Act, which mobilizes national service participants to help students at risk of dropping out. The Race to the Top challenge should continue to catalyze change within and beyond winning states, having proven to be a powerful tool to prompt reforms related to addressing the dropout crisis. These proposed bills and provisions in current law should be included in a coherent framework that maximizes federal resources for the greatest return on investment.



Accelerate Graduation Rates by Strengthening the Public Education System

Build Linked, Common Data Systems and Enhance Data-Driven Decision Making. States and districts should work together to ensure there are linkages across data systems, and to provide appropriate access to all stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, students, parents, researchers, non-profits, and other community-based groups, consistent with student privacy. State leaders must help build the capacity of local stakeholders to use data, including through professional development and training, to ensure that educators can effectively understand and use data to make decisions at the school level. States should also share data across borders, given the highly mobile student population.

Set High Expectations and Provide Engaging Coursework. Research shows that high expectations, a rigorous curriculum, and engaging coursework can boost student academic achievement. Students should have fewer, clearer, and higher standards aligned with college requirements; all students should be expected to graduate from high school and college or career training programs that lead to meaningful employment; every state should adopt a compulsory school age law of 18, coupled with strong anti-truancy efforts in schools and additional supports for struggling students; and states should continue to adopt the Common Core State Standards, together with performance standards with real accountability for meeting them. States should also ensure that their assessments use multiple methods and reflect what students actually need to know and be able to do.

Train and Support Highly Effective and Accountable Teachers. Research has consistently shown that a main factor of the dropout crisis is under-qualified and ineffective teachers who are disproportionately found in low-income schools and schools that exhibit dropout crisis symptoms. More support should be provided by states and the federal government on a competitive basis to school districts that provide incentives to teachers to boost student academic achievement, teach in the lowest-performing schools, and for teacher training and professional development that sustain and further develop teachers as their careers progress. Research should accelerate our understanding of what education, training, credentialing, and practices make for a good teacher, and how we should further measure and provide incentives for such effective practices. Districts will need to strengthen how they recruit, recognize, and reward teachers through mentoring programs, career ladders, and pay tied to agreed-upon measures of performance. We need to recognize teachers as professionals and allow them

greater say in how their schools operate in accord with proven practices.

Train and Support Highly Effective and Accountable Principals. Principals, school leaders, and a collegial school environment are keys to raising student achievement. School districts must ensure that experienced principals with high-quality professional training and leadership development have more control over budgeting and scheduling, as well as the hiring, mentoring, development, and, as a last resort when leadership and support have failed to produce desired expectations, the firing of their teachers and staff.

Connect the Postsecondary Completion Agenda with High School Graduation. Data show that while the percentage of high school graduates enrolling in college has increased to nearly 70 percent, the percentage of young adults (aged 25-29) with a college degree remains at around 30 percent. As part of this Civic Marshall Plan, we will collaborate with leaders who are developing a postsecondary completion agenda that addresses issues such as: better aligning incentives toward completion, not just access to college, for students, colleges, and states; engaging colleges and employers to help students balance the demands of work and school; understanding why the powerful market incentive to complete college (higher earning potential) is not inducing more students to complete their degrees; ensuring that colleges track and report on-time completion rates and job placement rates for each of their degrees; and examining how the federal government can improve the collection and reporting of data relevant to college completion.

Next Steps

A National Dialogue and Response. Ending the dropout crisis will take a concerted effort by leaders and citizens at all levels of our communities, states, and nation. Progress over the last decade gives us confidence that good research can continue to guide our efforts, accurate data can prompt appropriate responses, and a targeted approach can help us reach our goals. The futures of millions of children are at stake, as are the health and vibrancy of our communities, economy, and nation. We should redouble our efforts to keep the high school dropout challenge a top national priority; mobilize the will, people, and resources to meet the challenge; and equip next generations with the knowledge and skills they need to find productive work and participate actively in American life. We have created a “Civic Marshall Plan Index” to keep track of our progress and challenges in ending the dropout crisis and building a grad nation.



Civic Marshall Plan to Build a Grad Nation Index: Where We Stand

Progress

National high school graduation rate increases from 72 to 75 percent between 2001 and 2008 — **an average of 0.43 percentage-points per year**

Class of 2008 had 120,000 more graduates than the Class of 2001 (holding population change constant)

29 states saw their graduation rate substantially increase from 2002 to 2008

Two states — Wisconsin and Vermont — almost reached a 90 percent graduation rate in 2008

African American, Hispanic, and Native American graduation rates are improving the fastest

261 fewer dropout factories in 2008 than 2002

400,000 fewer students attended dropout factories in 2008 than 2002

25 of the 100 largest city school districts had a 10 percentage-point or greater increase in promoting power

5 states saw a decline in the number of rural dropout factories

12 states have raised their compulsory school age since 2002

47 states have the capacity to follow individual students over time

208 early college high schools have opened since 2002

3 states have statewide early warning systems; several more states will introduce them soon

The Serve America Act created an Education Corps to increase national service supports in schools

Federal legislation aimed at ending the dropout crisis was introduced, e.g., Graduation Promise Act, Graduation for All Act, Success in the Middle Act, Keeping PACE Act, DIPLOMA Act

Challenges

Needs to increase 1.5 percentage-points per year over the next 10 years to reach 90 percent by 2020 (or 2 percentage points across the dropout factory and low graduation rate high schools)

Class of 2020 needs 600,000 more graduates than Class of 2008 for nation to reach 90 percent

21 states did not

8 states had graduation rates below 70 percent

Still 15–18 percentage-point gap with White rates

1,746 still remain

2.2 million students still attend dropout factories

23 of the 100 largest city school districts had a 3 percentage-point or greater decline in promoting power

More states did not

Over the past year, **13 states saw legislation introduced but not enacted**

Only 10 states provide data on student progress to schools, teachers, and parents

Less than half of all students nationally graduate college-ready

Most states and school districts do not have early warning and intervention systems

Needs to be fully funded so that more national service participants can provide supports

ESEA needs to be reauthorized with these initiatives incorporated

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