Recommendations to Improve No Child Left Behind for Struggling Students and Disconnected Youth

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Every day, an estimated 2,500 students across the nation drop out of high school.[1] In the last decade, approximately 30 percent of students who enrolled in high school have failed to graduate four years later.[2] The situation is even more dismal for youth of color. In 2003, only 55 percent of African Americans and 53 percent of Hispanics graduated from high school—compared with 78 percent of white students.[3]

Communities are losing the battle to successfully educate huge numbers of youth. While the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has succeeded in bringing to light the disparities that exist in our education system, it has failed to shine a light and provide solutions to the pressing problem of high school dropouts. The reauthorization of NCLB is a prime opportunity to rethink how we can strengthen our systems of services to reconnect with youth who have left school without receiving their diploma or are at significant risk of this grim fate. By opening the door for flexible education options, partnerships with other youth-serving systems, and replication of successful models for serving struggling students and dropouts, NCLB can empower communities to give their youth the education and skills they need to be successful. Our comments focus on how the resources in NCLB can be used to ensure that these youth have access to systems, support, and funding to attain a viable education that prepares them for future learning opportunities and the world of work.

Young people do not decide overnight to leave high school. Rather, the choice is the final result of a gradual process of disengagement from the educational process. Often, troubling signs are evident in the elementary or middle school years. Research demonstrates several predictors of eventual high school dropout, including early academic failure, retention in a grade, behavioral problems, and chronic absenteeism.[4] Students from low-income families are at particular risk for early academic failure, due to low family literacy levels. Students who have been engaged with the juvenile justice system are also more likely to drop out of high school.[5] These students lose large amounts of instructional time and are often far behind upon returning to school. Also at significant risk are students who have not successfully completed enough credits by the conclusion of ninth grade.[6] For some students, the decision to drop out is not directly school related but is due to a need to work or care for a family member, or in response to the birth of a child.[7]

Communities are suffering because of the huge numbers of youth that are dropping out of high school. These youth often are not productive, contributing citizens of the community; and their life prospects are quite bleak. High school dropouts are less likely to be continuously employed, and those who are employed do not earn a living wage. On average, high school dropouts earn 27 percent less than high school graduates and 58 percent less than college graduates.[8] These earnings are not sufficient to be self-sustaining or to support a family. Often, the result is that individuals turn to the underground market or criminal activity. Statistics show that high school dropouts also are far more likely to be involved in criminal activity leading to incarceration. Seventy-five percent of all state prison inmates and 59 percent of federal prison inmates are high school dropouts.[9] Without educational or job training opportunities, high school dropouts have little hope for turning their lives around.

It is important to note, however, that these youth are not beyond our reach. In a survey of recent high school dropouts, the majority of participants acknowledged that they wished they would have remained in school. Seventy-six percent said they definitely or probably would re-enroll in a high school for people their age if they could.[10] Asked what would make a difference for today's high school students, 81 percent of dropouts cited the need to make the classroom experience more relevant via real-world learning opportunities, and 75 percent indicated that smaller classes with more individual instruction would be helpful.[11]

Armed with this knowledge, state and local education agencies can take charge of the dropout problem by galvanizing community partners to institute real solutions for struggling youth and those who have left school prematurely. State and local education agencies can evaluate their school populations and create community-based interventions to protect students from the risks associated with dropping out and to keep them engaged in education. For youth who have already left school, pathways back to education can be created to support their academic goals while simultaneously preparing them for future work and educational opportunities.

We seek to ensure that interventions reflect effective practice, actively engage other youth-serving systems, and accurately depict the scale needed to impact this population.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO GRADUATION
The graduation rate statistics provide evidence that 30 to 50 percent of youth are not thriving in the traditional high school environment. The population of students that are failing is not monolithic. The reasons for failure are a complex mix of personal crisis, learning style, learning disabilities, lack of motivation, poor school climate, and stressed home environments. The educational and support environment that is appropriate for one may not suit another. Local education agencies need to create multiple pathways to high school graduation—pathways that connect youth to education options that teach them marketable skills, which in turn lead to a high school credential—while allowing students the flexibility to address their life needs. It is a different way of thinking about high school and secondary education; but there is evidence that

movement away from the large, impersonal structures to smaller, more supported environments—with opportunities for hands-on experiential learning and career exploration—works well for many youth that fail in the traditional structure. These education pathways must embrace relevant subject matter and experiential teaching methods without compromising the quality and rigor of education. They must offer a range of educational options and include students as an integral part of the planning team.[12] Work and school are not mutually exclusive in the lives of high school students. These pathways should bridge the worlds of education and work by ensuring that youth will attain the skills needed to be gainfully employed in the 21st-century workplace. Essential components of an education pathway for this population include:[13]

- **Credentials**. Awarding education credentials and including multiple pathways to a credential that includes a high school diploma and/or its equivalent
- **Credits**. Awarding credit based on proficiency and competency
- **Learning approach**. Offering competency-based and applied-learning approaches
- **Performance indicators**. Employing relevant performance indicators for student achievement and for programs and schools. These should be integrated into a larger framework of common measures shared by the workforce investment and public education systems.
- **Progress and interim measures**. Using measures that consider student progress over time and relative gains
- **Collaboration**. Collaborating with a myriad of partners, including but not limited to education systems/programs, community-based organizations, community colleges, and businesses/business coalitions
- **Elements of effective practice**. Including characteristics and elements that encourage students to stay in an education program or school
- **Support services**. Requiring the provision of family and community support services to students
- **Connection to workforce development and career preparation**. Including work-based learning, career preparation, internships, and other opportunities to help prepare youth for paid employment in the 21st-century workplace

Thus, we recommend the following:

- Fund the implementation of dropout prevention and recovery programs that apply principles of effective practice to their model

- Elevate reform of high schools within NCLB, with designated resources to be accessed by states and targeted to districts with greatest need, to support the implementation of multiple pathways to high school graduation

- Promote the creation of smaller, supported learning environments; opportunities for contextual learning; and opportunities for work and career exposure

- Require states and districts applying for such resources to specify the role that employers will play in ensuring that the curriculum is relevant; the instructional materials and equipment are state of the art; competencies are being imparted and documented; and youth have access to a wide array of internship, work-study, work-experience, and career-exposure opportunities

- Require states to develop content standards, assessments, and teacher-quality standards that are aligned with postsecondary and industry standards

- Promote dual and concurrent enrollment programs for secondary-postsecondary credentialing as a vehicle to accelerate learning while gaining technical and occupational skills, and as a vehicle for reconnecting out-of-school youth to a positive educational pathway

- Assist states and districts with the development of competency-based methods of imparting and documenting the achievement of critical skills required both for graduation and labor-market success

- Assist states and districts with the implementation of robust integrated data management and accountability systems, such that the progress of youth—in terms of credit accumulation, mastery of competencies, graduation, and postsecondary matriculation—can be monitored regardless of the pathway or educational vendor

DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY

Across the country, there are strong examples of innovative approaches that are yielding significant improvements in student achievement, keeping youth in school, or re-engaging them in education. Some examples include extended-day programs, smaller learning communities, and dual-enrollment programs. In addition, many schools are responding, achieving success by co-locating wraparound health and social services in the school in an effort to provide additional supports to students and families to facilitate their academic success.[14] There is no "one size fits all" approach to education, so school systems need to evaluate the student population and provide an array of opportunities to meet student needs.

The School Dropout Prevention Act, authorized under NCLB, is substantially underfunded and provides only for the implementation of school-wide activities that would promote better retention. The general language of the legislation does not direct funds to effective interventions that address the academic needs of disconnected and at-risk youth. For example, the legislation allows funds to be spent on such things as "reduction in pupil-to-teacher ratios" and "professional development." While these are necessary steps toward improving public schools, they do not directly address the particular academic needs of at-risk and disconnected youth or the infrastructure serving them. Greater specificity is needed to ensure the funds are used to implement effective practice for preventing dropout and recovering former students.

Thus, we recommend the following:

- Target federal and state funding of dropout prevention activities to the students at greatest risk of leaving school prematurely, by providing activities and services demonstrated to decrease dropout rates for students

- Allow community-based organizations, workforce development providers, and institutions of higher education with a proven track record of working with struggling students and dropouts to receive funds under No Child Left Behind to provide these students with educational services and support that will lead to a high school diploma or equivalent credential

- Broaden the set of activities eligible for expenditure of supplemental education services funds to include those activities that address the broader set of barriers contributing to student failure at the high school level

- Expand dropout prevention efforts such that they include services and programs in middle schools that feed into high schools with low graduation rates

- Require dropout prevention funding to be expended on subgroups within the school population that evidence a higher likelihood of dropping out, not just on school-wide activities. Focus dropout prevention funding on activities and services shown to decrease dropout rates for students, which may include:

  - extended-day programs
  - summer enrichment/knowledge retention programs
  - individualized tutoring
  - mentoring
  - wraparound social services located within the school
  - civic participation opportunities tied to school work
  - relevant, real-world learning opportunities
  - college tours and early exposure to college opportunities
  - partnerships with skills-based alternative education programs
  - non-traditional teaching to support alternative learning styles

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF OTHER SYSTEMS AND SECTORS

In addressing the dropout problem, it is also important to look beyond local education agencies and consider other systems or organizations that are quite successful in reconnecting youth. Programs such as Youth Opportunity (through the Workforce Investment Act [WIA]) and the Youthful Offender Reentry Program (through the Department of Labor) have a proven track record in this regard. The Youth Opportunity program engaged over 90,000 participants—48 percent of whom were out-of-school youth—in education enhancement activities, job-readiness and occupational training, internships, support groups, and many other activities.[15] The YouthBuild U.S.A. Youthful Offender Project exceeded its target outcomes in the areas of enrollment, program completion, receipt of high school diplomas or general educational

development credentials, and hourly wage.[16] Additionally, many nonprofits, community-based organizations, and private organizations have demonstrated effectiveness in the implementation of alternative education pathways for youth.

Many of the most challenged youth are simultaneously involved with other systems or entities, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), child welfare, or the justice system. Many are also eligible for services through the workforce system or TRIO programs under the Higher Education Act (HEA). The reauthorization of NCLB, WIA, and HEA provides the opportunity to promote a continuum of services and supports and articulation across these systems, allowing for greater alignment of their collective offerings with the needs and requirements of the labor market.

Thus, we recommend the following:

- Expand use of federal funds to allow community-based organizations and institutions of higher education with a proven track record of working with struggling students and dropouts to receive funds to serve these students through NCLB

- NCLB should require states and districts to expand possible partners in educational planning to include the local workforce investment system and youth councils (or similar entities), to ensure the necessary alignment and to coordinate access to workforce preparation activities and experiences. This includes coordinating with the workforce system in providing the programs and strategies needed to ensure successful transition support for youth who are transferring from juvenile justice and other institutions. Similarly, within WIA, workforce boards, through their youth councils, should be encouraged to work with local school districts and with employers to accomplish the alignment across systems and to structure the supportive programming that youth will need to develop the skills they will need for labor market success. This will require a restructuring of the composition of the youth councils mandated under WIA to reflect the participation of employers, education, and critical systems.

- Both NCLB and WIA should require local workforce boards and local districts to develop a plan outlining how the needs of disadvantaged and disconnected youth will be addressed as part of the high school reform and career preparation process, especially as related to preparing them for postsecondary education and labor market success.

- Strengthen supports to youth in detention facilities, to facilitate their transition out of institutions into educational and/or training options that lead to postsecondary success or high-growth employment. Encourage partnerships with the local workforce investment system in this regard.

ENSURING INTERVENTIONS AT SCALE

MANDATING GREATER ACCOUNTABILITY

We applaud the National Governor's Association for its work on a uniform calculation of the graduation rate and for the compact among governors to adopt the four-year cohort method. This information will assist education and other systems serving struggling students and out–of-school youth in the provision, planning, and design of education and service delivery that are better aligned with needs of all students to achieve success. Calculation and collection of this data is an important step in toward ensuring accountability of education and other youth-serving systems. In implementing this concept, it is important to accurately depict the high school graduation landscape for all students—particularly dropouts returning to education, students enrolled in alternative settings, and males of color.

Thus, we recommend the following:

- Require the use of the four-year cohort method for calculating graduation rates

- Include calculation of a six-year graduation rate in the accountability system, to include students who fall "off track" for graduation but elect to re-enter secondary education to earn a high school diploma

- Require schools to disaggregate and report dropout and graduation data by subgroups, and place greater emphasis on high school completion rates in calculating adequate yearly progress

- Include in the graduation rate calculation all youth enrolled in district-sanctioned alternative education pathways and/or nontraditional environments that lead to a high school diploma or equivalent credential

INNOVATION, REPLICATION, ADAPTATION, CAPACITY BUILDING

To dramatically change the landscape of how high schools prepare youth for postsecondary education success and success in the workforce will require leadership; innovation; willingness to research, test, and replicate promising approaches; technical support; and professional development. Successful transformation will require expanding the boundaries of where formal learning occurs—from inside the classroom walls to the broader community, the workplace, college campuses, and beyond. NCLB should encourage the building of the capacity of local districts to implement these changes and to ensure that adequate resources flow to districts to accomplish the much-needed transformations.

Thus, we recommend the following:

- Require local education agencies to articulate specific plans for their outreach to youth who have left school prematurely, and to report progress annually

- Guide states in the development of sustainable funding formulae to support multiple pathways to graduation and expanded educational options

- Authorize adequate funds in federal legislation to meet the needs of the large numbers of students who have left school prematurely or are struggling to remain connected to school

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