The High School Dropout Problem

Perspectives of Teachers and Principals

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From a report by Civic Enterprises

THREE years ago, we released a report—The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts—to better understand the circumstances of the nearly one-third of public high school students, and almost one-half of African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans, who fail to graduate with their class every year.

We discovered that most students who dropped out could have succeeded in school. We also found that the severity of the dropout problem and its consequences to individuals, the economy, and society were largely unknown. Dropouts who shared their experiences and views in the report gave hope that more students could graduate ready for college and productive work if duly challenged and given appropriate supports.

A resulting national summit mobilized more than 100 organizations behind a 10-point plan of action. The America's Promise Alliance is now leading 100 dropout summits in all 50 states, providing new resources to help schools, communities, and states address their dropout challenges.

At the early summits, participants asked where the voices of parents were in the dropout discussion. In response, we released One Dream, Two Realities: Perspectives of Parents on America's High Schools, showing that parents with less education, lower incomes, and children in low-performing schools were the most likely to see a rigorous education, and their own involvement, as critical to their child's success.

But the views of teachers and

administrators were missing from the dropout discussion. To better understand their views, focus groups and nationally representative surveys were conducted of high school teachers and principals. A focus group of superintendents and school board members was also included. These interviews took place in large cities, suburbs, and small towns with low-achieving, high-dropout-rate schools. To help interpret the results, we convened a colloquium among teachers and education experts to shed light on the new data.

President Barack Obama has made clear that “dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It’s not just quitting on yourself, it’s quitting on your country.” We hope our new report provides those on the front lines of education—teachers and administrators—a stronger voice in the dropout debate and more support to help address the challenge.

Teachers and administrators in public high schools recognize the dropout problem and express strong support for reforms to address high dropout rates.

Yet, less than one-third of teachers believe that schools should expect all students to meet high academic standards, graduate with the skills to do college-level work, and provide extra support to struggling students. Although more than half of principals believe schools should hold these expectations for all students, significant majorities of both teachers and principals do not believe that students at risk for dropping out would respond to high expectations and work harder.

Our data, focus groups, and colloquium indicate that the views of many teachers are shaped by what they see in the classroom, particularly among students who show low skill levels and weak motivation. Teachers, in large part, believe that they and their students are not receiving the necessary resources and supports. As a result, many are skeptical about the possibility of educating every student for college.

Our surveys of teachers and principals and focus groups, when juxtaposed to a key finding of the Silent Epidemic report—that two-thirds of dropouts said they would have worked harder if more were demanded of them—reveals an expectations gap. This expectations gap may be one barrier to closing the achievement gap. Although teachers and principals express strong support for reforms that would help reduce dropout rates—such as alternative learning communities, expanding college-level learning opportunities, connecting classroom learning with real world opportunities, and help for struggling students as early as elementary school—none of these efforts are likely to be as successful with-
out the fundamental expectation that all students should meet high academic standards and receive supports to graduate ready for college and the work force. We clearly need a national dialogue among teachers, administrators, students and parents around these findings to ensure continued progress in meeting the dropout challenge.

The Dropout Problem

Most principals (76%) and a majority of teachers (59%) saw dropout as at least a “major problem.” Only 14% of principals and 11% of teachers viewed the dropout problem as a “crisis.” Thirty-five percent of teachers and 24% of principals consider it a minor problem or no problem at all.

Nearly half of teachers (48%) and more than half of principals (55%) reported their school’s graduation rates were 90% or higher. Only 23% of teachers and 20% of principals reported their school graduating less than 80% of the incoming freshman class. Yet research showed the average on-time national graduation rate was in fact between 68% and 75%.

Nearly half of teachers (46%) and the majority of principals (58%) viewed reported national graduation rates as only somewhat or not accurate and reliable. Among teachers who questioned the reliability of the statistics, the majority (54%) felt statistics understated the problem. Fifty-one percent of principals said statistics overstated the problem. Principals were more optimistic (61%) than teachers (47%) that the dropout rate could be halved in a decade.

Eighty-one percent of teachers and 89% of principals felt their school was doing a good or excellent job. Less than 10% of teachers and principals rated the nation’s schools as excellent, but 24% of teachers and 25% of principals felt their school was excellent. Even at schools where teachers reported graduation rates below 80%, 64% of teachers classified their schools as good or excellent.

Why Students Drop Out

Teachers and principals identified many reasons why students drop out, reflecting an understanding of the complexity of the problem. Most cite a lack of parental involvement and support as the core problem.

Sixty-one percent of teachers and 45% of principals saw lack of support at home as a factor in most cases of students’ dropping out, with 89% of teachers and 88% of principals saying it was a factor in at least some cases. Seventy-four percent of teachers and 69% of principals felt parents bore all or most of the responsibility for children dropping out.

Only 20% of teachers and 21% of principals felt boredom was a factor. While 42% of teachers felt students who said they dropped
out because school was boring were just making excuses, half of all teachers and nearly seven in 10 principals felt students were speaking to an important cause. Previous research has shown that nearly half of dropouts said they left school because they found it boring and uninteresting and did not see the relevance of school to real life.

Sixty-two percent of teachers and 60% of principals cited students being academically unprepared for high school as a factor in at least some dropout cases. Previous research has shown that more than one-third of dropouts (35%) reported leaving school because they were failing and 45% of dropouts stated previous schooling had not prepared them for high school.

Forty-five percent of teachers and 42% of principals cited absenteeism, one of the early warning signs, as a key factor in most cases of high school dropout.

They also understood other causes, such as the negative influence of peers not interested in school, needing to get a job and make money, becoming a parent, and caring for a family member.

**What Might Help**

Our surveys showed strong support among educators for reforms to increase high school graduation rates. Yet, there were disturbing signs that America's commitment to providing every child the opportunity to an excellent education is falling short in classrooms.

- **Raising low academic expectations**—Less than one-third of teachers (32%) believed we should expect all students to meet high academic standards, graduate with the skills to do college-level work, and receive extra support if they are struggling. Fifty-nine percent of teachers believed we should have a separate track to allow students who are not college-bound to get a diploma without achieving these high standards.

In contrast, nearly six in 10 principals believed we should expect all students to meet high academic standards, graduate with the skills to do college-level work, and receive necessary extra support. Only 41% wanted a separate track for those not college-bound.

Seventy-five percent of teachers and 66% of principals did not believe students at-risk of dropping out would work harder if more was demanded of them—higher academic standards, more studying, and homework. These perspectives are in stark contrast to previous research showing that 66% of dropouts said they would have worked harder if more had been demanded.

- **More responsibility from educators and schools**—When principals and teachers were asked how much responsibility they have for students dropping out, 22% of prin-
principals held themselves and teachers as largely or solely responsible. Thirteen percent of teachers took responsibility. Teachers were more likely to place responsibility on the school system (19%), or broader society (18%) and believed elected officials at the local, state, and federal levels were as responsible as they were (13%) for students leaving school.

- Changes are needed—When teachers and principals assessed their own high schools, principals more readily acknowledged the need for improvement in a variety of areas, including engaging parents, keeping students interested and engaged in course work, helping students with problems outside of school affecting school work, and providing support for struggling students.

- Support for reform—Majorities of both teachers and principals thought some significant improvements were needed in high schools to ensure all students graduate.

More than three-fourths of teachers and 71% of principals strongly favored alternative learning environments. Another 19% of teachers and 25% of principals somewhat favored this proposal, giving it strong support in both groups.

Seventy-five percent of teachers and 54% of principals felt reducing class sizes would help.

Seventy percent of teachers and 68% of principals felt early warning systems to identify and help struggling students would do a lot to reduce the number of dropouts.

Seventy percent of teachers and 68% of principals felt connecting classroom learning to real-world experiences would help a lot. In our focus groups, many believed service-learning and hands-on projects would help, but some felt the regimented calendar of daily lessons interfered.

The majority of teachers (63%) and principals (51%) felt increasing parental outreach programs would reduce the number of high school dropouts. Many in our focus groups believed the parent-school relationship was the key to boosting student performance.

Teachers and principals supported other proposals to reduce the dropout rate, such as expanding college-level learning opportunities and mandating a national compulsory school age of 18 with support for struggling students.

Most teachers and principals did not believe eliminating standardized test requirements to graduate would reduce the number of dropouts. Only 27% of teachers and 22% of principals believed elimination of such standardized tests would help a lot.

Ways Forward
To help students succeed, we recommend the following:

- Accurate graduation data
and college readiness accountability—All states need to follow a common calculation of graduation rates, as put forth by the National Governor’s Association and adopted by the U.S. Department of Education.

States also need to establish ambitious graduation rate goals and make districts and schools accountable for progress toward these goals. Finally, teachers and administrators need to be brought into the mission to graduate all students prepared for postsecondary education.

- **Standards-based rigorous curriculum and high expectations for every student**—Schools should have fewer, clearer, and higher standards aligned with college requirements. Principals and teachers should have high expectations for every student. Research has shown the clear link between teacher expectations, rigor in student coursework, and student academic performance across all student backgrounds and income levels.

- **Improved communication, understanding, and collaboration among teachers, parents, and students**—Schools and communities should engage teachers, parents, and students in a dialogue about the different perspectives these groups have on the high school dropout challenge. Teachers and parents need to work together to provide struggling students with the necessary supports. Students need to become better self-advocates and seek help from teachers and parents. Schools need to create parent engagement strategies that focus on teacher feedback on a student’s progress and provide parents better information and tools—such as information on graduation and college admission requirements and homework hotlines.

- **Secondary school redesign**—The traditional high school is outdated and needs to be revamped. Teachers and administrators need to have the necessary supports and school structure so they are not overwhelmed with the number of struggling students. Excellent models of high school redesign exist, largely centered around a rigorous college and career-ready curriculum.

- **More research to ensure a high-quality teacher in every classroom**—Research tells us that good teachers matter, but we do not know enough about what qualifications, characteristics, and classroom practices that are more likely to boost student achievement.

More research should be conducted in this regard. States and school districts should establish rigorous teacher preparation programs and open up more alternative licensing routes. They must work to recruit and retain strong teachers by providing professional
development, mentoring, and competitive salaries.

- **Elimination of out-of-field teaching**—States and school districts need to work together to ensure that every classroom has a teacher educated and certified in that subject area. Districts need to acquire an adequate supply of effective teachers with appropriate subject-matter knowledge, and assign only highly-qualified teachers to low-income and minority students.

- **Development of induction programs**—Schools should have comprehensive induction programs for all beginning teachers. These should incorporate mentoring by highly-effective master teachers in the same subject area, ongoing professional development, common planning times to encourage collaboration, and a network of teachers at other schools.

- **Authority for principals to drive student achievement to scale**—Research shows that principals are the second most important factor in student achievement, behind teacher quality. The most effective principals have more authority in hiring and firing decisions and more control over school budgets.

- **Early warning systems**—Schools need to develop district-wide (eventually state-wide) early warning systems to identify students at risk of dropping out and to develop the mechanisms that trigger appropriate supports for these students. Research has shown that schools can predict who is at risk for dropping out with a high degree of accuracy in the later years of elementary school and can identify approximately half of eventual dropouts by middle school. By 9th grade, dropout can be predicted with 85% accuracy. The key indicators are poor attendance, behavioral problems, and course failure.

- **Ongoing literacy programs**—Research shows that more than 8 million students in grades 4–12 read below grade level. This leads to many students struggling with coursework, falling behind, and eventually dropping out. Students should be engaged in ongoing literacy programs in middle and high schools, and subject matter teachers should incorporate literacy strategies in their courses.

- **Alternative learning environments**—School districts should develop options for students, including a curriculum that connects classroom learning with real life experiences, smaller learning communities with individualized instruction, and alternative learning environments that offer rigorous and specialized programs to students at risk of dropping out. Connections should be made between classroom learning and real jobs in the workforce, through job shadowing, internships, and work study programs.