

Brief 4: State-Level Dropout Prevention Programs, Strategies and Policies

By Joel Rosch, Ph.D., Senior Research Scientist and Policy Liaison, Center for Child and Family Policy; and Jenni Owen, MPA, Director of Policy Initiatives and Associate Director, Center for Child and Family Policy

Why we care about dropouts

Almost one-third of North Carolina's public school students fail to graduate from high school after four years.¹ For the poor and members of racial and ethnic minority groups, the proportions are even higher. In the past, skilled, unskilled and vocational jobs in industries such as manufacturing and textiles provided employment and upward mobility for young adults without a high school diploma. Having a high school diploma was not essential to make a decent living. Dropping out of school did not necessarily constitute a family or community crisis. Today, dropping out of high school is much more likely to lead to unemployment and persistent poverty.

For an individual, the impact of dropping out may be tragic, but when a near-majority of young people from an entire community fails to graduate, the tragedy is even more pronounced. People without diplomas not only earn less and, therefore, pay fewer taxes, but they also consume more public services, have less stable families, commit more crime and live shorter lives.² The dropout crisis increases costs for whole communities, robs entire communities of resources and may deprive them of effective leaders.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to address the dropout problem; multiple strategies can increase the likelihood that students will complete high school. Some of these strategies require state-level action; others must be implemented locally, within individual schools and school districts. Still others involve working with students and families on an

individual basis. While none of the strategies is easy, quick or cost-free, identifying and implementing effective strategies is worthwhile. Increasing the graduation rate contributes to improving economic vitality, cutting the crime rate, reducing social welfare costs, expanding the middle class, reducing concentrated poverty and achieving social justice.³

Key to any strategy aimed at achieving higher graduation rates is gaining a better understanding of the dropout problem in our state and in each of our communities. We not only need to know who the dropouts are and why they drop out, but also understand that this will vary across our state and vary among schools within a single district. The more policymakers know about who drops out and why, the easier it will be to identify the most promising strategies for reducing dropout rates.⁴

This brief summarizes much of what we know about how to reduce dropout rates and increase graduation rates. The recommendations are based on what is known from a number of sources about the nature of the dropout crisis and how it can be addressed. While all communities have a dropout problem, each community's problem is somewhat different. To make the most progress, therefore, the guidance offered here should be integrated with the particular facts, characteristics and overall context of each community. This brief is not intended to be comprehensive; however, we hope it provides an overview of strategies to address the dropout problem.

Promising strategies for ending the dropout crisis

STRATEGY 1

Understand the dropout crisis in your community

Who drops out?

Education leaders should strive to answer several key questions prior to taking any action to address the dropout problem:

- How many students drop out?
- How far from graduation are they when they drop out (what percentage of dropouts are relatively close to graduation—within a year or so—and what percentage are still in need of three to four years of secondary schooling)?
- From which schools do they drop out?

Those who leave during or before the ninth grade require different strategies than working with late dropouts, who drop out well into their junior or senior years.⁵ We cannot provide differentiated interventions unless we know more about who is dropping out. To get a clear picture of the dropout problem requires data that permits tracking of students over time to determine which students entering ninth grade go on to graduate within four or five years.

Policymakers and practitioners can address these questions at either the state or the local level.

Ideally the state would invest the funding and human resources necessary to provide local school districts with enough information to retrospectively trace cohorts of students as they progress through school, from the sixth grade to graduation or dropping out. According to the Data Quality Campaign sponsored by the Alliance for Excellence in Education, Florida, Utah and Arkansas make this kind of information available to every local school district.⁶ The Data Quality Campaign identifies 10 types of information that are essential to do this kind of planning. While it is working to improve its data systems, today the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) can provide some, but not all, of this kind of information. (For how North

Carolina compares to other states, see: http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/survey_results/state.cfm?st=North%20Carolinanational.)

Having such data helps in several ways:

- Gives the community a firm understanding of how many students who start school graduate, and how far students are from graduation when they drop out;
- Allows communities to identify when and where students get off-track;
- Shows what factors predict who will drop out in different communities; and
- Provides a baseline from which to judge the impact of reforms.

Where the state cannot provide data, local leaders can begin gathering some of their own information. While state leaders are developing systems to capture this kind of information, communities can simultaneously take advantage of existing state data and national data to compare their schools to those in other districts.⁷

Local school officials also can begin by examining a sample of school transcripts from students who have stopped attending high school in the current year to estimate how far they are from graduation and to get an idea about why students in their schools are leaving. Some school systems have used this approach to develop “on-track” and “off-track” indicators.⁸ Some systems have developed ways to follow groups of students forward from sixth grade by looking at attendance patterns, behavioral history (suspensions, etc.), course grades and test scores of a sample of students who graduate and a sample of those who drop out. These kinds of estimates should be more than sufficient to get a picture of the dropout problem in a school or in a community that can be used to guide effective dropout prevention and intervention strategies. There are free, user-friendly models that explain how local school systems can develop their own early indicator systems.⁹

Building this kind of system for local communities could be an excellent use of one-time funding from either the legislature or from state and local

foundations and other philanthropic entities.

Experience from other communities shows that this kind of analysis requires only modest investments in time and dollars, but can bring large dividends. This is also an area in which colleges and universities could help local communities.

Why do students drop out?

Because students drop out for a number of different reasons, it is also important to understand why students drop out in different communities.

Researchers at Johns Hopkins identified four main reasons why students drop out.¹⁰ Each of these reasons requires a different response with regard to both prevention and intervention.

- 1) **Life Events**—students who drop out because of something that happens outside of school: they become pregnant, get arrested or have to go to work to support members of their family.
- 2) **Fade Outs**—students who have generally been promoted on time from grade to grade and may even have above-grade-level skills, but at some point become frustrated or bored and stop coming to school. Once they reach the legal dropout age, they leave, convinced that they can find their way without a high school diploma or that a GED will serve them just as well.
- 3) **Push Outs**—There are parents and advocates who believe that some students, especially students who are (or are perceived to be) difficult, dangerous or detrimental to the success of the school, are subtly (or not so subtly) encouraged to withdraw from the school, transfer to another school or are simply dropped from the rolls if they fail too many courses or miss too many days of school and are past (or in some cases not even past) the legal dropout age. *While this may be based on anecdotes, if this perception is widespread, mobilizing community support will be difficult.*
- 4) **Failing to Succeed**—students who fail to succeed in school and attend schools that fail to provide them with the environment and supports they need to succeed. For some, initial failure is the result of poor academic preparation; for others, it is rooted in unmet social-emotional

needs. Few students drop out after their initial experiences with school failure. In fact, most persist for years, only dropping out after they fall so far behind that success seems impossible or they are worn down by repeated failure.

In order to act, communities also need to know how much of their dropout problem is driven by each type of dropout.

While the popular viewpoint is that “life events,” “fade outs” and “push outs” predominate, most evidence points to “failing to succeed” as the main source of dropouts. Giving an accurate picture to the community is important. Through poor attendance, acting out and/or course failure, these “failing to succeed” students are the easiest to find.

Each community needs a clear picture of its dropouts. This does not have to cost a great deal of money. For instance, in Chatham County, N.C., community leaders used a small planning grant to find out more about dropouts in their community by interviewing a sample of students getting GEDs about why they dropped out of school.

Another strategy is to look at chronic truants. There is good reason to believe that last year’s truant is this year’s dropout. Researchers have found that asking students to report the number of school days they miss for various reasons can provide insight into why they later drop out.¹¹ When surveys are anonymous, students usually do not hesitate to provide answers even when they do not cast themselves in the best light. The survey results can then be used for follow-up interviews with a subset of students to delve more deeply into motives for dropping out. Local policies can be tailored to address those reasons.

Local officials can start by using information from other districts and then adjust as specific community details emerge. Work across a number of cities has shown that the majority of dropouts can be identified based on data readily available in, and commonly collected by, schools and school districts. Research in Philadelphia and replicated in three other districts shows that about half of eventual dropouts can be identified by the end of sixth grade, and close to 75 percent by the start of high school.¹²

Much of this kind of information ideally would come from the state. This is what local leaders need before they can thoroughly address their local dropout problems.

From what kinds of schools do students drop out?

Much can be learned from identifying where dropouts “happen” within a district. A relatively small number of high schools produce a large percentage of the dropouts. Again, there are national sources that identify high schools with the highest dropout rates. Local school systems can then see which middle schools feed those high schools. Districts can look at three issues at the schools where large numbers of students are dropping out:

- The needs of the students who attend these schools.
- The kinds of teachers and other educational resources the students encounter.
- The climate in the schools the students attend.

Student characteristics and needs

Nobody should be surprised that schools with a concentration of disadvantaged students have a harder task and need additional or, at a minimum, different kinds of resources. For example, high schools with high dropout rates usually have a large percentage of students who are repeating ninth grade for the second or third time, are old for grade, are in special education, are two or more years below grade level in mathematics and reading, or have missed a month or more of eighth grade.

Students at the middle schools that feed these high schools usually have attendance problems, behavior problems, and are failing either math or English. These are not the students that typical schools were designed to educate. Typical high school students are the appropriate age for their grade, come to school regularly, are not in special education classes, and have math and reading skills at or near grade level.¹³ With this data in hand, the legislature and/or a school district can determine which schools are most in need of extra resources.

Teachers and other school resources

These schools often do not have the appropriate teachers for the most challenged students. Experience in ninth grade is often the best predictor of whether or not a student will finish high school. Ninth grade, however, is often viewed as the least desirable teaching assignment in a high school, meaning those students may not end up with the more experienced and often more skilled teachers. In some schools, ninth grade is often taught by a shifting constellation of new, inexperienced, emergency-certified teachers and long-term substitutes. High-poverty middle schools are also often viewed as an undesirable teaching assignment, with teachers leaving for either elementary or high schools at the first opportunity. As The Education Trust’s Funding Gaps 2006 report shows, these imbalances in experienced and skilled teachers lead to both poor academic outcomes and funding inequities across schools within districts.¹⁴

If we are going to address the dropout issue, we need to systematically examine who is teaching the ninth grade in the high schools with the highest dropout rates and who is teaching in the middle schools that feed them. We need to know the experience and skill levels of the teachers we place in the most difficult jobs. Ideally, we also need to calculate the actual dollars being spent on instruction and student support in our most challenged schools.

School climate

School climate can be examined by looking at staff turnover, student and staff behavior, and staff attitudes.

High schools with high dropout rates and the middle schools that feed them are often marked by high rates of teacher and administrator turnover and absences. This has multiple negative consequences. It is difficult to have meaningful and lasting reform if the teachers and administrators who must carry it out are constantly shifting.

High staff turnover also means that students are taught by higher numbers of inexperienced teachers, provisionally certified teachers and long-term substitutes. When many teachers are frequently

absent, other adults in the building must cover their classes and, in so doing, have less time and energy to do their jobs or lead reform efforts.

Communities looking at teacher and administrator turnover rates and absences should see whether schools have a chaotic school climate, with students milling in the halls long after the bell has rung and all the classroom doors shut tight. This can be analyzed by talking to teachers, administrators and students, or by observation.

Looking at attitudes is more subtle. If the teachers say that the administration does not back them up when students act out; if administrators say teachers are not doing their jobs with classroom management; if students say they find some teachers caring, but others capricious and unfair, then you have likely found a school where teacher-administrator and teacher-student relationships have broken down. Everyone is blaming someone else, and the collaboration and trust that are essential to successful school reform are nonexistent (or only exist among a small beleaguered group of teachers/administrators). This creates a feeling that all teachers must fend for themselves. It leads some to conclude that the only thing they can do is leave as soon as possible and/or take off as many days as they can to make it through the year. Observations and simple surveys can identify schools with climates that are not conducive to learning.

Communities should carefully examine their high schools with high dropout rates and the middle schools that feed them. Has the community organized its public education system in such a way that a subset of its secondary schools face an almost overwhelming level of educational challenges with inadequate resources? Has it provided these schools with fewer resources when teacher quality and the actual educational dollars spent at each secondary school are examined? Is it allowing these schools to continue year after year with dysfunctional school climates that lead to high rates of teacher and administrator turnover and absences? Learning the answers to these questions is an important step in solving the dropout challenge.

STRATEGY 2

Data-driven prevention, intervention and recovery efforts at the key points where students fall off the path to graduation

Having the information described in Strategy 1 will be of greatest value if it is used to drive policy and practice. After learning about the students and schools most closely associated with dropouts, policymakers can direct resources where they can be used most effectively.

Taking advantage of key transitions

Transition points in the prekindergarten-through-12th grade education process often provide opportunities for prevention, intervention, or both. If students successfully transition into each level of schooling (elementary, middle and high), they are more likely to graduate from high school. However, such transition points also present opportunities for students to fall behind. Evidence shows that focused efforts and effective reforms at each of these transition points can make a positive difference and increase graduation rates.

None of this is easy. Often the students who fall behind at these transitions have multiple needs that require cooperation between schools and community agencies.

At each key transition point, schools and their community partners need to ensure that all students have the academic/cognitive skills, social-emotional supports and behavioral expectations they need to succeed in each level of schooling. This is because most students who drop out do so for a combination of academic and social-emotional reasons. The best instruction can only realize its potential positive impact if students attend school consistently; are encouraged by family and/or peers to succeed; and learn to behave appropriately.

Transition #1: Entering elementary school

The primary goal during the transition into elementary school is to ensure that all students have a successful start. There are two parts: acquiring the cognitive (prereading and premath) skills and

knowledge that will let them successfully learn in school, and acquiring the norms and behaviors of schooling.

A typical U.S. classroom scenario consists of one adult responsible for instructing 20 to 30 students. This arrangement assumes that students are prepared to succeed in this type of learning situation. Many of the students who are not prepared to succeed in elementary school quickly fall behind and ultimately drop out. Students who do not have the cognitive skills or knowledge to understand and successfully integrate the lesson a teacher is giving or do not know how to behave according to the expectations of the classroom will not learn at the expected rate. They will become frustrated and will likely frustrate the adults in the school. This, in turn, will lead to a number of often counter-productive responses, including teacher outbursts or students being held back or placed in special education classes. Or, as stated above, the students will quickly fall behind and, ultimately, drop out.

The importance of a successful start is well recognized. What is too often overlooked, however, is that a successful start involves instilling in students that learning is a joyful experience and that schools can be a place of joy. If students' first experiences with schooling are that school is a place of tension, rules and constraint, but not joy, they will view it as something to be endured, not cherished. This may be difficult because many of the parents of the most challenged students may not have had joyful experiences in school either. Furthermore, a teacher who is a master at instilling the joy of learning may not have the opportunity with kids who start way behind. Expanding prekindergarten education programs like More at Four to get children ready for school is one strategy. There is strong evidence that lowering class size in kindergarten and first grade is also an effective way to improve academic outcomes.¹⁵

Focus on making every student a successful early reader

Many say that nothing is more essential to success in school than the ability to read. Communities must ensure that everything possible is done to ensure that all students are reading at appropriate levels

by second grade.¹⁶ High quality prekindergarten programs can ensure that even disadvantaged students enter school with the prereading and premath skills necessary to begin learning. There are quick ways to identify students in kindergarten who do not have these skills, and interventions exist that have been shown to work. The key is identifying students with deficits, then matching the right interventions to those deficits. The research indicates that schools should establish a series of reading benchmarks for each student and develop a tiered response system of increasingly intensive instruction that is put in place when students do not meet the benchmarks. The intervention should continue until the student is able to meet the benchmark. The NCDPI has resources to help school systems implement these programs; but not all schools take advantage of these resources.¹⁷

Some children will need one-on-one instruction to learn how to read. These upfront costs will be repaid through fewer grade retentions and special education placements, which end up being far more expensive than one-on-one instruction.¹⁸ One strategy is to develop family literacy programs in which parents are taught how to play an active role in developing their children's reading skills. An advantage to this is that a struggling early reader may have younger siblings who can benefit as well.¹⁹

Do not forget mathematics

Reading is important, but so are early math skills. Some research indicates that early math skills may be a better predictor of future academic success than early reading skills.²⁰ Because much of young children's free play has a mathematical component, nearly all children, including children from high-poverty neighborhoods, enter kindergarten with the basic building blocks of mathematics. Mathematics is an area where nearly all students can experience early academic success. This can serve as an area of success for students who may be struggling to learn how to read. Providing early academic success for children should be an important part of any dropout prevention strategy. According to Johns Hopkins researchers, the National Science Foundation has helped develop a number of good early mathematics programs.

Socialize students into the norms of schooling

For students who live in chaotic environments, school can be an antidote to the high levels of uncertainty and stress in their lives. Many will need to be successfully socialized into the expected norms of activity and behavior in schools—everything from raising hands, to taking turns, to working quietly. They have to see that these rules help make schools a place where they can feel secure.

Often this means that the early years of schooling need to be full of active learning—group projects and experiences that enable students to experience success and develop a joy of learning, as well as provide them with important content knowledge about the world. Evidence-based interventions like the Good Behavior Game have been shown to create the conditions that help students successfully learn the behavioral norms of schooling.²¹ Schools in North Carolina that can successfully implement Positive Behavioral Support programs and other evidence-based interventions of whole school reforms have better results. Unfortunately, it is not enough to buy a new program or announce an initiative. It is critical to ensure that the programs are adopted and implemented well.²²

Do not expel primary students

This may seem far-fetched but it appears to be a growing phenomenon.²³ Giving up on a 5-, 6- or 7-year-old child is not a productive solution for anyone. Expelling primary school students should be viewed as total system failure. Additional skilled adults should be assigned to the classrooms where this is occurring to provide both the students and the teachers the supports they need to succeed.

Do not overuse special education

Special education should never be the first option for students who are not succeeding behaviorally or academically. Research suggests that the response to academic or behavioral problems should be intervention. However, for this to work schools need professional staff who can help teachers match student needs to appropriate interventions. Special education should only be used for students with clear needs that can only be addressed through its

supports, not as a first response to failure at regular education. New federal guidelines encourage schools to use special education funds to build this kind of system. States that have implemented this kind of system have better outcomes and fewer special education referrals.²⁴

Look for students who are falling behind

Some states have strategies to systematically focus resources on students who are failing grades. Through end-of-grade testing, monitoring report cards or checking attendance, school leaders know which students are headed for academic failure. Successful schools contact parents at the first sign of problems. Whether it be mandating reduced class size, individual instruction or requiring summer school, school systems need policies that target resources to failing students. For instance, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has truancy courts that hold parents accountable when their students miss too many school days. Different school systems use a variety of programs, including tutors, summer school, small classes, and so on, to help students who are falling behind.

Transition #2: The middle grades

This is perhaps the most perilous transition. Students who make unsuccessful transitions to the middle grades, as evidenced by poor and declining attendance, behavior problems and/or course failure in the sixth grade, rarely graduate. For every 100 sixth-graders who fail math or English, only 11 percent graduated from the school system on time.²⁵

Middle school brings with it a constellation of forces that actively work to disengage students from schooling. The middle grade transition is particularly difficult for students in high-poverty neighborhoods who are experiencing multiple changes in their lives at a time when they are deciding whether or not to be engaged with schooling. The cognitive demands of schooling are becoming more complex at the same time that students are more likely to encounter violence on the way to and from school, to become targets of crime or to be actively recruited into gangs or criminal enterprises. Finally, they may attend a school that has an overwhelming concentration of students in need and a high turnover of teachers and,

as a result, is chaotic and disorganized. A number of researchers identify middle school as the time when many students become lost.

On the instructional side, middle schools must provide an effective bridge to high school-level skills. The middle grades curriculum must build each year to measurable and intellectually meaningful outcomes in the eighth grade—the ability to write a persuasive essay and research paper, to read and interpret original historical documents, to conduct a science experiment and analyze its results and to use data analysis to uncover or solve a problem. These are the tasks that both engage middle school students and demonstrate they are ready for success in high school. This instructional focus must be paired with a communal organization of schooling that enables students to develop and maintain real bonds with their teachers. There are a range of techniques that can be used to achieve this, such as:

- Interdisciplinary teacher teams;
- teacher pairs, in which each educator teaches two subjects to the same students;
- Looping, in which teachers travel with students from grade to grade; and
- Small learning communities.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals has a guide to effective middle grade reforms.²⁶ The key is to create an organization of schooling where teachers can focus their efforts on a manageable number of students and spend sufficient time with them for true bonds to develop. There is evidence that a communal organization of schooling, combined with strong instructional programs and effective extra help in the middle grades, can increase graduation rates by 10 percentage points.²⁷ This, however, may not be enough. There are at least three other reforms or interventions that may be necessary.

A multitiered public health model prevention, intervention and recovery system

Middle grade schools work best when they use a public health model with universal, indicated and targeted supports for students.²⁸ To accomplish this:

First, there must be universal schoolwide strategies designed to prevent poor attendance,

behavior problems and course failure. Schools need to monitor every absence. Good behavior must be modeled and rewarded; poor behavior must be dealt with quickly and fairly with transparent processes. When implemented successfully, programs like Positive Behavioral Support promote this kind of positive school climate, which appears to lower rates of disruptive behavior and increase academic achievement.

Second, there are students who will need more focused or indicated intervention. These could be extra classes in core subjects in place of electives, mentoring, conflict management or grief counseling group sessions, or even brief, daily attendance check-ins by an adult. Some schools partner with agencies like Communities In Schools (CIS) to help with school-based supports.

Third, there are usually a small number of students who do not respond to school-based interventions. These students will need more targeted, intensive interventions, such as wraparound services offered by community agencies. This can include tutoring, counseling and various kinds of therapy. To provide these kinds of services effectively, schools need close working relationships with social service and mental health agencies.

This last group of students can be destructive to their classmates, their schools, themselves and their communities. While there is a temptation to remove them from school, they do not disappear. Because what happens in the community often impacts what happens in schools, suspending these students to the streets is likely to continue to have a negative impact on their schools and former schoolmates.

With this last group of students, communities are far better off using one of a growing number of evidence-based interventions for adolescents that have proven cost effective for use with these students. For these students, schools often need systematic ways to engage other kinds of social service agencies. North Carolina's Child and Family Support Team Initiative is an example of this kind of program. A number of North Carolina counties have systematic programs to link students with severe behavior problems with community-based services.²⁹

Schools also need clear rules on what triggers movement from one level of support to the next and determines when students are ready to move back to less intensive supports. There are often benefits to partnering with external organizations, which can help organize the integrated services students may need in the targeted and intensive support levels.

Engage the whole community in getting middle school students to attend every day

In high-poverty neighborhoods, the drop-off in attendance between elementary and middle school can be staggering. In some of these neighborhoods, half or more of the middle school students are missing at least a month of school, double or even triple the rate for elementary students. It may take more than just the school system to get 11-, 12- and 13-year-olds to school. In some communities where students take public transportation to school, it may involve redesigning bus routes. There are numerous ways to engage communities. For instance, in Pueblo, Colo., local businesses have made informal rules excluding school-age children from stores or malls during regular school hours. In Charleston, S.C., law enforcement personnel actively look for and question school-age children during school hours.

In some communities, faith-based groups and other community organizations work to improve child care so that 12-year-olds do not have to watch younger siblings while parents go to work. In some systems, school personnel call students every day they are absent, within 30 minutes of the start of school, to see what help they need getting to school. This could involve artful use of technology, linking teachers with laptops to parents with cell phones allowing teachers—with a click of the mouse—to send instant alerts to parents when students do not show up for school or leave early.

Truancy is the first step to dropping out; schools cannot address this issue alone. It is a good place to involve national service organizations like CIS, AmeriCorps and City Year, which can help provide the necessary human resources.³⁰

Transition #3: High School

The Consortium on Chicago School Research has shown that if students do not earn on-time promotion to the 10th grade, their odds of graduating greatly diminish. For many of these students, moreover, failure in ninth grade happens very quickly. If students miss 10 or more of the first 30 days of school because they feel that not much is going on and no one reacts to their absences, they have a good chance of failing and having to repeat ninth grade. Schools must monitor these students, just as they need to monitor attendance in middle school. Some students may attempt to repeat the ninth grade, but, minus additional supports, their probability of graduating is significantly reduced. If we can get these students to 10th grade with the appropriate number of credits, their chances of graduating go up significantly.³¹

If students miss 10 or more of the first 30 days of school because they feel that not much is going on and no one reacts to their absences, they have a good chance of failing and having to repeat ninth grade.

Transform the high schools where dropping out is common or even the norm into strong learning institutions

Any school where the number of freshmen is nearly twice as large as the number of graduates has a dropout crisis.³² To turn this around, communities must ensure that their high schools that face high degrees of educational challenge combine evidence-based comprehensive school reforms with the human resources necessary to implement and sustain these reforms. A great deal has been written about how to transform America's high schools. The National Association of Secondary School Principals, the Gates Foundation and MDRC all have examples of strategies to improve high schools.³³ Some of these strategies have been developed for North Carolina.³⁴

Based on most of this research, if the focus is on low-performing students who reach high school, reforms must accomplish three key objectives in

order to improve high schools with low graduation rates:

1. Ensure that all students earn on-time promotion to the 10th grade.

While social promotion is often counterproductive, repeating ninth grade is often a one-way ticket to dropping out. Earning on-time promotion to 10th grade is the equivalent of being able to read by second grade, in terms of reducing the risk of dropout. It is a point when everything possible needs to be done to ensure successful promotion. In practical terms, this means many students will need a double dose of mathematics and reading instruction in the ninth grade (80-90 minutes a day for the entire year). Some students will need targeted extra help, which will involve reduced class size and extra tutors. For some, this still might not be enough, and summer school or intensive courses early the following year will be needed to get them to full 10th-grade status as rapidly as possible. In short, this is the point when relentless support is needed. In systems that have effective targeted interventions in the earlier grades, it is hoped that the number of students who need this kind of support will be low. In some systems, it will be high. This is the time to identify and target those most likely to drop out.

2. Recognize that there are both academic and social-emotional components to course failure and low scores on assessments.

Students fail in high school mostly because they lack the necessary academic skills and knowledge to succeed. However, those who have studied dropouts claim that students also fail because they are afraid of failing and would rather be able to say they failed because they did not try hard than admit that they tried and still failed. Students who continue to fail despite the provision of extra help may need classes as small as 10 students so that teachers are able to learn and understand their circumstances and the factors that stand in the way of success.

3. Make high school relevant to adulthood; teach adult behaviors.

Just as the early elementary grades need to make learning a pleasant experience, and the middle grades

need to be designed to fulfill early adolescents' desire for adventure and camaraderie, the early years of high school need to be focused on building a bridge to adulthood. Many students in high-poverty areas are compelled to grow up fast and assume adult responsibilities at an early age. They are not, however, given the time or supports to learn adult outlooks and behaviors, like working for future goals and knowing what needs to be done to realize them. High school curriculum planners must actively structure electives and the themes of core courses to stress how the lesson is relevant to adult success. Vocational Education and Career Academies can often accomplish this, as can thematic academies that stress the arts, science or public service. Critical to success is that students make an informed choice that lets them align their studies with their interests.³⁵

Involving Parents

Surveys indicate that students routinely say they work hardest for their parents. But this is also the age when it is hardest for parents to know how their students are doing and to stay involved with their children. One strategy is for high schools to have mandatory parent-student-teacher report card and future planning conferences twice a year to celebrate successes, identify challenges and design solutions. Just as important, current school successes or struggles need to be continually linked to future outcomes and combined with post-secondary planning beginning in the ninth grade. Technology via conference calling should be used to accommodate parents' work schedules. The National Network of Partnership Schools highlights a number of promising approaches for increasing parental involvement at the high school level.³⁶

STRATEGY 3

Building multiple pathways to adult success

Keeping students on the path to graduation through the transitions to elementary, middle and high school is not always possible. Despite best efforts, some students will fall off-track. Any of these reforms will take time and none will work for all students. Students will also transfer in from other systems. To effectively lower the dropout rate, school systems

need to provide multiple pathways to a diploma.

First, schools need effective recovery options for students who, despite all of the supports provided or because of a life event, made a decision to drop out. These students need a way to get back on the path to graduation. Some systems have developed a second chance to graduate. For students who recently dropped out and/or were close to graduation, this may be possible in a regular school setting.

Students who are two or three years behind their age cohort, however, are unlikely to return to a setting filled with younger students and may need to attend high school at night or, at least, in an alternative setting. Indiana allows community colleges to offer high school diplomas. In some systems, alternative schools are not solely for discipline problems; rather they are for students who cannot realistically continue their education within a regular population of students.

Students are more likely to stay in school or try to come back after dropping out if the diploma they receive is meaningful and provides a clear path to either a job or postsecondary schooling. Traditional vocational education may no longer be appropriate. High schools need to build direct linkages for students to these options through high-quality career and technical education (CTE) programs. Emerging evidence suggests that the same underlying academic skills that are needed for success in college are also needed for success in today's workplace. While career advancement may require a college degree, there are many rewarding and productive occupations where entry requires only two years of postsecondary schooling or training. In some professions, those who complete their four-year degrees while working actually outperform those who have already earned their degrees when they start.

High schools also need to find new strategies to collaborate with community colleges to increase the number of ways students can achieve adult success. The early college movement allows students to earn credits toward a high school diploma and an associate's degree at the same time. North Carolina Central University offers a joint program with Durham Public Schools, and the number of

early college programs is growing across North Carolina. States could consider allowing both types of institutions to receive reimbursement for the same students, creating incentives for this kind of program through raising the amount of funding received. These schools provide the option to graduate with an associate's degree ready to work or to transfer to a four-year college.

Other Strategies

1. Raise the compulsory school attendance age

There is some evidence that raising the compulsory school attendance age can lower the dropout rate. States that have raised the age have seen a decrease in dropouts.³⁷ While there is some controversy with this approach, these programs are more likely to curtail the number of late dropouts than to reduce the number of early dropouts.

2. Increase rigor

Though it may seem counterintuitive, there is some evidence that increasing academic rigor can lower the dropout rate. According to the Gates Foundation, school systems that offer more challenging math courses in the early grades and more Advanced Placement courses in high school have reduced their dropout rates.³⁸

3. Build a communitywide campaign: Schools cannot do this alone

In communities where dropping out is common, the school systems will not be able to address the problem on their own. The necessary community response must have several components, including:

A communitywide compact to end the dropout crisis

One reason why the dropout crisis persists is that often no one is ultimately the steward of the necessary reforms. Communities need a strategic plan formulated at the community level, supported by schools and other permanent institutions of the community—its businesses, institutions of higher learning, civic groups, etc. These are, in short,

the civic enterprises that will bear the costs of the dropout problem. The Pew Partners for Change and the “Silent Epidemic” Web sites provide resources on how to organize a communitywide compact to end the dropout crisis.³⁹

Correcting the dollar flow between education and social services

There is clear evidence that reducing dropouts will lower social services costs and that more effective social services can improve school performance. Yet, currently, the relationship between educational and social services funding at the local, state and national level is not organized to take advantage of this. Local communities must work at the state and federal level to make sure that they can blend or braid funds between education and social service agencies. Better collaboration can get more funds flowing toward dropout prevention work. A number of efforts are under way in North Carolina to build these relationships.⁴⁰

4. Increase coordination among all parts of the education system

A number of states, including North Carolina, have established committees that bring together people from the various levels of education, ranging from preschool to college and beyond (years 16 to 20).⁴¹ Some states include representatives from other state agencies, businesses and the nonprofit sector. The goal is to develop a seamless continuum that prepares students for life, work and further study. Under the definition used by the Education Commission of the States, there are now 40 such councils nationwide. Some are more comprehensive and have more authority than others.⁴²

5. Invest in human resources

For evidence-based interventions to succeed, they need to be well implemented. Every major new intervention, whether it is at the district or school

level, needs someone to keep the implementers engaged and on task, to troubleshoot and customize the intervention to local circumstances, and to continuously look to improve the policy or program. In theory, this is supposed to be the school principal, but school principals have many other duties. Too often, education reform focuses mostly on teachers and principals. But our most challenged students also need help from counselors, social workers, nurses and school psychologists, especially if we expect schools to adopt targeted programs. This is also a place where community resources can help.

Businesses and local institutions, as part of the community compact, could provide employees with nine-month leaves to serve as implementation managers for key reforms (and perhaps the state and federal governments could provide tax incentives to help defray the cost). This would provide schools with access to a larger pool of individuals with good management skills and provide the community with first-hand knowledge of how schools work and the challenges they face.

This can be done

The dropout crisis in North Carolina can be stopped. The vast majority of dropouts do not want to leave high school without a diploma, and even those who think they do quickly regret it. The challenge is not so much to convince students to stay in school, but to provide the continuous support they need to succeed in school and to give those who leave a way to return to school. This can be accomplished by first developing a deep understanding of the nature of the dropout crisis in your community. The next step is to focus community efforts on building a comprehensive dropout prevention, intervention and recovery system targeted at the key points when students fall off the path to graduation. Finally, the community must commit itself to a sustained campaign to end its dropout crisis and gather the financial and human resources it will need to succeed.

This document draws heavily on the work of Robert Balfanz and his colleagues at the Center for Social Organization of Schools (CSOS) at Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Balfanz gave us permission to borrow liberally from his report, *What Your Community Can Do To End Its Dropout Crisis*, and related research at CSOS. That report and related reports used in this document can be found online at <<http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS/graduation-gap/gradgap.html>>. What is presented is our interpretation of his analysis and other analyses. It reflects the views of the authors, not Dr. Balfanz or Duke University.

¹ EPE Research Center. Graduation rates map. <<http://apps.arcwebservices.com/edweekv3/default.jsp>>.

² For North Carolina and national figures, see Alliance for Excellent Education. <http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis/schools/state_information/north_carolina>.

See also Vernez, G., Krop, R.A. & Rydell, C.P. (1999). Closing the education gap: Benefits and costs. <<http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR10d36/>>.

³ Alliance for Excellent Education. <http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis/impact/economic_analysis>.

⁴ Jerald, C.D. (2006). Identifying potential dropouts: Key lessons for building an early warning data system. Washington, D.C.: Achieve Inc. <<http://www.jff.org/Documents/IdentifyingPotentialDropouts.pdf>>.

See also the Data Quality Campaign. <<http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/>>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The Data Quality Campaign. <<http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/>>.

⁷ Alliance for Excellent Education. *High schools in the United States: How does your local high school measure up?* <<http://www.all4ed.org/promotingpower>>.

⁸ Project U-Turn. <<http://www.projectturn.net>>.

⁹ Jerald, C.D. (2006). <<http://www.jff.org/Documents/IdentifyingPotentialDropouts.pdf>>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Balfanz, R. (2006). *What your community can do to end its dropout crisis*. Baltimore: Center for Social Organization of Schools. <<http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS/graduation-gap/gradgap.html>> and <http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS/graduation-gap/pdfandppt/What_Your_Community_Can_Do_to_End_its_Dropout_Crisis_Final.pdf>.

¹² Neild, R.C. & Balfanz, R. (2006). *Unfulfilled promise: The dimensions and characteristics of Philadelphia's dropout crisis, 2000–2005*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Youth Network, Johns Hopkins University and University of Pennsylvania. <http://www.projectturn.net/downloads/pdf/Unfulfilled_Promise_Project_U-turn.pdf>.

See also Project U-Turn. (2006). *Turning it around: A collective effort to understand and resolve Philadelphia's dropout crisis*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Youth Network. <http://www.projectturn.net/downloads/pdf/Turning_it_around_Project_U-Turn.pdf>.

¹³ Center for Social Organization of Schools. *The graduation gap*. <www.gradgap.org>.

¹⁴ The Education Trust. <www.edtrust.org>.

¹⁵ McRobbie, J., Finn, J.D. & Harmon, P. (1998). *Class size reduction: Lessons learned from experience*. San Francisco: WestEd. <http://www.wested.org/policy/pubs/full_text/pb_ft_csr23.htm>.

See also Kruger, A.B. & Whitmore, D.M. (2001). The effect of attending a small class in the early grades on college test-taking and middle school test results: Evidence from Project Star. *The Economic Journal*, 111. <<http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/action/showPdf?submitPDF=Full+Text+PDF+%28548+KB%29&doi=10.1111%2F1468-0297.00586>>.

¹⁶ National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instructions*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Child Health and Development. <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/upload/report_pdf.pdf>.

¹⁷ National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). *Timing and duration of student participation in special education in the primary grades*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. <<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007043.pdf>>.

See also International Reading Association. *Focus on response to intervention*. <http://www.reading.org/resources/issues/focus_rti.html>.

¹⁸ Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2003). *High schools for the new millennium: Imagine the possibilities*. Seattle: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. <<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/downloads/ed/edwhitepaper.pdf>>.

See also Finn, C.E., Rotherman, A.J. & Hokanson, C.R., Editors. (2001.) *Rethinking special education for a new century*. Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and Progressive Policy Institute. <http://www.edexcellence.net/doc/special_ed_final.pdf>.

¹⁹ The National Center for Family Literacy. <<http://www.familit.org>>.

²⁰ Duncan, G.J., Dowsett, C.J., Claessens, A., Magnuson, K., Huston, A.C., Klebanov, P. et al. (2007). School readiness and later achievement. *Developmental Psychology*, 43, 1428-1446. <<http://www.apa.org/journals/releases/dev4361428.pdf>>.

²¹ Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy. *What works and what doesn't work in social policy?: Findings from well-designed randomized controlled trials*. <<http://www.evidencebasedprograms.org>>.

²² Wasilewski, Y., Gifford, B. & Bonneau, K. (2008). *Evaluation of the school-wide Positive Behavioral Support program in eight North Carolina elementary schools*. Durham: Center for Child and Family Policy. <http://www.pubpol.duke.edu/centers/child/evalsvcs/files/PBS_EvalReport_040108.pdf>.

See also National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support. (2007). *Is school-wide Positive Behavioral Support an evidence-based practice?* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Special Education Programs. <<http://www.pbis.org/files/101007evidencebase4pbs.pdf>>.

²³ Gillman, W.S. (2005). *Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems*. New Haven: Yale University Child Study Center. <http://www.fcd-us.org/usr_doc/ExpulsionCompleteReport.pdf>.

²⁴ RTI Action Network. <<http://www.rtinetwork.org/>>.

See also chapter 17 of Finn, C.E., Rotherman, A.J. & Hokanson, C.R., Editors. (2001.) *Rethinking special education for a new century*. Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and Progressive Policy Institute. <http://www.edexcellence.net/doc/special_ed_final.pdf>.

²⁵ National Association of Secondary School Principals. *Breaking Ranks in the Middle*. <http://www.principals.org/s_nassp/sec_inside.asp?CID=934&DID=53491>.

²⁶ Center for Social Organization of Schools. *Talent Development Middle Grade Program*. <www.csos.jhu.edu/tdms>.

²⁷ National Technical Assistance Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. <<http://pbis.org/main.htm>>.

²⁸ Washington State Institute for Public Policy. *Costs and benefits*. <<http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/topic.asp?cat=18&subcat=0&cteSlct=0>>.

See also North Carolina Collaborative for Children, Youth and Families. School-based behavioral and mental health. <<http://www.nccollaborative.org/management/10/school-based-mental-health/>>.

³⁰ Project U-Turn. (2006). <http://www.projectturn.net/downloads/pdf/Turning_it_around_Project_U-Turn.pdf>.

³¹ Balfanz, R. (2006). p. 19. <http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS/graduation-gap/pdfandppt/What_Your_Community_Can_Do_to_End_its_Dropout_Crisis_Final.pdf_p19>.

- ³² Alliance for Excellence in Education. *Promoting power*. <<http://www.all4ed.org/promotingpower>>.
- ³³ MDRC. <www.mdrc.org>; National Association of Secondary School Principals. <<http://www.principals.org>>; and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. <www.gatesfoundation.org/unitedstates/education/>.
- ³⁴ Achieve Inc. & Jobs For the Future. (2007). *Moving North Carolina forward: High standards and high graduation rates*. Washington, D.C.: Achieve Inc. and Jobs For the Future. <<http://www.achieve.org/files/MovingNCForward.pdf>>.
- ³⁵ Almeida, C., Johnson, C. & Steinberg, A. (2006). *Making good on a promise: What policymakers can do to support the educational persistence of dropouts*. Boston: Jobs For the Future. <<http://www.jff.org/Documents/MkingGoodProm.pdf>>.
- ³⁶ Balfanz, R. (2006), see also Center for Social Organization of Schools. <www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000>.
- ³⁷ Bridgeland J. M., DiIulio J. J., Jr., & Streeter, R., *The Silent Epidemic*. <<http://www.silentepidemic.org/pdfs/compulsory-age.pdf>>.
- ³⁸ Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2003). <<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/downloads/ed/edwhitepaper.pdf>>.
- ³⁹ The Pew Partnership for Civic Change. <www.pew-partnership.org> *The Silent Epidemic*. <<http://www.silentepidemic.org>>.
- ⁴⁰ North Carolina Collaborative for Children, Youth and Families. <www.nccollaborative.org>.
- See also Philadelphia Education Fund. *Secondary education blueprint*. <http://www.philaedfund.org/sec_ed/index.htm>.
- ⁴¹ Cech, S.J. (2008). P-16 Councils bring all tiers of education to the table: State-level councils emerge as a popular, if unproven, forum for turning concerns about precollegiate and postsecondary alignment into an achievable agenda. *Education Week*, June 5, 2008. <<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/06/05/40overview.h27.html?print=1>>.
- ⁴² Education Commission of the States. P-16/P-20 Councils. <<http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=910>>.