

# Executive Summary

**D**ropout. The term immediately brings to mind an image, or a myriad of images. It conjures up a long list of adjectives—many of them negative.

We know who these kids are. Or do we?

For decades, we neglected the dropout issue because we lacked the definitions, the data and, possibly, the desire to come to grips with the enormity of the problem. The reason that the school dropout crisis is now referred to as a “silent epidemic” is because, when we weren’t paying attention, the graduation rate in our country slipped to a level that threatens the very health and well-being of our society.

Each year, almost one-third of all public high school students—and nearly one-half of all blacks, Hispanics and American Indians—fail to graduate from public high school with their classes.<sup>1</sup>

This briefing report to accompany the 2008 North Carolina Family Impact Seminar, “Dropout Prevention: Strategies for improving high school graduation rates,” will help us come to grips with the problem by providing a wide range of information, including data and insights about how to address the problem.

In **Brief 1**, we pose tough questions that cut to the heart of what is most troubling about this crisis.

In **Brief 2**, we take a detailed look at the dropout problem in North Carolina.

In **Brief 3**, we explore what we mean by “high school dropout,” and we

describe the many different rates and measurements used to quantify the problem.

In **Brief 4**, we share information about dropout prevention strategies.

Underlying all of these briefs is the belief that there is a path to graduation for every student, but not necessarily one path that is appropriate for all students.

Furthermore, research shows that there are particular milestones that all students must reach in order to be successful in school. And, we know that students are most at-risk for getting off-track when they are transitioning from one school to the next.

So, if we can figure out **who** is dropping out, **why** (for what reasons), **when** (at what point in the student’s career) and **where** (from which schools), we should be able to figure out **how** best to guide each student on a path that leads to graduation. This briefing report strives to take us further in that direction.

We know who these kids are. They are our children—our future.

*One reason that the high school dropout crisis is known as the “silent epidemic” is that the problem is frequently masked or minimized by inconsistent and opaque data reporting systems. For example, in some districts, a student who leaves school is counted as a dropout only if he or she registers as one. In others, a dropout’s promise to get a GED at an unspecified future date is good enough to merit “graduate” status. With such loose definitions of what it means to graduate, it’s no wonder this epidemic has been so silent!*

—Margaret Spellings, U.S. Secretary of Education, April 1, 2008

<sup>1</sup>The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts. (March 2006).