



Virginia Family Impact Seminars

**TRUANCY AND DROPOUT
PREVENTION POLICIES: STRATEGIES
FOR
VIRGINIA'S YOUTH**

Briefing Book

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Commission on Youth

Established in statute, §30-174 and §30-175 by the 1989 General Assembly, the Virginia Commission on Youth was a legislative response to a two-year study examining the issues related to services to chronic status offenders.

Virginia code mandates the Commission "to study and provide recommendations addressing the needs of and services to the Commonwealth's youth and families." Enacted in 1989, the Commission began operations in 1991. The Commission,

- Provides a bipartisan forum for complex issues related to youth and their families;
- Monitors developments in federal, state and local policies and laws which impact youth and their families;
- Contributes to the General Assembly's ability to make sound policy decision based on well-studied and reasoned recommendations;
- Assists members in developing bills on study issues which reflect consensus among key agencies, organizations and special interests;
- Conducts legislative studies on issues related to youth and their families;
- Serves as a resource for constituent concerns and the general public;
- Performs research on youth related topics at the request of members;
- Analyzes youth-related legislation (proposed or existing) for members;
- Publishes a yearly newsletter outlining the major legislative and budgetary initiatives impacting children and youth each year following the General Assembly Session;
- Addresses professional associations, civic and community groups on the legislative process, state and national policy issues impacting youth, and specific topical areas;
- Educates interested groups on Commission studies; and
- Serves on varied private and governmental task forces convened on children's issues.

Acknowledgments

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The **VCU Center for Public Policy** is a multidisciplinary policy studies organization serving Virginia Commonwealth University and its surrounding communities. We are proud to sponsor the Virginia Family Impact Seminar.

Located on the Monroe Park Campus of VCU, our Center is housed within the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs and is part of the University's College of Humanities and Sciences. Our Center was established on July 1, 1994 as an initiative of a "Strategic Plan for the Future of Virginia Commonwealth University", with the goal of focusing the university's multidisciplinary efforts in public policy.

As a comprehensive, university-wide center, the Center for Public Policy has responsibilities in each area of the University's broader missions: teaching, research, and public service. The Center houses and administers the Ph.D in Public Policy and Administration. In addition, our staff members conduct basic and applied research on a number of public policy matters, with special attention to health policy, urban and metropolitan development, and state and local government and politics. The Center for Public Policy is also home to the Commonwealth Poll, a regular survey of Virginians' attitudes about politics and policy. Beyond these contributions, the Center also engages in significant service through its training programs, conferences, publications and other contributions to public discourse.

We also wish to thank...

Karen Bogenschneider, Director, and her colleagues at the **Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars**, University of Wisconsin, Madison Wisconsin.

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The Minnesota Family Impact Seminars and the University of Minnesota Children, Youth and Family Consortium for their inspiration in developing the VAFIS folders.

Statement of Purpose and Focus

The purpose of the Virginia Family Impact Seminars (VAFIS) is to share objective, nonpartisan, solution-based research on topics of current concern to state policymakers. Families are perhaps the most important aspect of life for most Americans. Family Impact Seminars encourage policymakers to consider the impact of policies on families much the same as they examine the impact of economic and environmental policies and practices.

Seminar topics, which are focused on policies and practice solutions that have an impact on children and families, are identified by legislators and legislative staff each year and are based on their concerns and insights of what family related issues are likely to be addressed during up-coming legislative sessions. VAFIS conducts annual seminars, prepares briefing reports, and conducts periodic follow-up activities designed specifically for state legislators and legislative staff, the Governor and executive branch staff, and state agency representatives.

Through VAFIS, research, information and insight related to policy, practice and programs are presented by

- Nationally regarded experts who participate in panel discussions at seminars with legislators and
- Written briefing reports that highlight the most essential information about seminar topic.

VAFIS also opens the door for ongoing exchanges between legislators, experts who speak at the Seminars, researchers, VAFIS faculty members, and a broad range of stakeholders concerned about the issue, including members of the executive branch, directors of state and local government agencies, leaders of nonprofit agencies, and researchers and scholars from Virginia Commonwealth University and other institutions of higher education. The briefing report is disseminated to this broad audience and is posted on the VAFIS web site: <http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/gov/vfis/main.html>.

VAFIS suggests that the first step in developing family-centered policy is asking the right questions. For example,

- What can government and community institutions do to enhance family members' capacities to help themselves and their families?
- In what ways will a policy affect the family: will it strengthen or weaken family life?

Focus on Dropout and Truancy

The Virginia Commission on Youth is currently directed to study truancy and school dropout prevention in Virginia. For its inaugural seminar, the VAFIS has joined with the Commission on Youth to address these critical issues.

The important questions concerning dropout and truancy include:

- Are there common characteristics of families whose children are truant and drop out of school, and schools that children leave before graduating?
- What are the effects of truancy and dropouts for Virginia's families? For our country's and our state's future health and welfare?
- What truancy and dropout prevention programs work for Virginia's students and their families?
- Are there policy strategies that have been successful that are realistic in times of fiscal stress?

In 2008, Delegate Franklin P. Hall introduced HB 1263: Truancy and School Dropout Prevention "...providing that local school boards must implement school dropout prevention programs and services that include an emphasis on truancy prevention. The bill amends relevant Code sections pertaining to compliance with the compulsory school attendance law to strengthen the authority of local school boards" (the Bill was continued to 2009 in Education by a voice vote.) The Committee also recommended that the Commission on Youth conduct a study of Truancy and School Dropout Prevention in Virginia, which is in its first year.

Why should Virginia's policy makers be concerned about school truancy and dropouts?

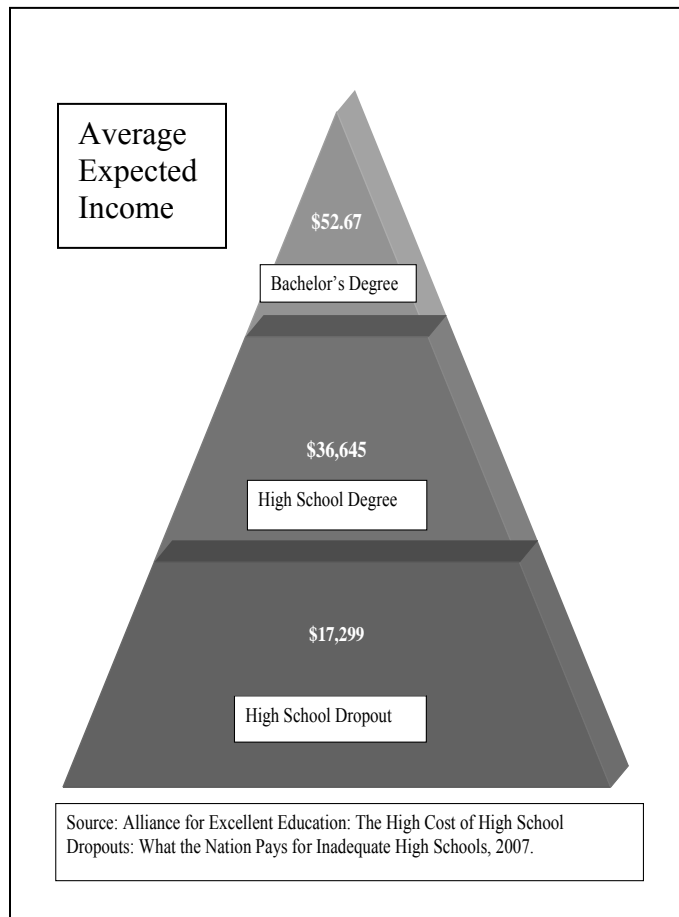
The Virginia Department of Education reports that in 2006-2007, of the 567,547 children enrolled in Virginia’s public schools on September 30, 2006, 10,540 dropped out of school (1.86%) by the end of 2007. Thirty-eight counties reported less than one percent dropouts, twenty-seven reported between 2 and 2.99 percent, and 22 reported having a dropout rate of three or more percent—one district reported a rate of 7.48 percent.

The accuracy of the numbers of truancies during the 2006-2007 reporting period is difficult to assess. Twenty-five districts reported zero or one truancy for the year, while the district with the largest number reported over 5,000 truancies. New data on annual truancies and dropouts will soon be published and are expected to be much higher than earlier reports due to two pieces of recent legislation: SJR 329 (Locke, 2007) which requested that the Board of Education study high school dropout and graduation rates in Virginia; and HB 19 (Fralin, 2006) which required that the Board collect, analyze and report high school graduation and dropout data using a formula approved by the Board of Education. The formula is the National Governor’s Association (NGA) On-Time Graduate Rate (See HD 81, December 2006).

Points to Consider

A recent report (Amos 2008) published online by the Alliance for Excellent Education, presents the following points to consider regarding the cost to our nation in lost opportunities for students that dropout before graduating from high school:

- Over the course of his or her lifetime, a single high school dropout costs the nation approximately \$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity.



- If those students who dropped out had graduated with their class in 2008, it is estimated that the nation's economy would have benefited from an additional \$319 billion in income over their lifetimes.
- High school dropouts are more likely than graduates to be arrested or incarcerated. Rather than contributing to the communities' wealth, these youngsters become a drain on a community's resources.
- Each student who graduates from high school will save states an average of \$13,706 in Medicaid and expenditures for uninsured care over the course of his or her lifetime.
- For every \$500 of wealth accumulated by households headed by a dropout, households headed by a high school graduate possess an estimated \$5,000.
- If high schools and colleges were able to raise the graduate rates of Hispanic, African American, and Native American students to the levels of white students by 2020, the potential increase in personal income across the nation would add, conservatively, more than \$310 billion to the U.S. economy. (Amos, p.2; the author notes that the data in these points should not be aggregated.)

References

Amos, James (2008). *Dropouts, Diplomas, and Dollars: U.S. High Schools and the Nation's Economy*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.

Brief Number 1: The Community

Approach to Truancy

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The Supreme Court of the United States in *Brown v. Board of Education*, declared that “education is perhaps the most important function of state and local government. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities. It is the very foundation of good citizenship...it is doubtful that any child may reasonably succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education.” Yet those dealing with school attendance issues have experienced children saying “we don’t need no education,” parents saying “my child doesn’t need that education” and schools saying “we don’t want to educate that child.”

Our history has provided many examples of successful men and women who dropped out of school in the 5th or 6th grade and made more than enough money to raise a family. How many School Boards or Boards of Supervisors, when debating money and programs, have had some parent stand up and confront them by saying, “I don’t have a college or high school degree and my child doesn’t need one either”? So while some of us repeat in public grandiloquent slogans about the importance of education, why should our communities be concerned about whether Dick or Jane regularly attend school and get a high school degree if they, or their parents, do not care?

The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children and the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE), in “Saving Money, Saving Youth: The Financial Impact of Keeping Kids in School,” provided a partial answer to this question when they calculated the costs to the community for a child dropping out of school. Using figures developed by Vernez, Krop and Rydell at the RAND Corporation, the 2003 report concluded “one high school dropout can be expected to cost the public in excess of \$200,000 over the course of his or her life.” Part of this cost was attributed to the loss of tax revenue, part to the cost of social programs used (higher for women than men) and part to the cost of criminal justice services (higher for men).

A Truancy Fact Sheet prepared by the NCSE provided the following verification of the connection between school attendance and criminal justice concerns:

- Truancy has been clearly identified as one of the early warning signs of students headed for potential delinquent activity, social isolation, or educational failure via suspension, expulsion, or dropping out.
- In 1991 and again in 1993, three grand juries in Dade County, FL analyzed the data from more than 5,000 of the county's most serious juvenile offenders and found that excessive truancy was one of the three traits most of them had in common.
- After the police opened a truancy center in North Miami Beach and began picking up school aged youth on the street during school hours, crime diminished substantially in the targeted neighborhoods. For example, vehicle burglaries decreased by 22%, and residential burglaries criminal mischief both decreased by 19%

Of the increased cost of social programs for high school dropouts, a portion is the expense of health care. And while some of our parents do not value a high school degree for their child, we assume that all but the most callous parents want their 18 year old child to be healthy. Children who attend school and do well are more likely to be healthy and less likely to cost the community medical dollars.

In "Protecting Teens: Beyond Race, Income and Family Structure" Dr. Robert Blum, formerly at the University of Minnesota and now at Johns Hopkins, analyzed data relating to teenage health issues from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Blum isolated risk factors and protective factors for white, Hispanic and black male and female teens for (1) cigarette use, (2) alcohol use, (3) weapon related violence, (4) suicidal thoughts and attempts and (5) sexual intercourse. Among the conclusions reached were the following:

- Youth that have problems with schoolwork are more likely to experience health risks. This is evident, with very little exception, across the groups studied making school failure a public health problem.

- Teens who spend their time “just hanging out” with friends, especially friends involved in specific risk behaviors, are more likely to become involved themselves. Clearly, one’s choice of friends matters. There may also be health consequences to substantial amounts of unstructured leisure time

The results of studies suggest that the community has legitimate reasons to be concerned about whether our youth regularly attend and graduate from high school. We need solutions that improve the chance that they will do so. Since not all children skip school for the same reasons, the community cannot treat all truants the same and effectively reduce the dropout rate.

In a study entitled “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts,” John Bridgeland, former Director of the Domestic Policy Council at the White House for President George W. Bush, interviewed high school dropouts about why they dropped out and the top reasons were as follows:

- Classes were not interesting (47%)
- Missed too many days and could not catch up (43%)
- Spent time with people who were not interested in school (42%)
- Had too much freedom and not enough rules in my life (38%)
- Was failing in school (35%)

Of the high school dropouts interviewed, 66% said they would have worked harder if their school had demanded more and 82% were at least somewhat confident that they could have graduated. The dropouts were asked what changes would have improved their chance of success. They responded:

- Make classes relevant with opportunities for real world learning (81%)
- Better teachers, keep classes interesting (81%)
- Smaller classes, more individual attention (75%)
- Parents and School to communicate with each other (71%)
- Parents to ensure kids go to school every day (71%)
- Increase supervision at school to ensure kids attend classes (70%)

These answers clearly show the role that parents and the school play in whether a child graduates from high school. Yet the community at large can have both a positive and negative impact on graduation rates. Some localities try to limit the allure of skipping school by promoting truant free shopping areas where truants will not be served during school hours. Other localities struggle with

the competition from businesses that devour young, unskilled workers. One only has to follow the caravans of trucks, filled with chain saws and teens, advancing northward on Route 29 from Culpeper during the morning commute to appreciate the impact of a \$100 a day “tax-free” job on school attendance. In other communities, gang issues spill into schools, spawn concerns about student safety and impact attendance.

A comprehensive approach to truancy that involves the community, family, and school was one of the primary themes of the Washington, D.C. Conference titled “Partnering to Prevent Truancy: A National Priority.” Robert Flores, the Administrator of the Office on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and a co-sponsor of the Conference with the U.S. Department of Education, used terms like “multidisciplinary” and “collaborative” when describing the search for solutions. He emphasized that the focus could not just be on student attendance but had to include all of the three A’s-“Attendance, Attachment and Achievement.”

The Three A’s are interrelated. For example, attaching or connecting a child to a school increases the chance that the student will attend and achieve success. One way to attach children to school is through extra-curricular activities. Some studies have found a positive correlation between time spent by students on extra-curricular activities and graduation rates while others have documented a positive correlation between extra-curricular activities and educational aspirations.

Nicholas Zill concluded in “Adolescent Time Use, Risky Behavior and Outcomes: An Analysis of National Data” that children who participate in extra-curricular activities tended to do better in school. In a comparison of 10th grade students who spent 1-4 hours a week in extracurricular activities and 10th grade students who spent no hours a week in extracurricular activities, students in the latter group were:

- 57 % more likely to drop out of school,
- 49% more likely to use drugs,
- 37% more likely to be a teen parent,
- 35% more likely to smoke,
- 27% more likely to be arrested

The “Wingspread Declaration: A National Strategy for Improving School Connectedness” summarized some of the research about school connectedness or attachment. The approaches that were found to improve student connectedness to schools were:

- Implementing high standards and expectations, and providing academic support to all students. (research citations omitted)
- Applying fair and consistent disciplinary policies that are collectively agreed upon and fairly enforced.
- Creating trusting relationships among students, teachers, staff, administrators, and families.
- Hiring and supporting capable teachers skilled in content, teaching techniques, and classroom management to meet each learner's needs.
- Fostering high parent/family expectations for school performance and school completion.
- Ensuring that every student feels close to at least one supportive adult at school

Courts in Virginia have been called on to deal with truants when other efforts have failed. While truants can be sentenced to detention for failure to follow a Court order to attend school, there is little research on the effectiveness of detention on truants. One study that involved Colorado students found that “no one’s attendance or grades improved markedly following detention.” A minority of the 30 detained truants reported that they were better off after detention while others reported they were worse off. The group that seemed to be most impacted positively by detention consisted of the low risk students who may have been “scared straight.” Dr. Edward Latessa of the Division of Criminal Justice of the University of Cincinnati, as well as others, has cautioned that detaining low risk children can push them further into the criminal justice system.

The Colorado study has been criticized because of the small number of children involved in the study. Judge Cole of Boulder, Colorado was involved with a follow-up study that focused on interviews with truants who were not detained but knew detention was a possible sanction. Of the 41 non-detained youths surveyed, 74% claimed that the thought of jail time motivated them to attend school regularly.” More study is needed to determine if detention, or the threat of detention, is an effective means of increasing school attendance.

In a time of economic turmoil and foreign countries arming themselves for the future by training scientists and mathematicians, producing successful educational outcomes for all children, not just the children in our own home, is crucial. Solutions to truancy will need to include comprehensive support by the community, parents and school for the student. As programs are

implemented, they will need to be analyzed to see if they produce the desired results and if they are an efficient use of time, energy and money.

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Brief Number 2: Dropout Prevention Programs; What Research Has to Say About What Works

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In recent years widespread concern has developed around the number of students, particularly black and Hispanic students, who never graduate from high school. A Gates Foundation-funded national dropout study labels the situation a “high school dropout epidemic in America,” and a Johns Hopkins University study that coined the term “dropout factory” to describe certain high schools was afforded front-page coverage in major newspapers across the nation; the study estimated that there are 1,700 such high schools. While it is clear that the dropout problem has become one of the top education issues of the day, much less clear is what should be done about the problem. What programs and policies hold the best promise for reducing dropout rates? And, what does the research base say about dropout prevention programs? These questions are the topics of this brief.

Dropout Prevention: No Shortage of Programs

By all accounts, it is costly to both the individual and to society whenever a student drops out of school without a diploma. Relative to high school graduates, the average dropout can expect lower life-time earnings, decreased employability, and poorer health over the course of their life. From society’s perspective, dropouts are associated with lower tax revenues, greater public assistance costs, and higher crime rates. The large number of students who dropout each year, coupled with the substantial cost per dropout, remind us of the urgent need for programs that might help students stay in school.

In fact, there is no shortage of dropout prevention programs. The Dropout Prevention Center/Network lists hundreds of dropout-prevention programs in its online data base of “model programs”. In thinking about dropout prevention it is useful to categorize interventions into either (1) programs that set dropout prevention as the primary goal and that target specific students or groups of students for assistance or (2) interventions that have a broader goal than dropout

prevention and a broader target audience than “at-risk” students, but that, nevertheless, have lower dropout rates as one of their primary goals. Programs in both categories tend to share some or all of four primary mechanisms for lowering dropout rates:

- increasing school attendance,
- increasing student school engagement and learning,
- building student self-esteem, and
- helping students cope with the challenges and problems that contribute to the likelihood of dropping out.

Given our experience with dropout programs, we tend to have good information on the numbers, types, and structure of existing programs and on the characteristics, numbers, and outcomes of the students that they serve. Unfortunately, we know far less than we would like about the most important question: how effective are these programs at reducing dropout rates? For example, only a handful of the “model programs” cited by the Dropout Prevention Center/Network have been rigorously evaluated for effectiveness.

When one does examine the best available research, it becomes clear that we have not yet developed systematic and widespread methods and programs for addressing the dropout problem. As Mark Dynarski and Philip Gleason write in a report on dropout prevention programs, “Dropping out is as hard to prevent as it is easy to do.” (Dynarski & Gleason 1998). The authors note that this result is consistent to what was found by two earlier U.S. Department of Education sponsored evaluations of other dropout-prevention programs.

What Research Tells Us About Dropout Prevention Programs

There are two overarching messages that should be taken from this briefing report on dropout prevention programs. The first is that it is hard, but not impossible, to design research that can identify the true, causal effect of a dropout prevention program. The second is that when research on the effectiveness of programs is held to a high standard, very few interventions show positive results at reducing dropout rates.

The primary reason that it is hard to design research that tells us which programs work and which programs do not work is that students who participate in dropout prevention programs are seldom a random sample of the relevant population of at-risk students. Students in a given program either self-select into that program, or they are administratively assigned to the program.

Either of these non-random selection processes poses problems for research designed to measure the impact of the program on dropout rates. In particular, just looking at the outcomes of program participants does not tell us how effective or ineffective is a particular program. And without going into detail, suffice to say here that even comparisons that use a comparison group of non-participants and sophisticated statistical techniques often fall short of giving us the true causal impact of a program on dropout rates. These realities mean that one should think carefully about the design and rigor of the evaluation at hand when interpreting research findings about dropout prevention programs.

One of the largest and most rigorous set of evaluations of dropout prevention was a late 1990s study of twenty-one different dropout prevention interventions that were funded between 1991 and 1995 by the U.S. Department of Education under its School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program (SDDAP). The evaluations of the SDDAP programs were conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., a research firm noted for well designed and executed impact evaluations. The SDDAP programs included both targeted and broadly defined dropout-prevention efforts. The targeted interventions were usually evaluated through randomized, controlled experiments, while the evaluations of the broad, school-restructuring efforts were quasi-experimental and used observationally similar schools as the comparison group for SDDAP schools.

The evaluations studied sixteen targeted interventions, evenly split between middle and high schools, and five high school restructuring projects. The overarching finding from the SDDAP evaluations is that “most programs made almost no difference in preventing dropping out in general” (Institute of Education Sciences). In particular, only one of the sixteen targeted efforts and none of the high school restructuring efforts showed success at reducing dropout rates.

The successful targeted program in the SDDAP evaluations was an alternative middle school in Flint, Michigan that focused on students who were entering middle school behind grade level. The alternative school provided students with an array of intensive services including extra counseling services and attendance monitoring, challenging curricula, and school outreach to the students’ families. Three years after students were randomly assigned to the Flint program 3 percent of the treatment group had dropped out of school compared to 17 percent of the students in the randomized control group. The extra services of this alternative school cost 22 percent more than the cost for attending regular middle school in Flint (Institute for Education Sciences).

A second source of evaluations of dropout prevention programs that meet recognized levels of rigor is the federally funded What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). The WWC is a U.S. Department of Education sponsored effort to examine the research in seven different education topics to determine which studies meet predetermined levels of rigor, and to make available for a general audience the findings of studies that meet the WWC threshold for rigor. Dropout prevention is one of the areas of study by the WWC.

To date the WWC review of dropout-prevention programs has looked at fifty-nine studies of sixteen dropout prevention programs (Institute for Education Sciences). Ten of the programs had undergone evaluations that were rigorous enough to make it possible to reach firm conclusions about program effectiveness. These ten programs include a wide range of interventions including counseling and monitoring, school restructuring and curriculum redesign, financial incentives for students and families, and community services designed to mitigate factors that can negatively impact school achievement and success. (Institute for Education Sciences)

Five of the ten programs that had been rigorously evaluated showed promise in reducing dropout rates. A sixth intervention, Financial Incentives for Teen Parents to Stay in School, also showed some positive dropout reduction results. However, this intervention is part of state welfare programs and is not a dropout prevention program per se. Two of the five programs with positive results—Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS) and High School Redirection—are no longer active.

ALAS was a pilot program launched in San Diego during the early 1990s that was designed to address student, school, family, and community factors that affect dropping out. ALAS participants were assigned a counselor who would monitor attendance, behavior, and academics. In addition to providing feedback to the student on these areas, the counselor was responsible for coordination of services and communication across students, families, and teachers; they were also expected to serve as the student's advocate. On the family side, the program made efforts to train parents in parent-child problem solving, how to participate in school activities, and how to contact teachers and school administrators to address issues. At the end of the ninth grade, 98 percent of the students who were randomly assigned to the ALAS program were still enrolled in school, compared with 83 percent of the students in the non-ALAS control group (Larson & Rumberger). The ALAS intervention costs \$1,185 per student annually in 2005 dollars (Gandara, Mehan & Rumberger, 1998).

High School Redirection was an alternative high school program for youth who had dropped out in the past, who were teen parents, who had poor test scores, or who were over-age for their grade. The program emphasized basic skill development, a small school model, and encouraged teachers to serve as mentors as well as instructors. Three years after random assignment, 43 percent of the students assigned to the High School Redirection program—an alternative high school program for students considered at risk—had dropped out, compared with 53 percent of the randomly assigned control group (Institute of Education Sciences). The additional cost of High School Redirection relative to the regular per pupil cost in the district ranged from an additional 33 percent of annual per pupil expenditure to an additional 15 percent depending on the site (Weinbaum & Baker 1991).

The three remaining positive programs cited in the WWC represent three distinct approaches to dropout prevention. One, Check & Connect, is a relatively intensive program for (mostly) high school students; a second, Career Academies, fits the school-within-a-school model; a third, Talent Development High Schools, is best described as whole-school reform.

The Check & Connect¹ model works with and coordinates services among the student, the family, the school, and the community. The signature feature of Check & Connect is the assignment of a “monitor” to each student in the program, with the monitor serving as the student’s mentor and case worker. In the Check component, the monitor continually assesses the student’s school performance, including attendance, behavior, and academics, with quick follow up at the first sign that a student is struggling in any of these areas.

The Connect component combines individualized attention to the student with the coordination of services and information about the student across school personnel, family, and community service providers. The program carries a minimum two-year commitment to students and families, including the promise and ability to follow highly mobile youth from school to school so that students do not lose services when they move from their original program site.

In two separate experimental evaluations, Check & Connect showed positive effects on staying in school and progressing through school. One study showed that 9 percent of the ninth-grade students enrolled in Check & Connect had dropped out of school by the end of the year compared with 30 percent in the

¹ Information on the *Check & Connect* program was largely synthesized from information found on the *Check & Connect* website at <http://ici.umn.edu/checkandconnect/>.

control group. Another study showed that by the expected graduation year, 39 percent of Check & Connect students had dropped out of school compared with 58 percent of the control group. The high dropout rate associated with both groups reminds us of the dropout risk level present in the population targeted by Check & Connect and most of the other programs mentioned in this brief. The cost of implementing the Check & Connect model was an additional \$1,400 per student during the 2001-02 school year (Institute of Education Sciences).

Career Academies² are another intervention that have shown effectiveness in lowering dropout rates, at least for students most at risk of dropping out. The Career Academy model has three key features. First, it is organized as a school-within-a-school: students in a smaller and more personal learning atmosphere stay with the same teachers over the three or four years of high school. Second, it includes both academic and vocational coursework, with the two integrated in the curriculum and in pedagogy. And, third, it uses partnerships between the academy and local employers to build links between school and work and to provide students with career and work-based learning opportunities. Begun in the 1970s, there are currently some 1,500 Career Academies nationwide that serve a more diverse set of students than the “vocational ed” students who tended to be the original constituents of the academies.

An experimental evaluation of more than 1,700 students who applied for admission to one of nine Career Academies across the nation found that among high-risk youth, the Career Academies reduced the baseline dropout rate of 32 percent by 11 percentage points and that in the students’ projected twelfth-grade year, 40 percent of the high-risk academy students had earned enough credits to graduate compared with only 26 percent of the high-risk students in the control group.³ The best cost estimates are that in 2004 the per pupil cost of educating a student in a Career Academy was \$600 more than the average per pupil cost of non-academy students (Institute for Education Sciences).

² The information on the Career Academy model was largely taken from the MDRC evaluation report. See James J. Kemple and Jason C. Snipes, "Career Academies: Impacts on Students' Engagement and Performance in High School" (New York: MDRC, 2000).

³ James J. Kemple, "Career Academies: Long Term Impacts on Labor Market Outcomes, Educational Attainment, and Transitions to Adulthood" (New York: MDRC, 2008). We note two additional facts about the Career Academies evaluation. First, among moderate- to low-risk students, there were no differences in dropout rates or earned high school credits between the Academy and non-Academy students. Second, a longer-term follow-up study found no differences between Academy and non-Academy students in terms of high school completion. We note, however, that high school completion in the later study included both receiving a high school diploma and obtaining a GED.

Though there have been many different high school reform models over the years, there is almost no rigorous evidence that reform high schools lower dropout rates. One exception to this pattern is Talent Development High Schools (TDHS), a reform model developed at Johns Hopkins University. TD high schools are reorganized into small learning communities that feature a curriculum designed to prepare all students for high-level English and math courses, along with measures to increase parent and community involvement in the school. There are now forty-three districts in fifteen states that use the TDHS model (Center for Social Organization of Schools). The added cost of educating students in a TDHS school is about \$350 per student per year (Institute for Education Sciences).

A research design that followed twenty cohorts of ninth graders for up to four years in Philadelphia found that 68 percent of the students in TDHS schools were promoted to tenth grade compared with 60 percent of the comparison group in non-TDHS schools (Kemple, Herlihy & Smith). These findings should probably be viewed with some caution because they are based on a quasi-experimental research design.

An alternative approach to either dropout prevention "programs" or to discrete, redesigned high schools is a more systemic approach that gets carried out at the district level. One example of this approach is the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation in the New York City Department of Education. In 2007-2008 this office oversaw 30 "transfer high schools" that served approximately 9,000 students and 22 "Young Adult Borough Centers" (YABC's) that served another 5,500 students. The "transfer high schools" are designed for students who are "over-age and under-credited or have dropped out of school," while the YABC's are organized around evening academic programs for students "who might be considering dropping out because they are behind or because they have adult responsibilities that make attending school in the daytime difficult." YABC students who earn all of the required credits and pass all required exams are subsequently rewarded a high school diploma from their regular high school.

New York's transfer high schools and YACB's try to address drop out risk factors that are difficult for more traditional high schools to address. Not only do these schools try to offer a more individualized and personable education experience, they also tend to offer flexible course scheduling and/or non-traditional school hours along with more support programs for students such as child care for teen parents. A distinguishing feature of the New York system is that the "transfer" high schools and YABC's are embedded in a

district-wide, systemic effort to address the dropout problem, an effort overseen by the district-level Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation. The effectiveness of such systemic efforts in lowering dropout rates has not yet been evaluated.

Summary

Putting the evidence together suggests that successful dropout prevention programs have at least some of the following five elements in common:

1. Close mentoring and monitoring of students
2. Case management of individual students
3. Family outreach
4. Curricular reform toward either a career-oriented or experiential approach, or alternatively, an emphasis on improving proficiency in the core subjects of math and English
5. Attention to a student's out-of-school problems

In terms of costs, the relatively high costs to society associated with each student dropout suggest that all of the successful programs cited in this brief would pass a societal cost-benefit analysis if we could accurately identify the students who would benefit from a dropout prevention intervention. This turns out to be a nontrivial issue since even the best dropout predictors will place students in programs who do not need the intervention, while at the same time missing students who could benefit from the programs.

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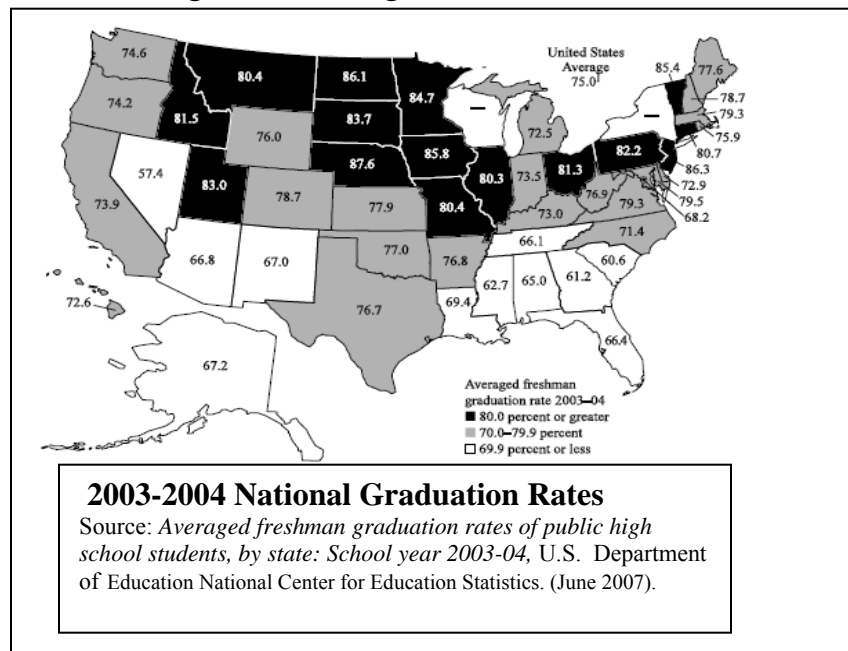
Brief 3: Meeting Five Critical Challenges of High School Reform, Lessons from Research on Three Reform Models⁴

Janet Quint
MRDC

High school reform has moved to the top of the education policy agenda, commanding the attention of the federal government, governors, urban school superintendents,

philanthropists, and the general public. All are alarmed by stubbornly high dropout rates, by the low academic achievement of many high school students, and by the large numbers of high school graduates who are required to take remedial classes in college. These trends disproportionately affect urban and certain rural areas and minority groups:

The most troubled high schools are concentrated in about 50 large cities and 15 primarily southern and southwestern states, and the majority of their students tend to be African-American or Hispanic.



This is the first in a series of reports summarizing and synthesizing what has been learned from rigorous and large-scale evaluations of high school reform initiatives. It discusses three comprehensive initiatives — Career Academies, First Things First, and Talent Development— that have grappled with the challenges of improving low-performing urban and rural schools. Together,

⁴Quint, Janet. 2006. *Meeting Five Critical Challenges of High School Reform: Lessons from Research on Three Reform Models*. New York: MDRC.

these three interventions are being implemented in more than 2,500 high schools across the country, and various components of these models are being used in thousands more schools. This report focuses almost exclusively on MDRC research, but subsequent reports will synthesize lessons from additional studies of high school reform conducted by MDRC and others. While aiming to be useful to researchers, this series of reports is directed primarily toward policymakers, practitioners, and others who must make hard choices about how to change high schools.

Each of the three programs that MDRC studied involved multiple components. (Table 1, which follows Challenge 1, briefly describes the programs and their evaluations.) Each program, too, featured a philosophy or theory of action that linked the various components into a coherent whole that program developers believed would be more than the sum of its parts, and the developers offered considerable technical assistance about how best to put the components in place. MDRC's evaluations of these programs built on rigorous research designs using comparison or control groups, and they provide unusually strong evidence about the interventions' effects on attendance, academic achievement, persistence in school through graduation, and postsecondary education and labor market outcomes. Importantly, these impacts reflect the combined effects of all the components, packaged in a particular way by the programs' developers. For districts and schools interested in replicating a comprehensive school reform, turning to one of MDRC's reports on these models would be a good first step.

Some policymakers and practitioners, however, may not want to join forces with a multicomponent comprehensive school reform model like the ones that MDRC studied; instead, they seek informed advice about how to fill in the missing pieces in their current reform strategies. For them, this report takes a different path. It discusses five major challenges associated with low-performing high schools and offers lessons addressing each. Looking inside the "black box" of the three comprehensive reforms, the report seeks to draw reasoned conclusions about which particular aspects of the reforms made them effective (or, in some cases, proved ineffective). It tries to link particular outcomes to particular inputs, using available evidence from MDRC's evaluations, including analysis of student records, teacher and student surveys, and field research, along with the program developers' own theories of change, where possible. At the same time, it acknowledges that each program may be more than the sum of its components and that conclusions about particular components of the initiatives can never be as solidly grounded as conclusions about the effects of the programs as a whole. Thus, while phrases like "appears

to” and “suggests that” are not completely satisfying, they remind readers that the lessons go beyond the bounds of what is known with confidence.

Because of these methodological issues, lessons in this report should be viewed as judgments, not facts. Almost all the judgments are grounded in evidence, although that evidence is thick in some cases, thinner in others. In a few instances, these lessons represent the assessments of the program developers or of researchers who have studied the programs for many years. In this Executive Summary, an effort has been made to give the reader a sense of the evidence on which each lesson is based; for further details, readers are referred to the body of the report.

Challenge 1

Creating a Personalized and Orderly Learning Environment

A positive school climate — where students and adults know each other well and where adults express care and concern for students’ well-being, intellectual growth, and educational success — is a key motivational element in the learning process for adolescents. But the large size of many low-performing high schools leaves many students, especially those who are less academically successful, feeling lost and anonymous and prevents the development of an atmosphere conducive to learning. This problem may be exacerbated for ninth-graders leaving behind the more family-like environment of middle school — a critical issue because students attending low-performing schools who do not complete ninth grade successfully and on schedule are at greatly heightened risk of dropping out altogether. The MDRC studies of the three reform models suggest that changes in the structure and functioning of large high schools can help remedy the impersonality of large high schools.

- **Student survey data suggest that small learning communities — groups of students who share the same cadres of core-subject teachers — make students feel known and cared about by their teachers.** Students in First Things First schools registered higher levels of perceived support from their teachers after the demonstration was implemented than they had before it was put in place, and Career Academy students reported higher levels of teacher support than members of a control group.
- **The experiences of First Things First in Kansas City, Kansas, and of Talent Development in Philadelphia indicate that both small learning communities that encompass all four grade levels and**

separate Freshman Academies followed by communities for upperclassmen can play a role in increasing attendance and reducing dropout rates. While feeling connected to teachers and classmates is only one factor that promotes attendance and persistence, both interventions, with their different small learning community structures, had positive effects on these outcomes.

- **The separate Freshman Academy structure may have played a key role in helping more ninth-graders succeed in the critical first year of high school.** Students in Talent Development’s Ninth Grade Success Academies received special attention from their teachers, and their rates of attendance and on-time promotion were higher than those of ninth-graders in comparison schools.
- **Faculty advisory systems can give students a sense that there is an adult in the school looking out for their well-being.** Almost three-quarters of First Things First students reported on surveys that their advisor was either “very important” or “sort of important” in giving them someone to talk to when needed, helping them do better on schoolwork, and recognizing their accomplishments. Training helped family advocates perform their roles more effectively.
- **Implementing small learning communities is not easy. School administrators and program operators report that scheduling classes to ensure that they contain only teachers and students within the same small learning community can present a major challenge.** This problem is especially marked for students in the upper grades, who may want to take electives offered only by communities other than the one to which they belong.
- **Implementing small learning communities is likely to improve the climate of schools but will not, in and of itself, increase student achievement. It may help to do so, but the studies do not provide conclusive evidence on this point.** All three initiatives that were studied involved small learning communities. Talent Development improved eleventh-grade math and reading test scores for students where the intervention had been in place longest although other elements of the model undoubtedly also contributed to these results). By contrast, Career Academies had no effect on achievement, and First Things First was effective in boosting achievement only in the first district where it was implemented and in one school in a second district.

Table 1. Features of the Initiatives and Their Evaluations

Career Academies

Key Program Features

- “School-within-a-school” structure
- Integrated academic and occupational curriculum
- Employer partnerships providing career awareness activities and work internships

Study Design

- **Methodology:** Random assignment of eligible and interested students either to the Career Academy in their school or to the regular high school program
- **Evaluation period:** 1993-2006 (projected)
- **Sites evaluated:** Nine Career Academies in San Jose, Santa Ana, and Watsonville, California; Washington, DC; Miami Beach, Florida; Baltimore, Maryland; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Socorro, Texas
- **Student characteristics:** Race/ethnicity: 30% African-American, 56% Hispanic; family receiving welfare or food stamps: 24%; average baseline performance on state assessments: 39% at 24th percentile or lower in math, 35% at 24th percentile or lower in reading

First Things First

Key Program Features

- Four-year, theme-based small learning communities
- Family Advocate System (faculty advisory program)
- Instructional improvement efforts

Study Design

Methodology: Comparative interrupted time series analysis

- **Evaluation period:** 1999-2004
- **Sites evaluated:** Four high schools in Kansas City, Kansas; three high schools in Houston, Texas; one high school each in Greenville and Shaw, Mississippi, and in the Riverview Gardens School District, Missouri
- **Student characteristics:** Race/ethnicity: 46% African-American, 39% Hispanic; eligible for free/reduced-price lunch: 65%; average baseline performance on state assessments: 44% failing or in bottom two proficiency categories in math, 37% failing or in bottom two proficiency categories in reading

Talent Development

Key Program Features

- Ninth Grade Success Academy
- Career Academies for students in grades 10 through 12
- Extended block schedule
- Catch-up courses in reading and math for ninth-graders with low skills

Study Design

- **Methodology:** Comparative interrupted time series analysis
- **Evaluation period:** 1999-2004
- **Sites evaluated:** Five nonselective high schools in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- **Student characteristics:** Race/ethnicity: 75% African-American, 23% Hispanic; eligible for free/reduced-price lunch: 86%; average baseline performance on state assessments: 86% below basic level in math, 76% below basic level in reading

Challenge 2

Assisting Students Who Enter High School with Poor Academic Skills

Large numbers of students enter urban high schools poorly prepared for academic success. The Ninth Grade Success Academy — the centerpiece of the Talent Development model tackled the problem of low achievement among entering ninth-graders head-on through interconnected changes in scheduling and curricula and produced positive results for many students. The Talent Development experience suggests the following lessons:

- **A double-blocked class schedule is useful because it permits students to attempt and earn more credits per year than other scheduling arrangements.** In contrast to a traditional schedule (entailing daily 50-minute classes) or a single-blocked schedule (involving 80- or 90-minute classes meeting every other day), a double-blocked schedule calls for classes that meet daily for extended periods. Because double-blocked classes can cover in a single semester what would normally be a year's worth of material, students in Talent Development schools could earn four full course credits each term and eight credits each year, compared with the six or sometimes seven credits per year that students would receive in schools following a traditional schedule.
- **Semester-long, intensive “catch-up” courses that shore up ninth-grade students’ skills in reading and mathematics appear to help students succeed in the regular curriculum, with gains in credits earned being sustained over time.** The catch-up courses in Talent Development awarded elective credits and were designed to precede and prepare students for college preparatory classes in English and algebra. (The double-blocked schedule allowed the catch-up and regular classes to be sequenced in this way.) First-time ninth graders in the Talent Development schools were significantly more likely than their counterparts elsewhere to earn one or more credits in English and algebra. For these students, too, the intervention increased the total number of credits earned in the first three years of high school.
- **The structured curriculum of catch-up courses, combined with longer class periods, may have helped ensure that students spent more time “on task” in these classes.** More time in the classroom may not in itself be enough to improve student achievement; what appears to

matter is that the extra time be used to maximize learning. Most First Things First schools made substantial progress in implementing longer English and math class periods. However, no special curricula were in place during the period under study (a situation that First Things First has subsequently addressed), and most expansion-site schools did not register increases in student achievement.

- **Little is known about how best to assist and prevent dropping out among those students who struggle the most in ninth grade.** While Talent Development increased the rate of promotion to tenth grade, those students in Talent Development schools who were required to repeat a full year of ninth grade were more likely to drop out of high school than their counterparts in other schools. Different grouping arrangements and modes of instruction may be needed for such students.

Challenge 3

Improving Instructional Content and Practice

Teachers in schools serving disadvantaged populations are often less experienced and less knowledgeable about the subjects they teach than teachers in more affluent communities. The high school reforms that MDRC studied have addressed questions about how to improve the content and delivery of what is taught through the use of new curricula and through professional development. While only limited data are available linking instructional improvement efforts to changes in student outcomes, the experiences of the program developers and of the participating schools and teachers suggest a number of operational lessons about putting instructional improvement efforts in place.

- **It may not be realistic to expect teachers to create their own curricula reflecting the themes of their small learning communities; instead, they are likely to benefit from well-designed curricula and lesson plans that have already been developed.** First Things First's developers expected teachers to integrate the theme of their small learning communities into their classes, but teachers said that they had neither time nor training to do this, and field research observations and interviews indicate that thematic instruction was uncommon. Similarly, teachers of academic subjects in the Career

Academies generally followed the standard curriculum, rather than creating lessons that reflected their Academy's occupational focus.

- **Good advance training and ongoing coaching can help teachers make better use of even well-designed curricula.** Teachers in Talent Development schools who received training on teaching the catch-up courses reported that the training had helped them deliver their lessons more effectively.
- **There is suggestive evidence that student achievement may be enhanced by professional development activities that involve teachers working together to align curricula with standards, review assignments for rigor, and discuss ways of making classroom activities more engaging.** The expansion-site high school that the First Things First developer and researchers agreed had made the most progress in developing “professional learning communities” of teachers — who met regularly to discuss pedagogy — showed positive impacts on reading achievement.
- **Both academic departments and small learning communities should be regarded as key venues for instructional improvement.** First Things First developers initially sought to focus instructional improvement efforts on the small learning community. But they came to realize that while the small learning community is an appropriate setting for professional development directed toward improving pedagogical methods, teachers look to other department members as repositories of content expertise and, therefore, that departments should be incorporated into initiatives to improve instructional quality.
- **If administrators want teachers' meetings to focus on instructional improvement, they must both provide guidance about how to do this and follow up to ensure that meeting time is used productively.** Researchers' observations of teachers' meetings in small learning communities revealed that without specific direction about how to spend their time together, teachers talked mostly about matters unrelated to instruction (such as discipline issues, individual students' personal or academic problems, or planned small learning community field trips or parties). When administrators issued guidelines specifying that meetings were to focus on instruction — and when they sat in on these meetings — discussion centered instead on pedagogical concerns.

Challenge 4

Preparing Students for the World Beyond High School

Students in low-performing schools need special assistance in preparing for postsecondary education and for better-paying jobs. Among the initiatives considered in this report, Career Academies are most clearly oriented toward the goal of helping students prepare for a productive future after they leave high school. Both Talent Development and First Things First seek to improve academic achievement and graduation rates — which presumably would increase opportunities for students in the labor market and in postsecondary education — but neither has a strong postsecondary thrust, nor did the MDRC studies follow students beyond high school. The Career Academies study, which has the advantage of long-term follow-up, suggests the following lessons:

- **Earnings impacts for young men in Career Academies appear to be linked to career awareness activities and work internships during high school.** Young men in the Career Academies group earned over \$10,000 more than members of a control group over the four-year period following their high school graduation. Participation in career awareness sessions and work internships most clearly distinguished the high school experiences of Career Academy students from those of their counterparts who were not in the Academies.
- **The potential benefits of partnerships between high schools and employers can be more fully realized when these partnerships are more structured and when schools can designate a full-time, nonteaching staff person to serve as a liaison with employers.** Students in Career Academies with more structured partnerships and with full-time liaisons reported higher levels of participation in career awareness and work-based learning activities than did students in Academies where arrangements were less formal and where liaisons also had teaching responsibilities.
- **It may be necessary to improve the academic component of Career Academies in order to raise students' achievement on standardized tests and help them secure admission to college.** Students in the Career Academies did not have higher academic achievement or graduate from high school at higher rates than their non-Academy counterparts, nor were they more likely to enroll in college or earn a

credential. Field researchers found that core-subject courses in the Academies were very similar to courses in the rest of the school.

Challenge 5

Stimulating Change

Introducing change into high schools and making it stick goes beyond the discrete challenges discussed above. The following implementation lessons primarily reflect the perceptions and judgments of program developers and researchers. The lessons are likely to apply not only to ambitious and large-scale reforms like the ones studied here but also to less far-reaching efforts to introduce change into overstressed high schools.

- **Creating effective change demands an investment of personnel resources.** Whether personnel come from inside or outside a school or district, they must be skilled in designing reforms, putting them in place, and monitoring ongoing operations.
- **In deciding whether to adopt a comprehensive reform model or add new components to existing programs, school and district administrators should consider the adequacy of what is already in place and the capacity of local personnel to envision and implement change.** The fewer the reform elements already in place and the more limited the capacity of local staff, the more sense it may make for administrators to turn for assistance to the developers of comprehensive models.
- **Strong support of the initiative by the school district helps to ensure effective implementation and the reform's continuing existence.** The contrasting experiences of First Things First in Kansas City, Kansas, and of Talent Development in Philadelphia exemplify this point. In Kansas City, the central office leadership both exerted pressure on the schools to operate in conformity with First Things First guidelines and supported the schools' efforts to do so; close and consistent monitoring was a hallmark of the district's efforts. While the School District of Philadelphia initially welcomed Talent Development, it never formally endorsed the initiative or gave it support, and some of its actions (for example, the introduction of a new standardized curriculum and reductions in funding) undercut the program model.

- **It is important for policymakers and administrators to avoid jumping from one reform to the next; instead, they should stay the course until initiatives have been put in place long enough and well enough for their effectiveness to receive a fair test.** Research has shown that comprehensive reforms in place for five years or more had stronger impacts than those with briefer periods of implementation. Extended research follow-up may also be important: In the Career Academies evaluation, for instance, the initiative’s substantial effects on postsecondary employment were evident four years after students’ scheduled graduation from high school.
- **It is important to have high ambitions but also reasonable expectations about the size of impacts that reforms can produce.** Careful evaluations of reform efforts seldom find large and dramatic effects. But even impacts that appear to be small can nonetheless be important. For example, Talent development’s 8 percentage point effect on the rate of promotion from ninth to tenth grade means that hundreds of freshmen in Talent Development schools did not have to repeat the year and were at much lower risk of dropping out of school altogether.

Conclusion

The larger lesson of this report may be that structural changes to improve personalization and instructional improvement are the twin pillars of high school reform. Small learning communities and faculty advisory systems can increase students’ feelings of connectedness to their teachers. Especially in interaction with one another, extended class periods, special catch-up courses, high-quality curricula, training on these curricula, and efforts to create professional learning communities can improve student achievement. Furthermore, school-employer partnerships that involve career awareness activities and work internships can help students attain higher earnings after high school.

A further message is that students who enter ninth grade facing substantial academic deficits can make good progress if initiatives single them out for special support. These supports include caring teachers and special courses designed to help entering ninth-graders acquire the content knowledge and learning skills that they missed out on in earlier grades.

Whether districts and schools adopt a comprehensive reform initiative like the ones MDRC studied or put together the elements of a comprehensive intervention on their own, much has been learned about what is needed — and

what seems to work. What remains is to make sure that practitioners have the support they need to put that learning into practice.

VIRGINIA COMMISSION ON YOUTH LEGISLATIVE STUDIES

Education Reports

The Commission on Youth has prepared six reports that treat some aspect of the truancy and delinquency prevention spectrum. The reports are listed below and may be accessed on the Commission's website: <http://coy.state.va.us> (click Reports).

- ❖ Interim Report of the Virginia Commission on Youth - Study of Alternative Education Options—Report Document 194 (2008)
- ❖ Guide to Local Alternative Education Options for Suspended and Expelled Students in the Commonwealth—Report Document 144 (2008)
- ❖ Student Discipline Statutes—House Document 32 (2001)
- ❖ Truants and Runaways—House Document 57 (1999)
- ❖ Truants and Runaways—House Document 64 (1998)
- ❖ Educational Needs of Homeless Children—House Document 52 (1998)

In addition, the Commission has prepared a PowerPoint slide presentation on Truancy and Dropout Prevention (June 2008). Parts of the slide presentation, also accessible from the Commission's website, are included in this briefing report.

Other recent truancy and school dropout studies were a product of SJR 329 (Locke, 2007) which requested that the Board of Education (BOE) study high school dropout and graduation rates in the Commonwealth. HB 19 (Fralin, 2006) required that the BOE collect, analyze and report high school graduation and dropout data using a formula prescribed by BOE. The formula that was selected by the BOE is recommended by the National Governors Association Task Force on State High School Graduation. HJR 130 (Hall, 2006) encourages

the Department of Education (DOE) to monitor and collect data and information on the State’s high school dropout and graduation rates.

Virginia’s Truancy Laws

- ❖ In Virginia, the law does not specifically define a truant but does define a child who is habitually and without justification absent from school as a "child in need of supervision" when certain other conditions are met.
- ❖ DOE is using a proxy measure to report truancy: the number of students with whom a conference was scheduled after the student had accumulated six absences during the school year, in accordance with §22.1-258, *Code of Virginia*.

Virginia Law by Section Number Related to Truancy	
§22.1-254	Compulsory Attendance Laws
§22.1-258	Appointment of Attendance Officers
§22.1-259	Teachers to Keep Daily Attendance Records
§22.1-260	Reports of Children Enrolled and Nonenrolled
§22.1-261	Duties of Attendance Officers
§22.1-262	Complaints to Court When Parents Fail to Comply
§22.1-263	Violations Constitute Misdemeanor
§22.1-265	Inducing Children to Absent Themselves
§22.1-266	Law Enforcement Officers and Truant Children
§22.1-267	Proceedings Against Habitually Absent Children
§22.1-269	Duties of the Board of Education
§22.1-279.3	Parental Responsibility and Involvement Requirements
§16.1-241.2	Proceedings Against Certain Parents

- ❖ §22.1-258 of the *Code of Virginia* addresses the responsibilities of the student, parent and school employees with respect to attendance, identification procedures and the provision of services as well as the imposition of sanctions in the event of noncompliance.

The primary element of §22.1-258 with respect to identification is that an “unexcused absence” is defined as one in which the parents are unaware and non-supportive of their child’s nonattendance.

Truancy and Related Terminology

The Terminology used in referring to children and youth who do not attend school regularly (Source: Virginia Department of Education, *Improving School Attendance, A Research Guide for Virginia Schools*, 2005.)

Truants	Defendant
Status Offenders	Member of an Assistant Unit
Children in Need of Supervision	Student, minor, child or juvenile

Issues Related to Truancy

- **Chronic truancy and school dropout rates continue to be critical problems nationally and in the Commonwealth.**
- **In certain areas of the Commonwealth, dropout rates exceed the annual state and national dropout rates.**
- **Truancy affects students of all ages, communities, backgrounds and school divisions.**
- **Data reveal that a disproportionate number of poor, urban and minority youth drop out of school each year, and that factors associated with school dropout are also linked to chronic truancy.**
- **Unexcused absences from school are linked to numerous harmful social and personal consequences, among them are:**
 - **Academic failure, school dropout rates, crime and violence, unemployment, substance abuse, adult criminality and incarceration, unwanted pregnancy and social isolation.**
- **The gap between dropouts and high school graduates is widening as opportunities are increasing for higher skilled workers and are disappearing for the less skilled.**
- **Declining graduation rates threaten Virginia's economic stability to maintain a competitive advantage among industrialized nations.**

Recent Commission Activities Pertaining to Truancy and Dropout Prevention:

Youth Roundtables

- The Virginia Commission on Youth conducted youth roundtables throughout Virginia in partnership with the Virginia Boys and Girls Clubs.
- Over 70 students participated
- Over 20 youth-related community leaders were present, including:
 - State Senators, Delegates, School Superintendents, Ministers, Police Officers, Youth Leaders, Local Officials and Local Service Providers.

Site Visits

The Virginia Commission on Youth scheduled site visits with local schools, school superintendents, departments of social services, court services units, J&DR judges, law enforcement and community organizations.

Location	Date
Danville	May 20, 2008
Hampton	May 27, 2008
Manassas	June 4, 2008
Norfolk	June 5, 2008
Richmond	TBA
Petersburg	TBA
Roanoke	TBA

Roundtable Questions

- What are some of the positive aspects of growing up in your area?
- Why do you think it is important to graduate from high school?

- What do you believe is the reason that some of your classmates skip school – don't attend school or drop out of school?
- What are some of the challenges that you face as teenagers that make completing school difficult?
- What could the school system or the community do to encourage students to graduate from high school?
- What do students need to succeed?

Youth-Identified Factors Leading to Truancy and Dropping Out of School

- Lack of motivation
- Family problems at home
- Gang violence
- Drug abuse
- Bullying
- Negative peer pressure
- Teenage pregnancy
- Stress and anxiety
- Boredom

Youth-Identified Obstacles to Staying in School

- Support from family
- Peer pressure
- Lack of empathy from school administrators
- Lack of additional teacher support (tests, personal)
- Culture
- Parent's denial of student behavior
- Overcoming low self-esteem

Youth-Identified Resources that Help Keep Kids in School

- After school activities and centers
- Older teenagers as mentors
- Positive community leaders
- Youth counselors

- Family court (in some states)
- Imposing mandatory GPAs to participate in sports

Youth-Identified Steps to Curb Truancy and School Dropout

- Anonymous peer counselors
- Additional tutoring for standardized tests
- Programs to improve low self-esteem
- Change the image of attending school
- After school jobs
- Additional information on trade schools and careers
- Teacher training
- Improved school security
- Stiffer penalties for chronic truants (family court)

Commission on Youth Site Visits

- Site visit interviews scheduled with local school division representatives, school superintendents, principals, guidance counselors, attendance officers, J&D judges, court service unit officials, social service officials and sheriffs.
- **Site visits to date:**
 - Hampton City
 - Manassas/Prince William
 - Lee County - completed
 - Roanoke City
- **Initial Findings from Site Visits**
 - Issues confronting school divisions impacting truancy/dropout rates are varied.
 - Prescription drug abuse
 - Teen pregnancy
 - Substance abuse
 - Factory work/hours impact families' ability to respond to truancy

- Transient population
- Generational issue
- Diverse student body within school divisions
- Assortment of school division policies and procedures pertaining to truancy
- Some school divisions utilize Juvenile & Domestic Relations Court whereas others do not.
- Several localities have truancy courts.
- Collaboration with law enforcement is crucial.
- Family Assessment and Planning Team (FAPT) referrals typically utilized only for Special Education students.
- Some school divisions had a more comprehensive approach encompassing both prevention and intervention practices.
- Lack of leadership/collaboration
- Alternative schools are being used with success.

The Virginia Department of Education's Dropout Prevention Project Leadership Committee had its first meeting on June 24, 2008 during which the dropout issue was defined, the cost of dropouts (educational, social and economic) was discussed along with contributing factors and prevention measures. A second meeting was held September 23, 2008. **VDOE will host the *first statewide summit on dropout prevention in Richmond, VA on October 28, 2008.***

ABSTRACTS OF SELECTED RESEARCH ON TRUANTS AND DROPUTS

Introduction

This section presents brief summaries of published research that focuses on truancy and dropouts. We have organized these summaries by level of education that they address with the first being preschool and early education, followed by elementary school, middle school and high school. They are further divided by focus on the family, individual, school or community. In a few cases, a study is mentioned more than once when the researchers' work addresses more than one level, or issue.

Research that Focuses on Preschool/ Early Childhood Education

A 2000 report by Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, and Carlson examined longitudinal data on children's academic experiences from birth through age 19. One of their key findings was that dropping out of high school is a process and not a one-time event. The authors noted that race, socioeconomic status, and gender are significant predictors of HS drop out (specifically, Black, poor, male are at greater risk). However, this study also established the importance of early childhood experiences as being influential for later dropout risk, suggesting that dropout prevention must begin before children enter school.

Currie (2001) analyzed several randomized studies regarding Head Start programs and their effects on children's later performance in school. Head Start was shown to have short term effects on school-readiness and performance, but results were mixed about its long term impacts. The studies reviewed did demonstrate a decrease in grade retention, however, which has been correlated to future dropout. Head Start was also shown to be effective in improving educational outcomes for children from "disadvantaged" backgrounds, which is also related to higher dropout rates.

Temple, Reynolds and Miedel (2000) examined the impact of 20 sites of a community-based early education program in Chicago had on subsequent high school dropout rates. The authors found that for children who had participated in the program prior to starting school, there was a 24% reduction in school dropout. Similarly, those youth that participated for longer times (until third grade in some instances) were found to be 27% less likely to drop out of school, when compared to those who stopped before kindergarten.

In a related study, Reynolds, Temple, Robertson and Mann (2001) found that children who participated in community based early childhood interventions

had higher graduation rates, lower arrest rates and lower dropout rates when compared to children who did not participate in such programs. Additionally, the children that participated in the preschool interventions were less likely to be retained in any grade, and less likely to be referred to special education. Both of these factors have been associated with increased dropout rates.

Studies that identify individual and family factors associated with the relationship between preschool programs and school dropout:

Hammond, Linton, Smink, and Drew (2007) reported a number of family-related factors that impact the likelihood that a student drops out of school. These family dynamics may be singularly influential, or occur all together. Although these factors are being mentioned with the early childhood section, they often persist throughout high school. Consistent with other research, low socioeconomic status remains a key predictor of academic problems for children. Other concerns raised by Hammond, et al include frequent moves (resulting in high mobility and school transfers); parent's education level, and perceived value of education; large families, including other family members who have dropped out of school (parent or sibling); out of home placements ,such as foster care or kinship care, and the family's engagement with the school system.

The Hammond, et al study (2007) also identified individual (student) characteristics that are correlated with an increased risk of dropping out of school. Similarly, these issues also may be present across the academic life of a student, some manifesting as early as preschool, or in some instances, not appearing until high school. Specific individual characteristics include learning disabilities, negative attitudes and values regarding school, poor attendance, a lack of engagement in school activities, subpar academic performance, and home responsibilities such as a pregnancy, working, or an assumed caregiver role.

Research that Focuses on Children in Elementary School

In one of the earliest studies in this area, Simner and Barnes (1991) found that children who were unable to master first-grade reading and mathematics were more likely to drop out of high school, or have significant academic problems than students who performed better in the 1st grade.

Subsequently, a longitudinal study about the antecedents to school dropout that followed a cohort of first grade students over 14 years, Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey (1997) identified factors of the first grade students that may predict late high school dropout. They divided these characteristics into two categories: “personal resources” and school resources. The personal resources such as behaviors and attitudes could be either a risk or protective factor, but remained influential to the student’s progress over the course of the study. School experiences include grades, test scores and being “tracked,” and are similarly risk or protective factors. The authors suggest treating dropout prevention as a “life course” process.

Alexander et al (1997) also were able to show that family factors, including parents’ attitudes and behaviors about school, family stressors, and parents’ own socialization habits had a greater impact than other previously identified “risk factors” for school dropout such as socioeconomic status, or family composition.

Research that Focuses on Children in Middle School

In a study of truancy among 8th and 10th graders, Henry (2007) identified several key predictors of truant behavior, including parent’s education, and a lack of supervision by parents or a responsible adult. Henry (2007) also noted that student variables such as low grades, low aspirations and general disengagement from school led to truancy for the students in his sample. Truancy has been linked to subsequent school dropout.

Balfanz, Herzog and MacIver (2007) also noted that detachment from school frequently begins in the middle school years. High absenteeism (usually truant behaviors), academic failure, and other behavioral problems can often predict the beginning of the disengagement from school.

In the Henry study (2007), as middle school students begin to disengage from school through truant behaviors, they often become involved with substance use and other delinquent behaviors with their peers. These behaviors often accelerate the dropping out process.

Research that Focuses on High School Youth

In an early study of this age group, Rumberger and Larson (1998) found that the family-level concerns addressed in the early childhood and elementary school years typically carry over to the middle and high school years. Of particular

importance in their study, however, was a finding that high mobility (frequent moving) for high school students doubles their risk of dropping out, when compared to students who have not moved.

In one of the most recently published longitudinal studies, the Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study-PELS, Nield, Stoner-Eby and Furstenberg (2008) reported on a cohort of ninth-grade students that was followed over four years. A key finding of this study was that the transition to high school (usually 9th grade) was pivotal in influencing the decision to drop out. The author's recommended that schools place more emphasis on this transitional period to reduce dropouts.

Hammond, et al (2007) reported findings similar to the above, and while they noted that the dropout process begins early in one's academic career, they identified specific student-level predictors of dropping out that manifest during the high school years. These included pregnancy or becoming a father, financial need to work and other home responsibilities. However, academic and behavioral performances remained influential on the decision to drop out.

Henry and Huizinga (2007) found that academic performance and friendship with delinquent peers were strong predictors of truancy, but doing well academically could mitigate the effects of delinquent peers.

Stearns and Glennie (2006) found that one of the reasons that high school students dropped out of high school was for family responsibilities, which was often the result of a teen pregnancy, or to care for another family member already in the home. These responsibilities may also lead the student to choose employment over school.

In the Stearns and Glennie's (2006) study of teen dropouts, the authors found that while teens leave school for varied reasons (most often poor academic progress, discipline or to work), the highest dropout rate was found among 9th grade students.

Bridgeland, DiIulio and Morison (2006) interviewed adolescents and young adults (16-25) from various parts of the country who dropped out of high school. The authors found that while there was not consensus as to why students dropped out, two oft cited reasons included poor academic performance, and concerns about meeting new testing standards. Most students who dropped out admitted to later regretting that decision.

Jimerson, Anderson & Whipple (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of 17 studies on high school dropout. Each of the studies showed an association with grade retention and subsequent dropout, and in several studies, retention was found to be the strongest predictor of high school dropout.

Rumberger and Larson (1998) also noted that changing schools was often a function of the student's discipline problems. Suspensions and expulsions, along with truancy and other misbehavior were found to be strong predictors of high school dropout.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS RELATED TO PUBLIC EDUCATION IN VIRGINIA

<http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Parents/glossary.html>

Standards of Quality (SOQ) - The Standards of Quality prescribe the minimum program that all public school divisions in Virginia must meet. The Standards are established in the Constitution of Virginia (Article VIII, § 2) and defined in the Code of Virginia (§§22.1-253.13:1 through 22.1-253.13:8). The Board of Education prescribes the Standards of Quality, subject to revision only by the General Assembly. A major portion of state funding for direct aid to public education is based on the Standards of Quality.

The Standards of Quality address basic skills, programs, and personnel; support services; accreditation and assessment; graduation requirements; training and professional development; planning and public involvement; policy manual; and compliance and enforcement.

Standards of Accreditation (SOA) - As authorized in the SOQ (§22.1-253.13:3 of the Code of Virginia), the Standards of Accreditation are the Board of Education's regulations that establish criteria for approving public schools in Virginia.

Standards of Learning (SOL) - As specified by the SOQ (§22.1-253.13:1 of the Code of Virginia), the Standards of Learning are the minimum grade level and subject matter educational objectives that students are expected to meet in Virginia public schools. The educational objectives describe the knowledge and skills "necessary for success in school and for preparation for life."

TERMS RELATING TO SCHOOL FINANCE

Direct Aid - Direct aid to public education - funding appropriated for the operation of the Commonwealth's public schools - is generally divided among categorical payments, funding for school employee benefits, funding of the Standards of Quality, incentive-based programs, allotment of sales tax and lottery revenues, and specific appropriations for programs such as Governor's Schools and adult literacy initiatives. Both state and federal funds are appropriated in direct aid. All lottery proceeds are earmarked for public education.

State Funding Formula - Through the commonwealth's direct aid to public education budget, Virginia provides funding for 136 public school divisions that serve approximately 1.1 million students. General fund support for direct aid to public education totals approximately \$8.0 billion over the 2000-2002

biennium, which equals approximately 32 percent of the state's general fund budget.

The three types of education programs funded in Virginia are:

- Standards of Quality (SOQ)
- Incentive-Based Programs
- Categorical Programs

SOQ funding is prescribed by statute and includes basic aid, special education, vocational education, remedial education, gifted education, and related fringe benefits for each of these programs. It also includes the one-cent state sales tax dedicated to public education.

Incentive-based programs provide additional education funding that goes beyond the levels required to meet the Standards of Quality. The programs are voluntary but, in order to receive state funds, school divisions must certify that they will offer the program and provide a local match of funds for the program. Incentive-based programs include the following: at-risk, primary class size reduction, at-risk four-year-olds, early reading intervention, maintenance supplements, and distribution of lottery profits.

Categorical funding also provides for additional education programs that go beyond the Standards of Quality.

These programs focus on particular needs of special populations or fulfill particular state obligations. State or federal statutes and regulations mandate much of this funding.

Examples of categorical funding include alternative education, funding for limited-English proficient students, school nutrition, adult education, and various regional programs such as Project discovery.

Average Daily Membership (ADM)

- The average daily membership for grades K-12 is the enrollment figure used to distribute state per pupil funding. It includes students with disabilities ages 5-21, and students for whom English is a second language who entered school for the first time after reaching their 12th birthday, and who have not reached their 22nd birthday. Preschool and post-graduate students are not included in ADM.

Composite Index - Article VIII, § 2 of the Constitution of Virginia authorizes the General Assembly to determine the cost of education as prescribed by the Standards of Quality and to apportion those costs between the state and local governments. Local governments are required to pay their respective shares of this prescribed cost from local taxes and other sources of local revenue. The composite index of local ability-to-

pay is the measure used to determine the state and local shares of education costs, and it is based on local sources of revenue.

The composite index is expressed as a ratio, indicating the local percentage share of the cost of education programs. For example, if a given locality has a composite index of 0.5000, then it would pay 50 percent of the costs and the state would pay 50 percent of the costs for the applicable program. If a locality's index is 0.3000, then it must pay 30 percent of the cost of education and the state will pay 70 percent.

Linear Weighted Average - The linear weighted average is a calculation that approximates what most school divisions spend to operate their schools. The formula incorporates the costs for every school division, but is not unduly influenced by divisions with unusually high or low expenditures. The formula weights division costs at the median at five and the most extreme costs (high and low) at one. It is used to establish the funded cost of many components of the Standards of Quality, such as instructional salaries.

Literary Fund - The Literary Fund is established in the Constitution of Virginia (Article

VIII, § 8) as a permanent and perpetual school fund. The Literary Fund provides low-interest loans to school divisions for capital expenditures, such as construction of new buildings, or remodeling of existing buildings.

TERMS RELATED TO SPECIAL EDUCATION

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) - Federal law has guided the delivery of special education services for students with disabilities since enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P. L. 94-142) in 1975. The law pledged the availability of federal funding for states to provide a "free and appropriate public education" for every school-age child with a disability. Renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990, and reauthorized in 1997, the act emphasizes quality teaching, learning, and the establishment of high expectations for disabled children. The IDEA also strengthened the role of parents in the educational planning process, endorsed meaningful access to the general curriculum, and delineated how school disciplinary rules and the obligation to provide a free appropriate public education for disabled children fit together. The IDEA also reduced the burden of unnecessary paperwork for teachers and school administrators. The final

IDEA regulations were adopted on March 12, 1999.

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) - The requirement to provide a “free and appropriate public education” is the premise of IDEA. It must be provided at public expense, under public supervision, at no charge to the parents, and must be based on the child's unique needs and not on the child's disability. FAPE must align with a state’s educational standards and must be provided for children beginning at age three and continuing until the student has reached the age of 22. FAPE must also be provided pursuant to an individualized education program (IEP) or an individualized family service plan (IFSP).

Individualized Education Program (IEP) - The Individualized Education Program is a written document articulating a pupil’s present educational level, specific services to be provided, behavioral interventions to be employed, language and communication needs of the child, and the child's need for assistive technology. The IEP also sets out goals to be attained and specifies how the goals will be evaluated. The IEP must focus on ensuring, to the greatest extent possible,

student access to the general curriculum.

Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) - The Individualized Family Service Plan is a written document articulating the procedure necessary to support the transition of a child to preschool services, or other services that may be available, to the extent that they are appropriate.

Individualized Education Program Team (IEP Team) - The IEP team is charged with developing, reviewing, and revising the student’s IEP. The team consists of the parent(s), the child (if appropriate), a regular education teacher, a special education teacher, an administrator qualified to supervise the provision of services, and an individual who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results. Other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child may also participate as a member of the team.

TERMS RELATING TO GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

Standard Unit of Credit - A standard unit of credits based on a minimum of 140 clock hours of instruction and successful completion of the requirements of the course.

Verified Unit of Credit - A verified unit of credit is based on a standard unit of credit, plus a passing score on

the end-of-course SOL test or substitute test approved by the Board of Education.

OTHER TERMS RELATING TO EDUCATION

Best Practice Centers - The Best Practice Centers work directly with school divisions to help them meet the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) and the Standards of Accreditation (SOA). Eight Regional Centers are currently in operation, and are located in Chesterfield, Newport News, Bowling Green, Winchester, Harrisonburg, Chatham, Marion, and Farmville. Each center serves 15 to 20 school divisions, or approximately 250 schools.

Curriculum - A plan or document that a school or school system uses to define what a teacher will teach and describes the methods that will be used to teach the students and assess their achievement.

Curriculum Alignment - Curriculum alignment occurs when what is taught includes or exceeds the content defined by the SOL.

Dropout – Generally, leaving school prior to graduation, including those who later earn the GED. Virginia Code addresses

dropouts, but does not offer a specific definition.

English as a Second Language (ESL) - The teaching of English to speakers of other languages through a wide variety of methods.

Graduation Rate - a standard four-year, adjusted cohort graduation rate using the following formula:
graduation rate = [on-time graduates in year x] / [(first-time entering ninth graders in year x-4) + (transfers in) – (transfers out)].

Limited-English Proficient (LEP) - Students whose first language is not English and whose English language skills are not equal to those of their peer group.

SOL Curriculum Frameworks (Teacher Resource Guides) - The resource guides for mathematics, science, English, and history and social sciences delineate essential knowledge, skills, and processes required by the Standards of Learning. Copies can be found at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Instruction/solscope/>

SOL Training Initiative - The 2000 session of the Virginia General Assembly provided \$33.9 million for continued funding of the Standards of Learning (SOL) Teacher Training Initiative. The goal of this two-year effort is to ensure student success on

SOL tests for mathematics, science, English, and history and the social sciences.

Substitute Tests - The Board of Education has approved many tests to substitute for the SOL end-of-course tests for awarding verified credit for high school. These tests measure knowledge and skills that either meet or exceed the content of the SOL and meet other criteria established by the Board of Education. These tests include Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), SAT II, Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Advanced Placement International English Language (APIEL), College-Level **Examination** Program (CLEP), as well as a number of certifications and licensing examinations in career and technical fields. The list of approved tests is expected to be updated regularly, and can be found on the Department of Education's Web site at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Instruction/subassessment.pdf>

Computer/Technology Education - The Computer/Technology Standards for grades 5 and 8 identify technology skills for improving student learning through the integration of technology across the curriculum. Mastery of these

skills results in students who are both computer literate and competent in their application of technology in support of learning. In grades 9 through 12, technology is integrated across the curriculum.

Truancy – In Virginia, The law does not specifically define a truant but does define a child who is habitually and without justification absent from school as a “child in need of supervision” when certain other conditions are met. Related terms used in referring to truancy include status offenders, children in need of supervision, member of an assistant unit.

Truancy measurement – The Department of Education uses a proxy measure to report truancy: the number of students with whom a conference was scheduled after the student had accumulated six absences during the school year, in accordance with §22.1-258, *Code of Virginia*.

Virginia Preschool Initiative - The General Assembly initiative for at-risk four-year-olds provides state funds for comprehensive preschool programs for 60 percent of Virginia's at-risk four-year-olds not served by federal programs such as Head Start or Title 1. Funding is calculated at \$5,400 per eligible child, to be shared by the state and local governments based on the composite index of local ability-to-pay.

