"Dropout Prevention: History, Politics, and Policy"

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History

The issue of student attrition is not a new one but has existed alongside school attendance as a natural occurrence with some students. The notion of the "dropout" and the pejorative nature of the term is relatively new, having developed in the early 1960s in response to what was believed was a substantial increase in the number of students leaving high school before graduation (Dorn 1996). Initially, the term was the complement to high school graduation and referred to those without a high school diploma. Over time, however, it came to reflect societal views regarding dependency, delinquency, and the importance of the high school as a societal institution. Before "dropping out" could be labeled a problem, it was necessary that high school graduation be established as a norm in American society. The establishment of high school graduation as a norm was influenced by two major factors: the increased enrollment of students in school throughout the mid-half of the twentieth century and the evolving labor market during the same time period.

Expanding High Schools and Constricting Markets

Before 1900 only a very select population attended high school and even fewer graduated. Estimates based on the U.S. Bureau of Census records indicate that the number of graduates of public or private high schools in 1870 approximated only 2% of the population aged seventeen and just over 6% in 1900 (Tyack 1974). This reflected the general belief that high school was a selective institution reserved for those with the capital, social, and intellectual means to attend. It also reflected the character of the labor market at the time, a "time when few employers required their employees to be high school graduates, and when entry positions were abundant for youth with meager

schooling" (Tyack 1974, p.59). By mid-century a shift in the labor market had occurred. Driven by "technological changes in work, the availability of adult immigrant labor, (and) growing child-labor law enforcement" (Dorn 1996, p.17) adolescents had fewer opportunities for employment, the consequence being increased enrollment of students in school for increased lengths of time. More students attending high schools meant two things: as more attended school, more would graduate, and more graduates would lead to the increased reliance on the diploma as a credential for employment.

By 1940 almost 80% of those aged fourteen to seventeen were enrolled in school and just over 50% of youths aged seventeen had graduated from high school (Tyack 1974). Compared to the turn of the century these numbers demonstrate an explosion in the proportions of students attending and graduating from high school. One key effect of this substantial increase in the proportion of those graduating was the increase in reliance on the high school diploma as a "credential." As the number of graduates increased, employers increasingly used graduation as a method of screening potential employees as the substance and average length of a secondary education had come to entail more than the requirements of many jobs (Dorn 1996). This practice increased the value of a high school diploma and thus, provided adolescents with further incentive to remain in and graduate from high school. It was accompanied by a shift in the general expectation of high schools. James Bryant Conant expressed this expectation in his study of comprehensive high schools in the late 1950s: "with few exceptions…the public high school is expected to provide education for *all* the youth living in a town, city, or district" (1959a, p.7). By the beginning of the 1960s graduation had come to be seen as the norm and the idea of the "dropout" was soon to follow.

The "Dropout" Defined

        Although the modern day notion of the "dropout" evolved in the 1960s, early concerns about attrition existed throughout the beginning half of the twentieth century. This concern, however, is characterized by Dorn as "idiosyncratic and unfocused" (1996 p.51). Also influencing this generally unlinked concern was the enduring attitude that attrition was a natural product of a system that enrolled a majority of students: attrition was seen as unfortunate but was accepted as commonplace (Tyack 1974). Despite its acceptance, attrition was a concern and broad thinking about attrition focused more specifically on the link between the economy and schools.

        In the early twentieth century, child labor activists played an important role in the attrition debate. They saw school attendance as a key component in reducing child employment and activists "were the primary alternatives to educators in discussions of school attrition" (Dorn 1996, p. 60). The focus of activists, however, was not the graduation of students but the prevention of child labor. Therefore, their efforts focused on legislation limiting child labor and the enforcement of compulsory attendance laws. Another view of attrition came from the administrative progressives, whose ideas dominated the systems of schooling in the early and mid 1900s. In particular were ideas of vocational education and social efficiency. The administrative progressives believed that schools were to prepare students for the complex tasks that they would face in life, i.e. the workforce, and the loss of any students through attrition was a sign of inefficiency (Tyack 1974). The expansion of comprehensive high schools and the increased enrollment and graduation of students during the first half of the twentieth century

illustrate general successes of the administrative progressives in response to this view of attrition but on a wide scale, views about attrition, its causes, and its effects remained fractured.

The dominance of the dropout issue in the 1960s reflected the establishment of a shared value of the importance of high school graduation and the definition of the dropout issue as a social problem affecting individuals and society. By the 1960s there was widespread attendance in high schools and high schools had come to be seen as comprehensive, not selective, institutions (Conant 1959b). Graduation from these institutions had become a widely held social expectation and in fact, more students than ever were graduating from high school. In this context the high school dropout was receiving a great deal of attention: labeled as a source of delinquency, social dependency, and economic liability. Increased attention created the view that high school dropouts were accumulating en masse as "social dynamite" (Conant 1961, p.2) in American cities: "a youth who has dropped out of school and never has had a full-time job is not likely to become a constructive citizen of his community…as a frustrated individual he is likely to be antisocial and rebellious, and may well become a juvenile delinquent" (p.35). Conant's characterization went so far as to label dropouts as susceptible targets of communist indoctrination due to their discontent, frustration, and lack of employment and thus as threats to America's domestic security (1961). The National Education Association began a Project on School Dropouts in 1961, the rationale best espoused by the director of the project and editor of several books produced by the project, Daniel Schreiber: "the United States… cannot afford to have almost one million youths drop out each year only to become unwanted and unemployed" (1967, p.6). Sociologist Lucius

Cervantes was less reserved in his characterization of dropouts: "It is from this hard core of dropouts that a high proportion of the gangsters, hoodlums, drug addicted, government-dependent-prone, irresponsible and illegitimate parents of tomorrow will be predictably recruited" (1965, p.197).

<u>Intervention and Current Context</u>

Response to the perceived issue was limited both in its scope and the constraints of viewing the issue as a social problem. In comparison to the policies and social systems that encouraged students to leave, dropout prevention programs were just too small (Dorn 1996). Dropout prevention programs, by definition, could not address the issue: they were meant to serve a limited set of individuals not initiate change in the greater education system (Dorn, 2003). Perceived as potential delinquents on the path to unemployment and dependency, a majority of programs for dropouts focused on individual counseling and work preparation, certainly benefiting some participants in returning to school or entering the workforce better prepared but on a whole programs continued to ignore factors that were influencing *why* students were leaving school (Dorn, 2003). By the end of the 1960s many prevention programs had disappeared and although the phenomenon of dropping out had not, it receded from its position as the dominant issue in American education. This is powerfully illustrated by *A Nation at Risk*, considered a seminal report on the status of American education in the 1980s and a major influence in the push for reform, but which ignores the issue of school dropouts altogether.

In the current context of education the issue of dropouts has resurfaced as an issue of equality precariously situated alongside systems of accountability and standards based

reforms. The Educate America Act (2000) set highly ambitious goals for the year 2000 aiming to drastically reduce the nation's dropout rate and improve the graduation rate to 90%. Nine years later, we have seen neither and the concern remains. In a follow up piece to *A Nation at Risk* titled *A Nation Accountable,* the Department of Education identifies dropping out as a "remaining challenge" to the performance of our schools and the level of our global competitiveness (2008). Current reform efforts would suggest that the challenge will only increase: the development and imposition of challenging state academic standards and corresponding high-stakes performance assessments has made it more challenging for students to gain a diploma (Dorn 1996) while overall policy continues to ignore the *why* that leads students to dropout.

Policy Research

Today, about two-thirds of all students and approximately half of all Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans who begin ninth grade actually graduate with regular high school diplomas four years later (Orfield, 2004, p.1). Replete with substantial disparities across racial, ethnic, income and geographic areas, America is experiencing a high school drop out crisis that has been a long time coming ("Left behind", 2009). According to the Center for Labor Market Studies (2009), nearly 16% of youth between the ages of 16 and 24 left high school without a regular diploma by 2007, leaving young Black and Latino males most negatively affected. The effects of these high dropout rates are far, wide, and devastating to the social and economic vitality of our country (Orfield, 2004, p.1). Until recently little attention and resource have been given to this silent epidemic. In 2001, with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), Congress took an initial step in

recognizing the expanse of the dropout problem by including graduation rate accountability provisions. Prior to NCLB, graduation rates were not part of the formal accountability systems in most states. Nevertheless, as Orfield (2004) argues, "because of misleading and inaccurate reporting of dropout and graduation rates, the public remains largely unaware of this educational and civil rights issue" (p.1).

What we know:

> The reality today is that we are ignoring the issue because of misleading data, prejudice against poor and non white adolescents, and because there are no simple answers to these tough questions. But we are dealing with the devastating consequences of family destruction, community decline, and incredibly costly and largely unsuccessful intervention through the criminal justice system, without thinking about how to use some of those resources to instead change young people's lives for the better. (Orfield, 2004, p.2)

Since *A Nation at Risk*, the 1983 report that warned that "our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them," educators across the nation in city, state and federal have "unsuccessfully been trying to get a grip on the high school dropout problem" (Pascopella, 2007, p.32) in order to maintain or regain a competitive edge in the global market. As per a report from the Center for Labor Market Studies and the Alternative Schools Network (2009), "the absence of new funding at the federal and state level since the 1980s has led to decades of disinvestment in re-enrollment programs across the country (p.2). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 has initiated a new interest in graduation and drop out rates, in addition to academic assessments. As Christopher Swanson posits, NCLB has effected much debate over various issues including, graduation levels among particular student subgroups, such as

Blacks and Latinos; the ways states implement graduation rate accountability; and the best methods of measuring graduation rates (as edited by Orfield, 2004, p13).

Although NCLB has included a graduation rate reporting and an accountability provision in the law, neither have been seriously motivated or enforced. According to Daniel J. Losen, anecdotal evidence indicates how high test-score accountability, inadvertently creates a disincentive for schools to support low-scoring students. NCLB, actually incentivizes the "push out" phenomenon whereby schools subtly and sometimes not so subtly encourage low performing students to drop out in order to increase school test-scores and make adequate yearly progress (AYP) (as edited by Orfield, 2004, p. 42).

Losen argues that failure to enforce graduation rate accountability further incentivizes the push out strategy (as edited in Orfield 2004, 42). NCLB requires that test-score data be disaggregated by subgroups traditionally known to be disproportionately low achieving: racial and ethnic minorities, English-language learners, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families. Each subgroup must make AYP in order for the school to make AYP. Graduation rate accountability provisions were added to the law's definition of AYP to stem the push out of members of the subgroups above. However, the law does not require subgroup accountability for graduation rates, despite the fact that accountability for racial and ethnic subgroups was a fundamental focus of the law. Essentially, schools are not required to disaggregate the data to evaluate what groups are actually graduating. This gives schools freedom to do whatever is necessary to make AYP, even if it means leaving behind the very students that NCLB was created to support.

Losen finds that both state and federal graduation rate and accountability implementation have been inconsistent at best (as edited in Orfield, 2004, p.44). In fact, he argues that "the intersection of weak graduation accountability with strong test-score accountability could deepen the crisis" (Ibid). Where NCLB intended to curb the push out phenomenon and reduce the dropout rates, NCLB, itself, may be contributing to the problem. In fact, Losen adds that the federal and state governments have essentially thwarted NCLB's reporting and accountability in three ways:

1.   With federal approval, states have promoted standards for calculating graduation rates that violate the definition in the statute and yield inflated rates.

2.   The US Department of Education issued regulations that all but eliminated graduation rate accountability for major racial and ethnic groups and others.

3.   Most states have extremely weak graduation rate accountability schemes, yet all have won the approval of the Department of Education. (as edited in Orfield, 2004, p. 45)

Who does this affect?

We do not have an accurate number of how many students drop out of American high schools because states use varying methods to monitor the progress and graduation of their students. Until better systems of calculating dropout rates are created, we will use the calculation methods of two scholars that, according to Orfield, are flawed, yet useful for now. The first is the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI), used by Christopher Swanson of the Urban Institute, which calculates the probability that an entering 9th grader will graduate on time with a regular diploma and observes the high school graduation rate defined by NCLB. Rather than use dropout statistics, Swanson gathers information on enrollment and diploma counts from the Department of Education's

annual Common Core of Data (CCD). The CPI indicator only requires only two years of data collection, and a one-year window of observation, which makes it very useful for application in accountability systems. Swanson posits that the CPI indicator can be used by practically any school, since it does not require much data (as edited in Orfield, 2004 p.14). Robert Balfanz, of Johns Hopkins, offers another method of estimating graduation and dropout rates through what he calls the *promotion power* of a school. This involves tracking a graduating class from ninth to twelfth grade, which offers a straightforward way of detecting problems in a school or district (as edited in Orfield, 2004 p.6). Both the analyses of Balfanz and Swanson are recommended as yielding the most compelling dropout data for policy purposes.

Using the CPI indicator, it is clear that the dropout problem in the US disproportionately affects young, low-income, urban, Black, Latino and Native American male students. Swanson finds that the graduation rates for these minority groups hover just at or barely above 50%, with White and Asian groups at 75% and 77%, respectively. The most dramatic racial dropout gaps are in the Northeast, where less than one-third of Native American, 36% of Hispanic, and 44% of Black students can be expected to graduate from school (as edited in Orfield, 2004, p.24). Swanson's findings also indicate that females consistently outperform males from the same racial/ethnic group across the country. Interestingly, Swanson observes that the size of the racial gap for males and females decreases as it moves from the Northeast, to the Midwest, to the West, to the South. The CPI indicator also highlights that minority students fail to reach the nation's 66% graduation average both nationally and regionally. In each state, at least one minority group falls below the 66% average when the graduation rate is disaggregated (as

edited in Orfield, 2004, p.26). Only female and white students consistently meet the national graduation average both nationally and regionally. Swanson's data clearly indicates that the dropout crisis is an issue faced by every state and nearly all schools in the US; however, its concentration in some areas indicates that targeted interventions are merited. These numbers represent not only the individuals that miss out on the social and economic benefits of a high school diploma, but also the astounding social and economic costs of the dropout crisis to greater society. In the words of Gary Orfield (2004), "when an entire racial or ethnic group experiences consistently high dropout rates, these problems can deeply damage the community, its families, its social structure and its institutions" (p.2).

Social and Economic Implications

According to the American Youth Policy Forum report, *Whatever It Takes*, a student drops out every 9 seconds (as cited by Pascopella, 2007, p.32). One-third of students in public schools and approximately half of blacks and Hispanics fail to graduate. Bored, disengaged, or confused, these students leave school to find their way as parents or workers in an increasingly competitive global market armed without the most basic credential- a high school diploma. What happens to these youth when they leave?

Dropping out of high school is a dangerous decision for students. *The Silent Epidemic* (2006), a report by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, posits that "dropouts are much more likely that their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced and ultimately single parents with

children who drop out from high school themselves" (p.2). Data from this reports show

that on average, high school dropouts earn less than $9,200 less per year than high school

graduates and about $1 million less over a lifetime than college graduates. These young

people are also usually dependent on family social services as they are often unemployed

and unable to support themselves. Unemployed and unable to support themselves or their

families, a high percentage of dropouts turn to crime. Every day, about one in every 10

male dropouts is in jail or juvenile detention, compared with the one in 35 male graduates

in jail. For black male dropouts, the reality is worse. Nearly one in four male dropouts is

incarcerated or involved in the criminal justice system in some way, compared with one

in 14 male, white, Asian or Latino dropouts (Dillon, 2009, p.1). Females and

communities are also negatively affected by this tragic circumstance. The number of

unmarried young women has sharply increased in high dropout communities, partly

because of the high numbers of male dropouts who are jobless year round and leave or

bouncing in and out of the criminal justice system. This leaves whole communities

lacking –our future students included. Dropping out clearly leads to a very bleak future

for our youth and the future of our communities.

The pervasiveness of the dropout epidemic affects our communities and society at

large. High drop out rates negatively impact the nation's economy and economic

standing (High Cost, 2009, p1.). The Center for Labor Market Studies asserts that high

school dropouts between the ages of 18-64 are estimated to earn $400,000 less than those

who graduated from high school. Males in particular, stand to lose $485,000 and even

$500,000 is some large states. Moreover, the Alliance for Excellent Education calculates

that the US would save between $7.9 and $10.8 billion annually by improving the

education of recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, food stamps and housing assistance. They also find that the nation would save $4.9 billion in crime-related costs if we could reduce the male graduation rate by only 5 percent. Overall, dropouts are a tremendous loss of potential and productivity to the nation.

<u>Different Approaches</u>

There have been many approaches to reforming the traditional structure of large, non-selective neighborhood high schools. Some, like Chicago, have applied a "pipeline" approach which floods investment into early grades as a means of prevention. These strategies provide no direct intervention at the high school level, and have been found ineffective. Allensworth posits that:

> In Chicago, targeting reform resources to elementary grades, ending social promotion with an eighth-grade gateway exam, expanding summer school and other extra help structures, implementing high-stakes accountability and assessments for students, teachers, and administrators, and providing only general assistance to high schools did not lead to substantial improvements in the graduation rate (as cited in Orfield, 2004, 72).

Allensworth's message about Chicago is clear: we cannot deal with the dropout problem on one front. Prevention as well as intervention is required to combat the pervasive dropout problem.

Balfanz and Letger report that the US Department of Education currently funds two initiatives that financially support school reform efforts in high schools – barely. The Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) and the Small Learning Communities (SLC) grants program provide some aid to the country's most troubled schools. However, each only provides funding for three years, which prevents them to support a cohort through graduation (as edited in Orfield, 2004, p72).

There are three high school reform approaches that Robert Balfanz and Nettie E. Legters recommend: 1.) creation of small schools; 2.) creation of new medium-to large theme schools; and 3.) converting large high schools into multiple small learning communities that operate with varying amounts of autonomy within the larger school building (as edited in Orfield 73). Balfanz and Legters advocate for small schools of no more than 300 high school students to support students with energized faculty, more personalized attention and individual instruction to increase graduation rates. Balfanz and Legters acknowledge that this is not feasible and therefore recommend new medium to large school creation where small schools are not applicable. The two scholars recommend the large school conversion for schools that volunteer to do so. This should not be imposed by higher authorities. This model can be used to break through the "bureaucratic inertia and create smaller, more personalized and flexible learning environments" to help face the challenges. These three models are not the cure-all. Balfanz and Letger admit that "an exclusive emphasis on any one of these strategies will fall far short of resolving the nation's dropout crisis" (as edited in Orfield, 2004, 73). Rather, we should seek to "develop the capacity, know-how, and will to implement what is known to work in all the high schools in need" (as edited in Orfield, 2004, 75).

Contemporary Politics

One issue, many approaches

The exigency of the dropout epidemic has caused a number of groups to work towards devising a solution. Though all of these groups concede that the number of dropouts is a major problem, the means they each suggest to combat the problem are

largely idiosyncratic. These suggestions are based on different conceptions regarding the factors that have caused the dropout epidemic. Each organization's unique rationale has led to a different approach to dropout prevention. In some cases, one approach may compete with or be opposed by another approach. This section describes the ways that these various actors engage in dropout prevention.

Federal government

The Obama administration has launched a campaign to improve schools and the state of public education. Called Race to The Top (RTTT), the campaign offers millions of dollars of additional funding to states that are able to demonstrate significant progress in four key areas:

1) Designing and implementing rigorous standards and high-quality assessments,

2) Attracting and keeping great teachers and leaders in America's classrooms,

3) Supporting data systems that inform decisions and improve instruction, and

4) Using innovation and effective approaches to turn-around struggling schools (Gibbs, 2009).

The fourth component of RTTT provides incentives for states and school districts to quickly improve the 5000 worst performing schools. According to speeches given by Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, these schools create approximately half of the dropouts nationwide (Obama, 2009). The government's approach is undergirded by the idea that failing schools and inadequate infrastructure for schools and districts leads to students dropping out. Improving the supportive structure for schools and providing more incentives for improvement is theorized to lower the dropout rate nationwide.

Education sector

The education sector, comprised of individual high schools and teacher and guidance counselor training programs in colleges, has begun to address the dropout crisis as well. By preparing school staff to meet the needs of potential dropouts, these actors attend to what they believe to be the cause of students dropping out: poor or insufficient teacher and school staff training. For example, National University (2009) and Sacramento State College of Continuing Education (2009) now offer a Dropout Prevention Specialist certificate. These credentials are supposed to help staff catalyze school-wide change, deepen strategic partnerships and develop student referral networks (Ibid.). High schools have also begun to offer or acquire services to ameliorate the issue. Some individual schools allocate funding specifically for dropout prevention counselors and programs. Both are brought into schools and attend to the issues that often lead to students dropping out. According to a New York City public high school guidance counselor, in many cases, these needs include referrals for subsidized housing, mental health services and connection to government programs like WIC (Personal interview, 2009).

Nonprofit sector

Nonprofit organizations play a key role in dropout prevention. Their work typically takes two forms: direct service or advocacy. The former refers to organizations that facilitate school-based or after-school programs that help keep young people in school. The latter refers to organizations that lobby elected officials and policy makers to attend to the factors that lead to students dropping out of school. Both of these approaches are based on the idea that schools are insufficiently equipped to effectively

address the curricular and extracurricular needs of students. Some organizations use both approaches. One example is the Alternative Schools Network (ASN), a Chicago based group that supports provision of direct educational services to inner-city youth and adults in addition to advocating on their behalf. Alternatively, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) funds and facilitates the Back to School/Stay in School program, a direct service intervention that "enhances student success by reducing the absenteeism and dropout rate, providing a higher level of academic and cultural enrichment, increasing parental involvement and improving overall perceptions about public schools" (NAACP, 2009).

Think tanks

Spurred by the imperative to provide empirical data that proves the causes of the dropout epidemic, academic institutions like the Alliance for Excellent Education have joined the fray (2009). To achieve its goal of promoting "high school transformation to make it possible for every child to graduate prepared for postsecondary learning and success in life, (Ibid.)" the Alliance produces reports and press briefings using national and state-level data. Additionally, the Alliance convenes conferences and advocates for policies that will lead to reform of the high school education system and improve student academic achievement and attainment.

Philanthropies

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Wal-Mart Foundation, amongst others, have assumed prominent roles in the struggle to reduce the number of high school dropouts. These foundations have underwritten advertising campaigns that encourage young people to stay in school and school-based and after-school programs that provide

students and families with academic assistance and resources that help students persist in school. Generally speaking, philanthropies have identified insufficient capacity and overcrowded schools as the main causes of the dropout epidemic. Significant funding initiatives have focused remedying these issues (Miner, 2005).

Private sector

Functioning primarily as a source of funding, private corporations have also contributed to dropout prevention work. Private sector funding has supported organizations that provide school-based and after-school programs as well as coalitions like the America's Promise Alliance, a group of nonprofit organizations that convene symposia and conferences on dropout prevention and share "best practices" with schools and service providers nationwide.

Divergent thoughts and approaches

Each actor listed above brings a different approach to confronting the dropout epidemic. This variety of approaches is based on varying definitions of the problem and what each actor believes to be its root cause or causes. For example, some groups believe that the dropout epidemic is a product of certain factors external to education, like economic failures or social inequity. Thus different organizations, based on unique assumptions, take different approaches to combating the dropout epidemic. These approaches can be condensed into four categories:

1) Giving or getting more funding – Organizations and actors in this category typically advocate that in order to address the dropout epidemic, new staff or facilities must be retained, employees must be trained with new techniques and material, or that new programs must be funded. Members of this category include

some nonprofit organizations that advocate for increased funding for programs and training, the education sector and the private sector.

2) Increasing accountability – Proponents of this approach support the use of student tests and academic achievement as the primary metric for evaluating a school or district's performance. Accompanying the tests are strict rules regarding the amount of progress expected from teachers and school administrators. The school's administration is penalized if too many students fail the tests or if their academic achievement is below the established standards. This approach has become widely used since 2002, when accountability measures were incorporated into the No Child Left Behind Act. Because of the apparent conclusiveness of testing, some nonprofits support this perspective, as do governments (the federal government and states like New York and Texas).

3) Providing second chance programs – One of the most popular approaches to addressing students who have dropped out is implementing "second chance programs." These programs allow students who have fallen behind in school to recover credits or attend alternative schools that cater to students who are over-aged, compiled too few credits or have been involved with the criminal justice system. Another "second chance" option for students is the GED, a battery of tests that certify that the test taker has acquired the knowledge and skills provided in high school. This approach is favored by most of the actors described above; for example, New York City's Center for Economic Opportunity created the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (2009), which oversees programs and schools that work with over-age, under credited students.

4) Investing in the "educational pipeline" – Based on the premise that early

interventions in children's lives are more effective than later ones, this approach

focuses on providing the maximum amount of funding and attention to early

childhood development. This approach prioritizes investments in programs like

Head Start and elementary schools, but has come under fire in recent years for

yielding lackluster results (Besharov, 2005, Ravitch, 1998).

Coalitions

Two notable coalitions have developed to concert the work of the actors described

above. The oldest is the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N). It was

founded in 1986 as a means of aggregating and disseminating "best practices" in

reducing the number of high school dropouts. According to the organization's website,

the NDPC/N's mission is "to increase high school graduation rates through research and

evidenced-based solutions" (2009). In addition, the NDPC/N also conducts evaluations of

dropout prevention initiatives and maintains a searchable database of programs organized

by the initiative's effectiveness. Each initiative is rated on a four point scale (i.e.,

initiatives are rated either as a "1," "2," "3," or "4") that assesses three aspects: the

number of years the program has been in existence, the method of evaluation used by the

organization or initiative, and the empirical evidence demonstrating either the prevention

or reduction of dropouts or the improvement in graduation rates and/or significant impact

on dropout-related risk factors (2009).

The second coalition is the America's Promise Alliance. Comprised of over 300

partner organizations, the Alliance mobilizes people through its Dropout Prevention

Initiative. The America's Promise Alliance works to increase awareness about the issue,

organizes constituents into action, and acts as an advocate for children (2009). Through its work, the America's Promise Alliance promotes five factors it believes will improve students' lives: caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, an effective education and opportunities for others (Ibid.). The organization has also convened and sponsored hundreds of Dropout Summits, conferences that pull together educators, parents, community based organizations, elected officials and students to discuss and plan solutions for the dropout epidemic.

Political barriers

Despite the overwhelming evidence and increasing public awareness of its presence, the dropout epidemic is still a contentious topic. Two political barriers inhibit the work of many of the actors described above. The first obstacle is financial. The strategies noted above require significant and continuous funding. To support one initiative would necessarily decrease the resources available to support any of the others. This conundrum is most apparent in the marked lack of incentives that encourage or force change in schools and districts. The dropout rate is not something for which schools are held accountable and there are no penalties for having a high percentage of students leave a school. Likewise, there are virtually no rewards for schools that have low rates of students dropping out. Policies like No Child Left Behind do not account for the dropout rate in the school's evaluation (Orfield, 2004). The major and often sole determinant of a school's rating is student performance on standardized tests. With the possible exception of New York City's school survey (2009), virtually no attention is paid to student attrition or factors the affect it. Because of the strict focus on student testing results, there

is little incentive for schools to invest, financially or programmatically, in retaining students who may drop out.

The second obstacle is the disconnected nature of dropouts and the communities where many of the foundering schools are located. Dropouts, in general, are politically, economically and socially disenfranchised. They are powerless to demand change because most of the common tools used to demand change are beyond their reach. The voting rates are also exceedingly low in areas that have high rates of dropouts (Milligan, et al., 2003). In many cases, this is because of the high likelihood that young people who drop out of school will infract laws and become incarcerated (Warren, et al., 2008). In the process, this same group loses its right to vote as a result. This reduces their ability to exert political pressure on elected officials and city offices like the Department of Education. The relationship between the average rate of educational attainment in a community and income is well founded (Sum, et al., 2009). Thus, dropouts are typically the least wealthy in the city in which they live and thereby have no economic leverage. Because of the confluence of the above factors communities that have high rates of high school dropouts are often marginalized, confined to their community and frequently inadequate resources.

Opportunities for change

Within the Race to The Top (RTTT), there is a specific focus on attending to the schools that produce many of the nation's dropouts. RTTT is encouraging an extreme focus on remedying these schools, what President Obama has taken to calling "dropout factories" (Obama, 2009). This investment institutionalizes the effort to reduce the number of dropouts, as opposed to the efforts that have traditionally taken place outside

of the formal structure of government-sanctioned programming. One early example of a program that has been proposed under this new governmental focus is the Hope & Opportunity Pathways through Education (HOPE USA) incentive grant plan. It is joint proposal from the National Education Association, National Urban League, Illinois State Council on Re-Enrolling Students Who Dropped Out of School, the Chicago Urban League, and Alternative Schools Network to develop pathways for high school dropouts to return to school and earn their high school diploma (Abdul-Alim, 2009). Formal attention and support from the federal government bolsters the work of many organizations and, as demonstrated by the HOPE USA proposal, forms groups of individual organizations with similar missions. Such attention and support is necessary to unify the efforts of all the major actors described above.

Policy Analysis

Dropout prevention policy, to date, has been thoroughly inadequate. As evidenced by the nearly 6.2 million dropouts in 2007 ("Left behind", 2009), present interventions have proven to be insufficient in stemming the tide of students leaving high school without degrees. High dropout rates are most concentrated in northern states and the three "mega-districts" of New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles (Orfield, 2004). Until these "dropout factories" are reformed, the American high school as an engine of economic growth and social transformation will continue to be compromised (Ibid.). This paper identifies the evolution of the dropout phenomenon in the United States over the past half century. Primarily, these interventions have been isolated and individual efforts. Theorized to be effective solutions, these initiatives have resulted in stop-gap measures.

Despite implementation of many initiatives, several urban centers continue to post tremendously high dropout rates. A structural, comprehensive intervention is necessary to effectively address the dropout epidemic. NCLB, the current accountability context can be expanded to hold school systems accountable for ensuring that students graduate. Enforcing a standard for the graduation rate as an assessment tool for schools and districts would enable this.

NCLB has fostered school culture focused on performance to ensure proficiency of all students. To that end, the policy has inadvertently created incentives for pushing failing students out of the building in order to make adequate yearly progress (AYP). The language of the policy is such that states can each determine fixed graduation rates and are not required to make yearly progress in that area. Therefore, school leaders are currently not responsible for the percentage of students who dropout of school. This allows schools and states to continue to focus on student performance while neglecting actual student graduation – the ultimate performance. In addition states are not required to disaggregate graduation rate data by minority subgroups for accountability purposes. This allows states to be responsible for only a portion of students to graduate. Furthermore, dropout prevention has been implemented through small and isolated programs that have been ineffectual (Dorn, 2003) in reducing the overall proportion of students leaving high school. The practices of small programs will affect a smaller number of students. With a problem as pervasive and devastating as the dropout epidemic, the backing of broader state and/or federal policies is necessary for prevention, intervention and re-enrollment of high school dropouts.

Recommendations for Policy:

Prevention & Intervention

Research indicates that there are several indicators for students at risk of dropping out. Lisa Abrams and Walt Haney find that "the rate at which students disappear between grades 9 and 10 has tripled over the last 30 years" (as edited in Orfield, 2004, 181). More specifically, they have discovered that students were not disappearing. Rather, students were being held back in the 9th grade across the country. Their research suggests that transitioning from 9th to 10th grade is becoming increasingly difficult, particularly in high-stake testing areas. This research shows that making a smooth transition from 9th grade into 10th grade is a critical step in the direction of high school graduation, particularly in low SES schools. Data obtained from a study of Maryland low SES schools conducted by Kerri A. Kerr and Nettie E. Legters reveal that small learning communities and interdisciplinary teaming "are significantly associated with lower school-wide dropout rates net of other school characteristics" (as edited in Orfield, 238). These findings confirm that smaller, more personalized learning environments can enhance students' attachment to schools. Kerr and Legters note that schools that combine small learning communities with other reform practices have a stronger influence on dropout rates, further suggesting that a more comprehensive demonstrated commitment to reform may produce lower dropout rates (Ibid). Thus, we recommend an expansion of funding for the current US Department of Education Small Learning Community (SLC) grants to be extended for an additional year and to be applied to more schools in need of this support. This will entitle schools for a full four years, as opposed to the current

three, which will enable schools to smoothly transition 9 graders into 10th grade and continue to provide additional support until graduation.

Re-enrollment

Because of the sheer number of dropouts across the nation and the cost of supporting these individuals through social services and the criminal justice system, "a national re-enrollment strategy should be a fundamental part of America's national education agenda" ("Left behind," 2009). The Center for Labor Market Studies has identified a range of effective re-enrollment programs that have emerged nationally and in a number of cities including Chicago and Los Angeles. The most successful of these programs are small, offering comprehensive after-school and summer activities to 80 - 150 students. Led by principals and teachers, they focus on learning practical skills and maintain strong records of data ("Left behind," 2009). We recommend government support of these programs. As they have kept records, the models lend themselves to adaptation in other cities of need.

The Hope and Opportunity Pathways through Education (HOPE USA) initiative is a good way to fund such programming. This initiative has been jointly proposed by the National Education Association, National Urban League, Illinois State Council on Re-Enrolling Students Who Dropped Out of School, the Chicago Urban League, and the Alternative Schools Network. The goal of HOPE USA is to obtain a $2 billion federal matching incentive grant program to spur state and local school districts to create programs for students who wish to re-enroll so that they can earn a high school diploma ("Left behind," 2009). This marriage of the major actors within the dropout prevention arena provides the structural and comprehensive approach necessary to stem the tide of

students leaving school without degrees. In April 2008, then Secretary of Education,
Margaret Spellings announced that by 2013 all states will be required to use a universal
definition for graduation, giving more accuracy to the percentage of students graduating
from high school and dropping out. Within his first month in office, President Obama
addressed the dropout crisis and the need for Americans to finish high school and go on
to higher education. Now is the time to ride the energy of the current administration to
advocate for the funding, legislation and attention necessary to give every student the
opportunity to learn and the pursuit of happiness.

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