KEEPING YOUTH CONNECTED

FOCUS ON HOUSTON

CLASP
policy solutions that work for low-income people

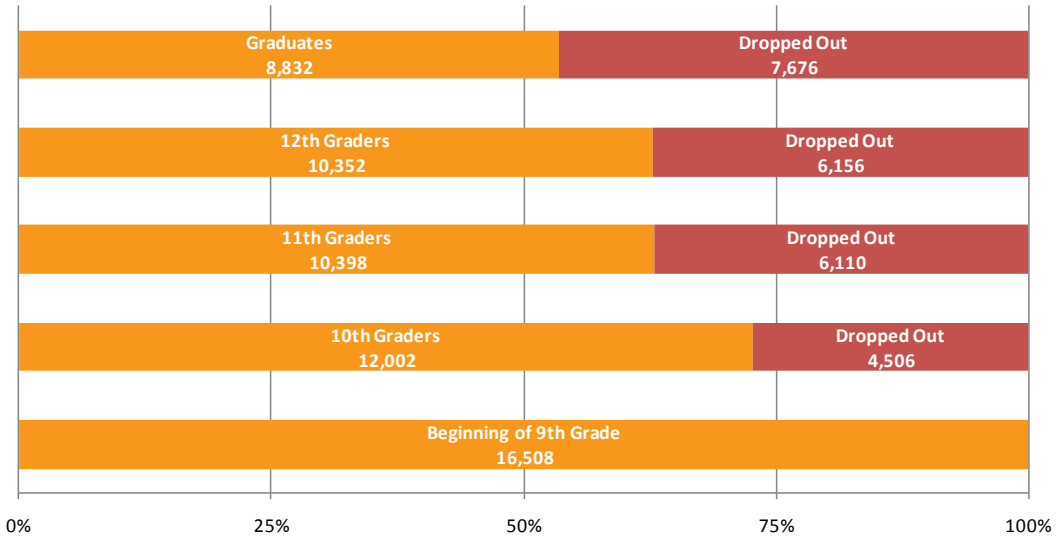
August 2011

In communities across our nation, thousands of students drop out of high school every day. For most, academic struggles and lack of support make the dream of completing high school and postsecondary education seem impossible. Dejected and defeated, many youth give up. In Houston, 54 percent of students who entered the ninth grade in 2004 graduated four years later. Of the approximately 16,508 students in that ninth grade class, four years later, 7,676 students were left behind. Most of these students are youth of color, as 92 percent of Houston's school enrollment is minority, 60 percent of which are Hispanic students and 28 percent of which are black students. Failure to complete high school has serious effects on long-term life outcomes for young people. Many will endure unemployment and poverty due to lack of education and skills.

Several factors affect a young person's development and academic achievement in school: the school environment, the conditions of the community in which they live, family stability, and peer influences. In low-income communities, the combination of all these factors makes it extremely difficult for youth to develop well, achieve in school, and remain on the path to success. For youth to thrive, it takes the collective effort of an entire community to address multiple stumbling blocks and remove barriers that impede a young person's ability to succeed in school and work.

The purpose of the community profiles project is to highlight data that help community members, advocates, and policymakers understand the nature and extent of issues facing large numbers of youth in low-income urban and rural communities. Many communities, such as Houston, already have begun to work on strategically addressing the issue of dropouts in their communities and are making great strides in this regard. Data and research help communities elevate the issue of youth development and high school dropout, target planning and resources toward specific interventions, create services and activities at sufficient scale to address the needs of all youth, benchmark progress, and make the case for increased investment.

Houston Independent School District
Graduation Pipeline, Class of 2008



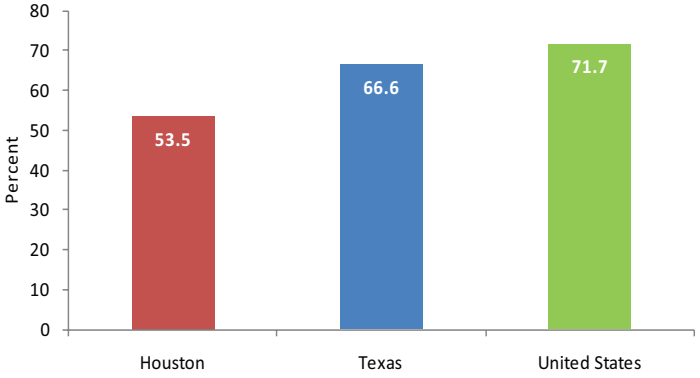
Source: Author's analysis using National Center for Education Statistics and EPE Research Center data

Schools

Educational success is the cornerstone to creating successful pathways for youth. Many schools in low-income communities are simply not making the mark. The school environment is not functioning well and, as a result, youth are disengaged from school and fail to complete their education.

Many schools or districts allocate insufficient staff and resources to address issues such as guidance and counseling, attendance, or additional course help. Disciplinary policies often cause students to spend too many days outside the school building for behavioral infractions. The curriculum is not sufficiently rigorous, and high-poverty and high-minority schools often have the least-experienced teachers.

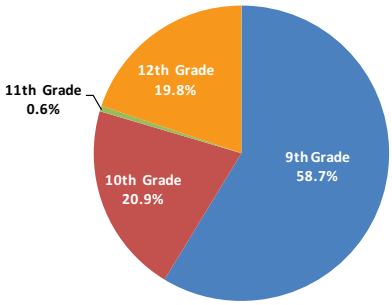
High School Graduation Rates
(2007-2008 School Year)



Source: EPE Research Center

Houston Independent School District falls slightly behind Texas and the United States in graduating students on time. In 2008, the cohort graduation rate was 53.5 percent. The four year cohort graduation rate tracks students who entered ninth grade in 2004 and graduated four years later (the class of 2008) in order to find out the outcome for each individual student. Research shows that the majority of students drop out early in high school, after having experienced several years of difficulty, beginning at the end of elementary school or in middle school.[4] In Houston, the largest proportion of students (59 percent) dropped out in ninth grade. Attendance, behavior, and coursework achievement are key predictors in the middle school years of continued school engagement in high school.[5] Tracking these critical areas for all students will enable schools to identify students most in danger of dropping out and provide them with academic and supportive services to keep them connected to school.

When Do Houston's Youth Drop Out?
(2004-2008 Cohort)

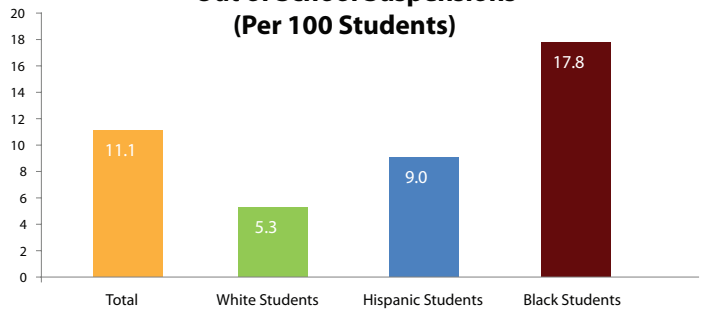


Source: EPE Research Center

Youth of color fare far worse in high school, particularly males. Nationally, less than half of black male students who begin high school will graduate four years later.[6] In some of the most challenged communities, that number drops to only about one-third. In Houston, a 21 percent gap in rates of high school graduation exists between black and white male students. [7]

Two of the major ways that youth are pushed out of the education system are through harsh disciplinary policies and tracking of students into particular educational levels. Both of these practices have done more harm than good for youth and have contributed to the nation's large dropout problem. The effect is felt more intensely by youth of color, as they are disproportionately affected by the implementation of these policies in school systems.

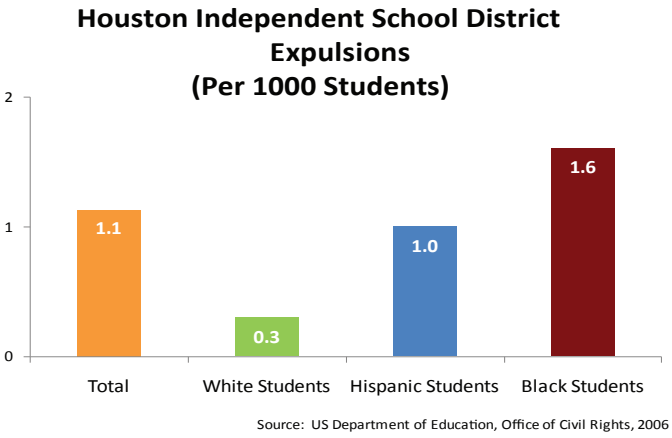
Houston Independent School District
Out of School Suspensions
(Per 100 Students)



Source: US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2006

Nationally, 3.3 million youth are punished for school infractions by out-of-school suspension each year. Almost 103,000 more youth are expelled from school. The policies that made these forms of school punishment so prevalent (zero tolerance policies) began as a way of protecting students from truly dangerous situations.

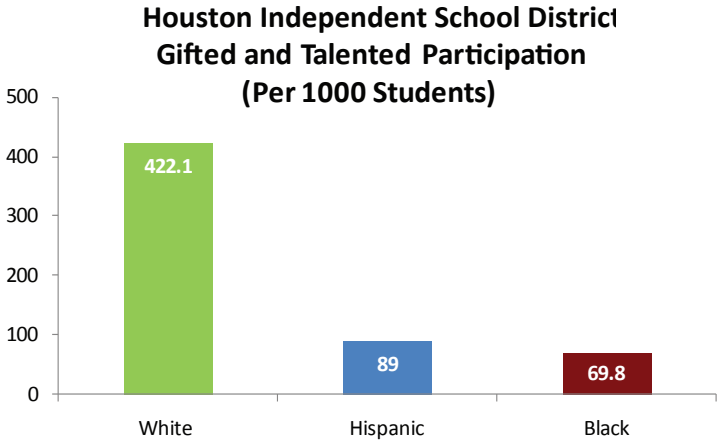
Their implementation, however, has been far too sweeping, punitive, and ineffective, and too many students have suffered a loss of educational opportunities as a result.[8] They lose precious time while out of the classroom, and become disengaged from learning. These young people become more likely to drop out of school. Many are also being placed into the criminal justice system unnecessarily.[9]



Source: US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2006

These outcomes are usually seen in large degrees in urban and high minority school districts, where the existence of these policies is far more prevalent.[10] While Houston's rate of expulsion is below the national average, its rate of suspension of 11.1 per 100 students is nearly double the national average of 6.8 suspensions per 100 students. Moreover, black and Hispanic students are far more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than their white counterparts.

Another area of educational concern for children and youth is the tracking of students into courses based on their perceived ability to succeed. Tracking that occurs in elementary school tends to follow students for the rest of their lives. Those placed in lower level tracks tend to stay there, even if they are performing well academically and would benefit from higher level coursework.[11] There is a strong correlation between race, class, and track placement. Black and Hispanic students are disproportionately tracked into lower-level courses with less-qualified teachers, reduced expectations, and fewer resources.[12] In Houston, white students are six times more likely than their black counterparts to participate in gifted/talented courses and nearly five times more than their Hispanic peers.



Source: US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2006

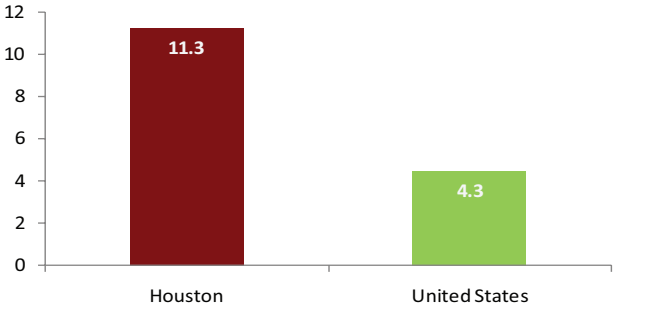
The large number of youth dropping out of school in Houston requires attention. Many of these youth are not in other educational settings or working.[13] Absent intervention, the segment of our population with less than a high school diploma will grow faster than any other.[14] It is important to note, however, that youth who drop out of school are not beyond our reach. Many recognize their limitations without an education and seek opportunities to reconnect to educational and work experiences to enhance their skills and future prospects. In a recent national survey of high school dropouts, 76 percent said that they would likely re-enroll in school if given a chance.[15]

The State of Texas passed legislation in 2007 allowing individuals up to age 26 to attend public school in order to reengage youth who have dropped out. Houston Independent School District has adopted a dropout outreach program (Reach Out to Dropouts), which calls upon volunteers, including superintendents and principals, to reengage out of school youth through home visits. Between 2004 and 2009, over 5,500 youth were recovered.[16] Reconnecting youth by providing them with pathways back to complete their high school education, and linking them to postsecondary education and training opportunities will set them on the right course for more economically stable futures.

Community

The community in which youth live plays a significant role in their development. Research shows that community socio-economic status has an effect on achievement, emotional and social well-being, and sexual activity and fertility.[17] Youth perception of the community, both in terms of connectedness and safety, is also critical. Positive connections to adults and institutions within the community and opportunities for civic engagement give youth a sense of worth and help them feel connected to the communities in which they live. Unfortunately, low-income communities lack adequate social and recreational resources, such as after-school and youth programs. This dearth of services has an adverse effect on youth development in the community. [18] Exposure to violence is associated with a number of behavioral and psychological outcomes and has been found to be distraction in school.[19] The constant threat of violence in low-income communities prevents youth from envisioning their life prospects, as they are uncertain of even surviving into adulthood.[20]

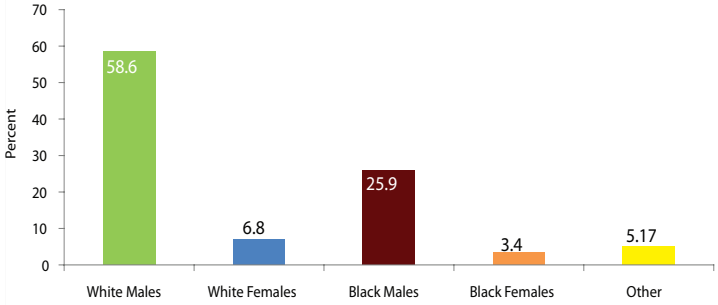
Violent Crimes per 1,000 People



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Statistics, 2009

In 2009, roughly 25,593 violent crimes were reported in Houston, which is a per capita rate of over double the national average. Reported homicide data for 2008 showed that people under age 25 represent 31 percent of victims. The majority of young homicide victims are between ages 18 and 24. A look at homicide data by race reveals that the almost a third of the victims were black, mostly males. The remainder of victims were white (65.4%), though the data does not specify ethnicity, making it likely that many victims were Hispanic. Many cities struggle to get a handle on violence, which is so integrally related to educational and employment success. Too many youth are lost, both as victims and perpetrators of violent crime.

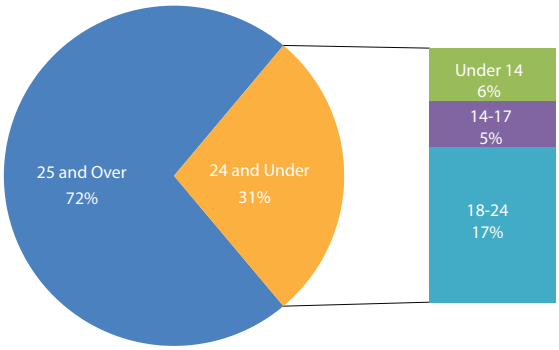
Homicide Victims in Houston, by Race



Source: Authors analysis of data from Bureau of Justice Statistics, United States Department of Justice, and U.S. Census Bureau, 2009

Youth in Houston are significantly affected by issues of violence. A recent study conducted in 2007 cited that 11.3 percent of high school students did not attend school at least once in the last 30 days because they felt unsafe either at school, or on their way to or from school.[21] In addition, 33.3 percent of high school students reported being in a physical fight, and 16.3 percent of students carried a weapon.[22] In the same survey, 28.2 percent of students reported feeling sad and hopeless almost every day for two consecutive weeks. In the face of conditions of violence and poverty, it is easy to see how youth may feel ambivalence or, worse yet, despair about their futures.

Homicide Victims in Houston, by Age

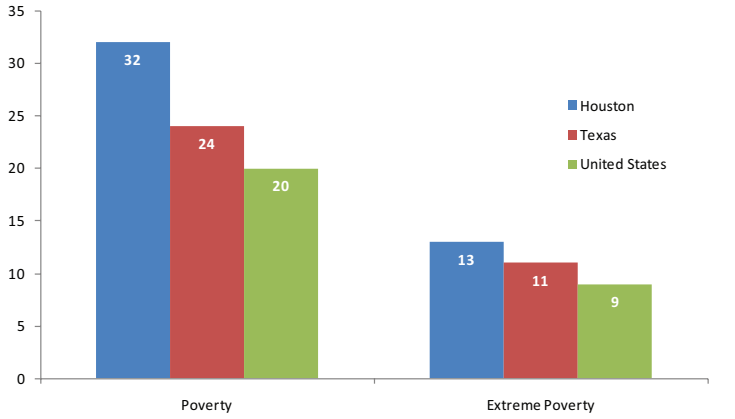


Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, United States Department of Justice, 2009

Family

Poverty and family circumstances also play a role in a young person's ability to complete high school and be successful in adulthood. Youth do not exist separate from their families or households. Issues of poverty and fragile families affect their development and academic attainment. Many of Houston's youth grow up in impoverished families, may have fragile living situations, or have parents or caregivers who themselves are not educated. All of these scenarios present extra obstacles to a young person's successful transition into adulthood. These youth need additional services and supports to be successful. In communities such as Houston, the volume of youth facing these issues is far greater than in most other locales. Significant investment is needed to affect outcomes for the youth in the community.

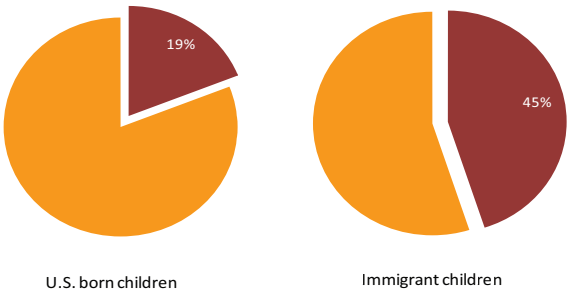
Percent of Children Under 18 Living in Poverty



Source: Kids Count Data Center, The Annie. E. Casey Foundation, 2009

Child poverty levels in Houston grossly outpace poverty levels in Texas and the United States. In 2009, almost one-third of all children and youth under 18 lived below the federal poverty line in Houston. In 2007, roughly 35 percent of children lived in families where no parent had full-time, year-round employment.[23]

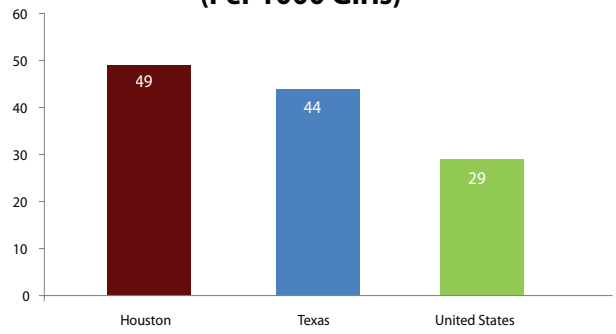
Houston Children Whose Parents All Lack High School Diploma



Source: Kids Count Data Center, The Annie. E. Casey Foundation, 2009

In addition to the lack of earnings coming into a home, family education levels present struggles for youth. Currently, 19 percent of Houston's U.S.-born children live in families where no parent has a high school diploma. The situation for immigrant children is far worse; about 45 percent live in families where no parent has a high school diploma. These parents or caregivers are often not able to effectively support the academic achievement of the youth in their homes. Another area of concern is teen pregnancy. Houston's teen birth rate is 49 per 1,000. Teens who have children are far less likely to graduate from high school.[24] Without flexible educational options for these mothers and fathers, they are more likely to drop out and raise their children in poverty. This continues the cycle of poverty because their children are less likely to be successful.[25]

Births to Teen Mothers (Per 1000 Girls)



Source: US Census, American Community Survey, 2008

Employment

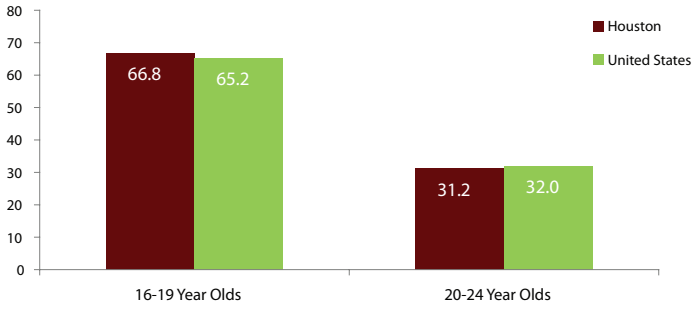
Employment is an important part of youth development and successful progression into young adulthood. A key predictor of consistent employment in adulthood is early exposure to the world of work through summer and year-round employment, internships, and service opportunities in the teen years. Youth who have been employed tend to have higher earnings in young adulthood.[26]

Teen employment exposes youth to careers, promotes job readiness and develops their skills in particular industries. Community-based employment programs that support the development of soft skills such as communication, work ethic, appropriate dress, interviewing skills, etc. provide the preparation that youth need to be successful in the workforce. These types of programs also have significant value with regard to educational outcomes. Youth employment programs reduce absences from school, and can promote positive academic attitudes and increase the likelihood that students will take academic courses.[27] Youth also begin to have higher expectations

of themselves and to set higher life goals as a result of being exposed to the world of work.

In addition to the many developmental benefits, youth employment is also helpful for the quality of community life, particularly during the summer months when youth work the most. Youth engage in less criminal activity while employed, [28] therefore the level of crime in a community declines when young people are put to work. In addition, dollars earned and spent by these youth are most often spent within the community, having an important economic impact.[29]

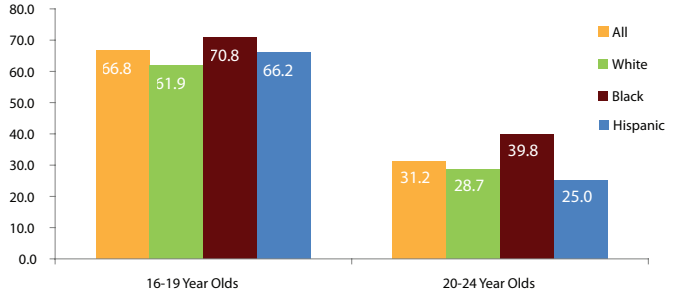
Percent of Youth Not Working by Age



Source: US Census, American Community Survey, 2008
*Note: "Not Working" is defined as either unemployed or not participating in the labor force.

Despite all that is known about its benefits, youth employment in our nation is currently at its lowest point in 60 years.[30] In Houston, the youth employment situation is similar to the national average, though still alarming. Two-thirds of youth ages 16 to 19 are not employed or in the labor force, as are 31 percent of 20 to 24 year olds. When the data is disaggregated by race, it shows that minority youth work less, with black youth being the least likely to have employment. Seven in 10 black youth ages 16 to 19 are either unemployed or not participating in the labor force. [31]

Percent of Houston Youth Not Working, by Race



Source: US Census, American Community Survey, 2008
*Note: "Not Working" is defined as either unemployed or not participating in the labor force.

In many urban areas, there are few jobs located in close proximity to low-income neighborhoods, as many businesses have relocated to suburban areas. Often, youth are competing with unemployed adults for low-wage employment. The end of crucial government-funded programs has significantly hampered the ability of communities to support youth employment. While some communities continue to invest local funds in summer employment, it does not nearly meet the vast need for employment and pathways to careers for youth in low-income communities. Many low-income teens also struggle with balancing the need to help support their families and to finish their education. When communities are able to structure programs that enable youth to accomplish both, everyone benefits.

Conclusion

Too many youth are lost each year when they drop out of school without completing a high school education. They are destined for lifelong poverty and difficulty if they are unable to complete their education and acquire the skills and knowledge that will enable them to work and have a meaningful career. Communities will suffer tremendously if this problem is not addressed – they will lose a significant amount of human capital, and will face rising costs in public services to meet the needs of an uneducated population. Young people, particularly those in low-income communities, must overcome many hurdles to be successful, including the conditions of their schools and neighborhoods. Communities must band together to figure out how to systemically deal with these issues - such as failing schools, family poverty, unemployment, and youth violence – so that youth can be successful. By using data to guide the planning and use of resources, communities can create sustainable solutions that will help to keep youth on the path to success in school and in life.

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[4] Robert Balfanz & Lisa Herzog, "Keeping Middle Grades Students On Track to Graduation: Initial Analysis and Implications," May 2006, www.philaedfund.org/powerpoint/dropoutresearch_4.06.ppt

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[6] Given Half a Chance: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males, Schott Foundation, 2008, http://www.blackboysreport.org

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[11] Amanda Datnow, The Gender Politics of Educational Change, 1998, 27-28.

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[22] "Youth Online: Comprehensive Results"

[23] "Profile for Houston (City)," Kids Count Data Center, Annie E. Casey Foundation, http://datacenter.kidscount.org

[24] "Teen Pregnancy Fact Sheet," March of Dimes, http://www.marchofdimes.com/professionals/14332_1159.asp

[25] "Teen Pregnancy Fact Sheet"

[26] Linda Harris, "The Tragic Loss of the Summer Jobs Program: Why It Is Time to Reinstate," Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, July/August 2007, 13-14.

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ABOUT CLASP

CLASP develops and advocates for policies at the federal, state and local levels that improve the lives of low-income people. We focus on policies that strengthen families and create pathways to education and work. Through careful research and analysis and effective advocacy, we develop and promote new ideas, mobilize others, and directly assist governments and advocates to put in place successful strategies that deliver results that matter to people across America.

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