



# Reauthorizing ESEA

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## Considerations for Dropout Prevention & Recovery

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American school districts are losing the battle to successfully educate a large number of the nation's youth. For every 10 students that begin ninth grade, three students fail to graduate from high school four years later.<sup>i</sup> This equates to about 1.2 million students who drop out each year.<sup>ii</sup> Urban areas are of particular concern, as they have the lowest graduation rates. In the nation's 50 largest cities, the graduation rate is an abysmal 53 percent.<sup>iii</sup> Disaggregating the graduation percentages by race reveals an even more disturbing story for youth of color. Only 55 percent of African Americans and 58 percent of Hispanics graduate from high school on time—compared with 78 percent of white students.<sup>iv</sup>

A failure rate of this magnitude is simply not acceptable. It does not bode well for the economic future of our nation that these youth will not become contributing citizens and will likely lack continuous employment and have unstable living situations. The nation and the communities in which these young people live lose capital due to the reduced earning potential of the uneducated segment of the population, and the increased level of support that must be provided to low-income individuals. Employers also are affected because they struggle to find qualified candidates to fill positions that require a higher level of skills. Individuals and families do not fare well because they lack skills to attain employment that pays a living wage and enables them to be self-sufficient. On average, high school dropouts earn 27 percent less than high school graduates and 58 percent less than college graduates.<sup>v</sup>

The accountability provisions included in the last authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) successfully brought to light many of the disparities in our education system. It unearthed the magnitude of the achievement gap and the graduation rate crisis that had been masked by misleading calculations. This led to new regulations for the uniform calculation of graduation rates, an achievement that should not be lost. ESEA, however, has failed to provide solutions for dealing with students who have dropped out. By allowing such a substantial proportion of our student population to leave school without attaining a high school credential, the public has abdicated its responsibility to educate the nation's youth. The education system must have options to reengage youth in education to ensure that all youth receive a quality education that equips them for postsecondary and labor market success..

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) made dropout prevention and recovery a priority through specific language around programming for high needs students. The reauthorization of ESEA presents a prime opportunity to build on these advances and to rethink how the nation can strengthen its commitment to reconnect youth who have left school without receiving their diploma. By holding local education agencies (LEAs) accountable for dropouts, opening the door for flexible education options, creating partnerships with other youth-serving entities, and committing adequate resources to fully address this problem,

ESEA can facilitate the end of the dropout crisis. These comments focus on how to amend ESEA to ensure that struggling students and high school dropouts have access to systems, support, and funding to remain in school or re-enter the educational system and attain a viable education that prepares them for postsecondary opportunities and career success.

## Dropout Recovery

Students drop out of school for many reasons. Proven factors that contribute to students dropping out include challenges in the school environment and schools' inability to meet their educational needs. The complex family and personal situations for many youth also leads to premature school exit. Youth recognize their work and life options are limited due to lack of education. Given the opportunity, they want to continue their education pursuit. Interviews with high school dropouts revealed that more than three-quarters of young people would re-enroll in a high school for people their age if they could.<sup>vi</sup> Young people seeking to complete their education need viable options for returning to school. States and LEAs must begin to recognize dropouts as their responsibility and to make intentional and coordinated plans for reengaging students and keeping them connected. This will only occur if high school dropout recovery is more elevated in importance in the reauthorized law, and if states and LEAs receive incentives to recover students who have dropped out. Currently, after students drop out of school, LEAs have no incentive for seeking out students and reengaging them in education. In fact, current policies are a disincentive because unsuccessful students negatively affect school and district aggregate test scores. As a result, there is little outreach to dropouts and many are encouraged to pursue opportunities outside the education system where schools and LEAs bear no responsibility and where there are very limited resources to support their academic endeavors.

### Recommendations

- Specify dropout recovery strategies as a required activity that must be included in state and LEA plans. This plan should include strategies for outreach and re-enrollment, multiple options for completion, partnerships for wrap-around services, and connections to post secondary and work opportunities.
- Include four- and six-year cohort graduation rates in accountability requirements to allow LEAs time to work with former dropouts to complete requirements for completion of high school. Include in the graduation rate calculation all students enrolled in alternative education schools and programs that lead to a regular high school diploma or recognized equivalent credential. As with data on Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), require that graduation rates be disaggregated by race, socioeconomic status, and disability.
- Designate a percentage of the formula funds given to all states and LEAs to be used exclusively for high school dropout recovery. Appropriate sufficient funds to enable states and LEAs to design and implement a robust dropout recovery strategy.

## Dropout Prevention

Though most students do not drop out until high school, warning signs are evident in the middle school years. Research demonstrates several predictors of eventual high school dropout, including chronic absenteeism, behavioral issues, and course failure.<sup>vii</sup> Students who have been involved with the juvenile justice and child

welfare systems are particularly vulnerable and more likely to drop out of high school. These students often lose large amounts of instructional time and fall far behind. Also at significant risk are students who have not successfully completed enough credits by the end of ninth grade.<sup>viii</sup> Ninth grade is a pivotal year in determining the life course of a student as the majority of students who drop out do so in ninth grade. Through analysis of the student population, LEAs can accurately identify students who will require additional supports to remain on-track and stay in school and can take steps to provide these supports.

### Recommendations

- Fund early identification and intervention approaches that work with students in middle schools that feed into high schools with low graduation rates.
- Target resources to students most in need of dropout prevention services and intervention, as defined by the term “high needs students” found in the final rules for ARRA Race to the Top funds. Also include in this “high needs students” population students who have completed far fewer credits than necessary to be on-track for graduation in four years.
- Appropriate sufficient funds to: 1) enable all states to design an early warning system to identify students in danger of dropping out of school, and 2) enable LEAs to implement early intervention strategies to support students before they drop out of school.

## Multiple Education Pathways and Options

The traditional high school model is not successful for large numbers of students. More flexible schooling options are necessary. One of the many reasons students cite for dropping out of school is that the structure of the school fails to meet their needs. Research conducted with high school dropouts found that smaller class sizes, more individualized instruction, and classroom experiences that reflected real world scenarios as key improvements that would have kept them engaged in school.<sup>ix</sup> For others, personal situations such as the need to work to support a family affect their ability to attend school. Students who are unable to successfully navigate a more structured, traditional school setting need access to alternate educational options and supportive services. For many dropouts, returning to a traditional high school is also difficult due to age differences, the need for remediation, or accelerated approaches that will allow them to complete credits in a shorter span. LEAs need support to create multiple education pathways and options to meet the needs of their school population and to guide students to successful completion.

### Recommendation

- Encourage states and LEAs to create a menu of well-supported educational pathways and options for high school students and dropouts that meet student needs, and prepare them for post secondary opportunities and success in careers. Examples of options include, but are not limited to:
  - High quality alternative programs or charter schools
  - Credits earned based on demonstrated competency instead of seat time
  - Applied learning approaches
  - Accelerated learning models
  - Twilight academies

- Specialized supports for parenting students
- Concurrent enrollment in high school and community college
- School/work models in partnership with workforce investment boards
- GED Plus/Diploma Plus models
- Career and technical education

## Collaboration with Other Systems and Sectors

LEAs cannot address the high school dropout crisis alone. It is imperative that they establish partnerships with other youth-serving entities such as other government systems, community-based organizations, and the business community. There are several examples of effective reengagement of disconnected youth in other systems, such as the Youth Opportunity Program and the Youthful Offender Reentry Program, which operated through the Department of Labor. In addition, there are many effective community-based alternative schools or programs that are operated by non-profit organizations. All of these pieces should be a part of a seamless P-20 educational delivery system that provides multiple options for young people. Collaboration among these various entities will create a safety net to capture students who have dropped out and provide them with another opportunity to be successful.

### Recommendations

- Recommend that states and LEAs make deliberate efforts to establish “horizontal alignment” with all other youth-serving systems (i.e. workforce investment boards, juvenile justice, child welfare, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) to support the educational needs of dropouts and those at risk for dropping out.
- Recommend collaborations between states, LEAs, and local colleges and universities to create a seamless P-20 route for students, with particular attention to those who have dropped out.
- Require that states and LEAs include representatives from local workforce investment, juvenile justice, and child welfare systems as partners in planning for turning around struggling high schools and recovering high school dropouts.
- Encourage collaboration between LEAs and local community-based agencies to provide comprehensive services to dropouts who are being reengaged, such as transportation, mental health supports, child care, social services, etc.
- Expand the use of federal ESEA funds to allow dollars to support educational services provided by community-based organizations and institutions of higher education with a proven track record of working with dropouts and struggling students.

## Data Systems

States need robust longitudinal data systems to plan strategically and make sound decisions to impact the education of all students. As states consider the components of their data systems, the collection of all data that would support dropout prevention and recovery is critical. This should include data from other systems or

entities that also aid in the provision of educational services, the tracking of both the attainment of regular high school diplomas and recognized equivalent credentials, and data on all multiple education options developed and recognized in that state. This enables states and LEAs to paint a more accurate picture of their dropout interventions, and to identify gaps in services to youth. Data systems should also track post secondary data for students, as a means of assessing whether student high school experiences provided adequate preparation for post secondary opportunities.

### **Recommendation**

- Encourage states to develop longitudinal data systems that include point at which students enter, exit, drop out, re-enroll, and complete high school or recognized equivalent, enrollment in post secondary education, remedial coursework needed in post secondary settings, and rates of post secondary completion. Include language that specifies structuring of data systems such that they are useful in informing planning and programming around dropout prevention and recovery.

## **Funding**

Past funding for high school dropout prevention and recovery has not reflected the magnitude of the crisis facing our nation. Under the current law, as well as in ARRA, funds for the dropout population have been largely competitive grants awarded to a small number of states or districts. The issue of dropouts plagues the entire country. The nation's 50 largest cities are in 30 states. Cumulatively, these districts are graduating just over half of their students. This problem requires a large-scale solution and greater investment to move the needle on the dropout crisis that is eating away at the pool of smart, educated, employable young people.

### **Recommendations**

- Ensure the appropriation of resources commiserate with the scale of the dropout crisis which are specifically dedicated to high school dropout recovery and prevention services.
- Guide states in development of sustainable funding formulas beyond competitive grants that support multiple pathways and expanded learning options which serve to keep struggling students connected to school and reengage dropouts into viable educational options.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Jay P. Greene and Marcus Winters, *Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates: 1991-2002*, Education Working Paper No. 8, Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute, 2005, 15, [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/ewp\\_08.pdf](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/ewp_08.pdf).

<sup>ii</sup> *High School Dropouts in America*, The Alliance for Excellent Education, February 2009, 1, [http://www.all4ed.org/files/GraduationRates\\_FactSheet.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/files/GraduationRates_FactSheet.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Christopher B. Swanson, *Cities in Crisis: Closing the Graduation Gap: Educational and Economic Conditions in America's Largest Cities*, EPE Research Center, April 2009, 14, [http://www.edweek.org/media/cities\\_in\\_crisis\\_2009.pdf](http://www.edweek.org/media/cities_in_crisis_2009.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Swanson, *Cities in Crisis*, 1.

<sup>v</sup> Jennifer Cheeseman Day and Eric C. Newburger, *The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings*, Current Population Reports, United States Census Bureau, 2002, 2, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p23-210.pdf>.

<sup>vi</sup> John M. Bridgeland, John J. DiJulio Jr., Karen Burke Morison, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, Civic Enterprises, 2006, 10.

<sup>vii</sup> Karl L. Alexander, Doris B. Entwisle, and Nader S. Kabbani, "The Dropout Process in Life Course Perspective: Early Risk Factors at Home and School," *Teachers College Record*, 103 no. 5 (2001): 760-822.

<sup>viii</sup> Ruth Curran Neild, Scott Stoner-Eby, and Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., "Connecting entrance and departure: The transition to ninth grade and high school dropout," lecture, Harvard Civil Rights Project and Achieve, Inc. joint conference, Cambridge, January 2001, <http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/dropouts/neild.pdf>.

<sup>ix</sup> Bridgeland et al., *The Silent Epidemic*, 10.