The Promise of Education
Reversing the High School Dropout Crisis for Boys and Young Men of Color

Rhonda Bryant

October 2013

CLASP
policy solutions that work for low-income people

ABOUT CLASP

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Since 1969, CLASP has been a trusted resource, a creative architect for systems change, and one of the country's most effective voices for low income people. Through careful research and analysis and effective advocacy, CLASP develops and promotes new ideas, mobilizes others, and directly assists governments and advocates to put in place successful strategies that deliver results that matter to people across America. We are nonpartisan and situated at the intersection of local practice, national research, and state and federal policy, and striving to translate each world to each other.

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Introduction

Today's youth are the future of America. They are the future workforce – teachers, scientists, architects, teachers, scientists, architects, inventors, nurses, and entrepreneurs – that will make us competitive in a global economy. They are the future mothers and fathers who must provide for their own children. And they are the future political minds who will shape our nation for generations to come. The outlay we make today for the education and development of young people is an investment in assuring a bright future for the United States.

A solid education is a stepping stone to improved overall health and well-being. By staying in school and graduating, youth are better positioned to have career readiness skills, be employed, be self-supporting, and able to contribute to their families, communities and society. Currently, boys and young men of color lag behind educationally and far too many fail to complete high school. As America becomes increasingly diverse, we cannot continue to ignore the barriers that prevent boys and young men of color from succeeding in school. We have to be attentive to the education and development of all of the nation's young people. In 2011, more than one-half of babies born were children of color.[1] Imagine if that many children grew up and failed to complete their education. Greater attention must be given to the outcomes of boys and young men of color, and ensuring they have the supports and resources needed to complete their education.

The good news is that we know early and targeted interventions work to keep kids in school. Using existing school data, we can identify the students that need help and be proactive about providing solutions. Schools can provide learning supports that remediate and accelerate learning, social-emotional supports that build students' development and self-esteem in ways that positively affect learning, and bridge the worlds of home and school by partnering with community organizations and other systems to provide wrap-around services that support families so that boys of color can remain focused on learning.

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The High School Dropout Problem for Boys and Young Men of Color

In the Class of 2012, approximately 1.1 million youth failed to graduate from high school.[2] Currently, little more than half of Latino, African American, and Native American students who begin high school will graduate (see Figure 1). Graduation data can also, however, mask the graduation issues of subgroups within broader ethnic categories. In the Asian community, for example, Southeast Asian students tend to have lower graduation rates, which are not evident in the 80 percent graduation rate overall for Asian American students. In Hmong, Laotian, and Cambodian communities, fewer than half of individuals over age 25 have a high school diploma.[3] In addition, there are gender differences in graduation rates. Generally, girls tend to fare slightly better than boys in when it comes to high school graduation.

Figure 1:
National Graduation Rates for Boys of Color, Class of 2009
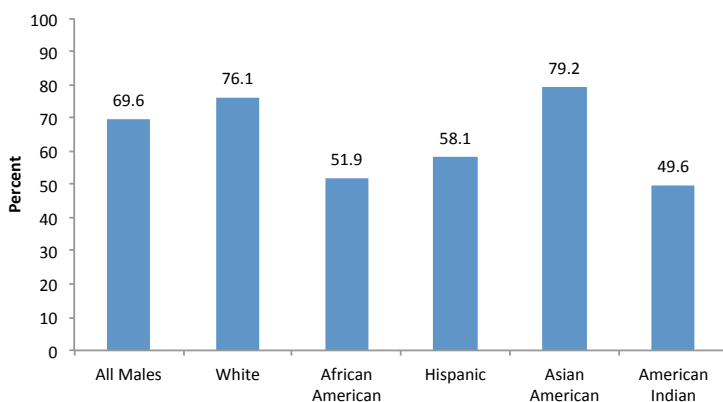
Source: Editorial Project in Education Research Center, "National Graduation Brief 2012," special supplement to Education Week's Diplomas Count 2012.

When young people drop out of high school, the impact for the young person and society is tremendous. Youth who fail to complete high school have significantly lower employment rates and earnings, and are also more likely to become involved in criminal activity that can lead to incarceration.[4] As a result, they are far more likely to live in poverty and need the assistance of taxpayer-funded services such as Medicaid and food stamps to make ends meet. It is estimated that dropouts from the class of 2010 alone will cost the nation $337 billion in lost wages over the course of their lifetime.[5] Society as a whole benefits from keeping boys and young men of color attached to school and graduating.

Figure 2:
When Are Students Lost?
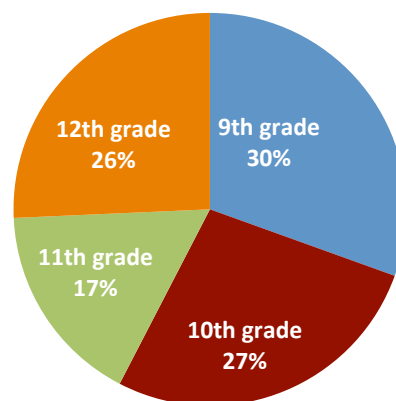
EPE Research Center, Ed Week Maps, 2009-10 school year

Students drop out of school for a variety of reasons that originate both inside and outside of school walls. Students with a history of being retained in a grade, failing courses, or having behavioral struggles are significantly more likely to drop out. The transition from middle to high school is a particularly critical point for students. Nationally, almost one-third of all school dropouts happen during the 9th grade (see Figure 2). These 9th grade dropouts were likely struggling significantly in middle school and entered high school unprepared. For those who remain in high school beyond 9th grade, repeated course failure leads to what the education field calls "over-age & under-credit" students. These are students who realize they are close to graduation age, but lack the courses or credits to graduate and fear they cannot catch up. Without intervention, many students disengage from education because they are not doing well in class or they have not been attending often enough to grasp the concepts well.

Boys and young men of color, in particular, also face being pushed out of school by harsh school disciplinary codes. Suspensions and expulsions from school are far more prevalent for males of color, and particularly for African Americans.[6] The Department of Education Office of Civil Rights reports that while African American boys are 9 percent of the nation's student population, they account for 24 percent of those suspended and 27 percent of those expelled from school. Similarly, Latino boys are 10 percent of school populations, but 14 percent of those suspended and 17 percent of those expelled.[7]

The safety of all students is important, and students who pose a real threat to others need to be dealt with in a manner that protects others. However, it is far more customary for males of color than white males to be suspended or expelled from school for non-violent offenses that could be addressed inside the school building.[8] To succeed in school, a student has to be physically present to learn. Increased suspension and expulsion rates for boys of color are a major threat to their academic success and their long-term ability to live healthy, productive adult lives.
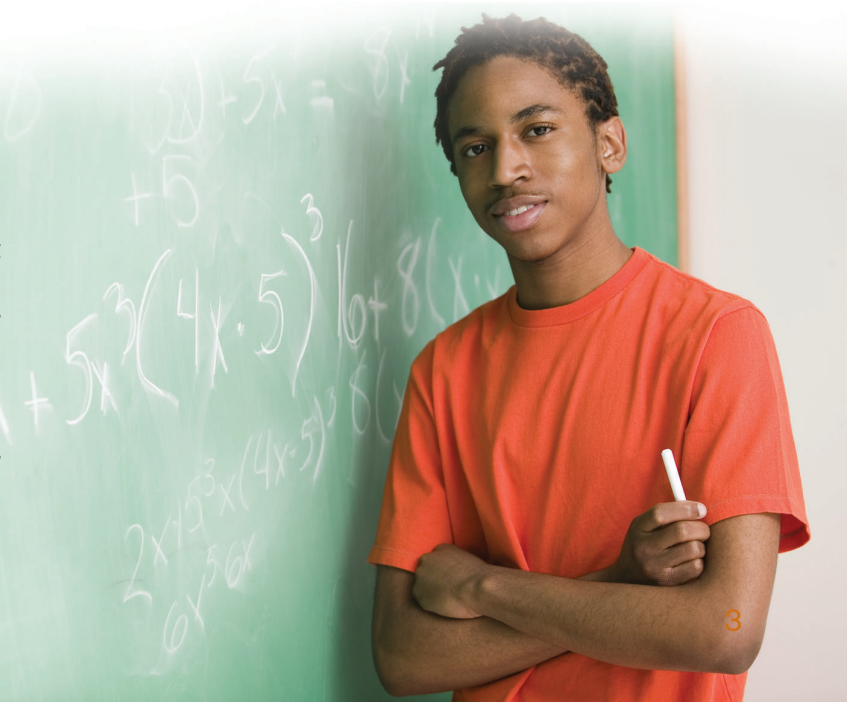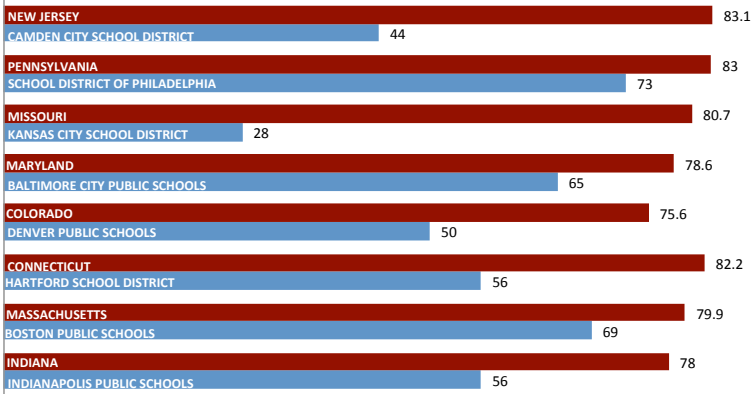
Replacing harsh disciplinary approaches with common-sense school discipline will help to keep more young men of color in school. This approach to discipline holds students accountable for their actions while avoiding unnecessary suspensions and expulsions. This will strengthen their chances of graduating and pursuing higher education and/or accessing meaningful employment.

Beyond the school walls, poverty has a significant impact on school attendance, the ability to focus while in the classroom, and behavior.[9] Family issues, such as the pressure on youth to work to help support the family, the need to miss school to care for younger siblings, or unstable housing are examples of what can impact school attendance and attachment. In addition, living in a high-poverty community with crime and violence can lead students to feel unsafe going to and from school or in the school building, which can negatively affect attendance.

Black and Latino male students report the highest prevalence of skipping school due to safety concerns, at 8 and 9 percent respectively, making them two times more likely to miss school for these reasons than their white male peers.[10] The impact of poverty is evident in graduation rates for school districts in high poverty communities (see Figure 3). In the most impoverished communities, fewer than half of students graduate in four years. The difference between their rates of high school completion and that of other students across the state is staggering.

These eight places are examples of states with graduation rates higher than the national average, yet school districts within the state with high minority enrollments lag far behind the state average. In Camden, NJ, for example, the gap is 39 percent.

Figure 3:
District & State Graduation Rates, Class of 2009

NEW JERSEY	83.1
CAMDEN CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT	44
PENNSYLVANIA	83
SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA	73
MISSOURI	80.7
KANSAS CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT	28
MARYLAND	78.6
BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	65
COLORADO	75.6
DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS	50
CONNECTICUT	82.2
HARTFORD SCHOOL DISTRICT	56
MASSACHUSETTS	79.9
BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS	69
INDIANA	78
INDIANAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS	56

3

Identifying Potential
High School Dropouts

Students gradually disengage from school over time due to academic struggles or outside factors. Often, this disengagement happens long before they stop attending school or officially drop out. The answer to ending high school dropout lies in understanding and identifying ways to keep students in school and engaged with learning and with their peers. If students are assisted to remain connected to their education, they can overcome barriers and make it to graduation and beyond. If schools, working in partnership with the community, can identify students who are becoming disengaged and provide them with the academic and social supports they need, then the students can get back on a path to school success.

A student's pattern of attendance, history of behavior issues, and track record for completing coursework are the key to identifying their risk for dropping out. Research has shown that by tracking data in these three areas, one can identify with significant certainty the students who will not complete high school. Analyses done in City of Philadelphia Public Schools showed that 80 percent of students who dropped out had shown signs of being at risk by middle school or their first year of high school.[11] Similarly, in Baltimore City Public Schools, research has shown that patterns of school disengagement appear several years before dropout actually occurs in high school and that many students enter high school already over age for their grade due to academic struggles and chronic absenteeism in earlier years.[12]

These findings are particularly significant because of the high number of youth of color in these particular districts, and because the majority of the nation's dropouts come from large urban districts such as these.[13] In addition, there is new evidence that attendance, behavioral issues, and coursework completion are better indicators of dropout risk for English Language Learners than even language proficiency.[14]

Schools and districts can begin to be proactive about preventing dropout by creating a system to analyze school data that will enable school leaders to identify the students at greatest risk. As early as the 6th grade, teachers and school leaders can begin to look at school data and identify students struggling in these three areas and needing assistance to stay on the path to graduation.[15]

It is recommended that interventions begin in the early middle grades in order to have the greatest impact.[16] If a student, for example, fails a middle school math course, a middle school English course, and attends school less than 80 percent of the time – all information that schools can track – that student is at high risk for dropping out of high school.[17]

Since 9th grade is the time when most students drop out of school, educators should be especially attentive to warning signals in this first year of high school and put in place appropriate interventions that will keep students on track to complete school. According to the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, creating an early warning indicator system is best done using a school district's own data and consists of three basic steps:[18]

• Assembling longitudinal data for individual students on a) graduation status and b) potential predictors of dropout, such as student attendance, behavior, grades, and test scores;

• Identifying the threshold level of each predictor that gives students a high probability of dropping out; and

• Checking that the predictors are accurate and do in fact identify a high percentage of the students in that district who drop out of school.

The National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research recommends tracking the specific data points using readily available school data to identify students in the 9th grade who are at risk for dropout (see Figure 4).[19]

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS FOR BOYS AND YOUNG MEN OF COLOR

For boys and young men of color, it is important that data analysis and identification be done within the proper context, with teachers and school leaders on the same page about the purpose: to help boys and young men of color get back on track with their educational pursuits. It is important to be proactive and consciously address perceptions and stereotypes, especially given the history of low teacher expectations and disproportionate disciplinary treatment for boys of color.[20] Equally important to explore are definitions of masculinity and gender roles. It is helpful for teachers to understand and implement approaches that are sensitive to these definitions and accompanying behaviors, which vary across racial and ethnic groups.

Schools should also be aware that some advocates, community leaders, and parents may be wary of attempts to identify boys of color who are at risk for dropping out. As such, schools should consider engaging parents and community members in planning for this work and in building solid solutions that will ensure success for these boys in school.

The Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color provides three guidance points for school staff who seek to improve school climate for these youth: become more conscious of their own cultural heritages and the values associated with those heritages; possess specific knowledge about the racial and ethnic groups that are represented in the school community; and learn approaches to working with students that demonstrate respect of cultural difference.[21]

Figure 4:
Summary of High School Early Warning Indicators

Type of Information	Indicator	Brief Description	Benchmark (Red Flag)
Attendance	Absenteeism rate	Number of days absent during the first 20 days, and each quarter of the first year of high school	The equivalent of more than 10 percent instructional time missed during the first year indicates student may be at risk
Course Performance	Course failures	Number of Fs in any semester-long course during the first year of high school	Even one failed course indicates student may be at risk
	Grade point average (GPA)	GPA for each semester and cumulative GPA	GPA under 2.0 indicates student may be at risk
	on-track indicator	Combination of the number of Fs in **core** academic courses and credits earned during the first year of high school	Two or more Fs in core academic courses *and/or* fewer than one-fourth of the credits required to graduate minus one indicate that student is off-track to graduate

Source: The National High School Center, 2008.

Interventions to Prevent High School Dropout

Having identified students displaying the warning signs of future dropout, communities must have targeted interventions in place to aid these young people. While no single model works best, years of dropout prevention programs and research point to key lessons to integrate into any model that a school, district, or state chooses to implement.

These lessons fall into four major categories:

1. School-wide reforms that support a philosophy of preventing school dropout
   a. Develop specialized high school preparatory classes to smooth the transition to high school for all students.

   b. Create "ninth-grade success academies"— schools within schools that create a smaller environment to nurture first-year students.

   c. Adopt discipline policies that focus on keeping youth in school.

   d. Create flexible options for students to attend school during day or in the evenings in order to address social and schedule factors that inhibit school success.

2. Academic supports to remediate and accelerate learning
   a. Provide catch-up courses in mathematics and reading using a block schedule format for students who need to earn additional credits.

   b. Provide intensive tutoring services to students who are behind.

   c. Use competency-based learning to enable each student to learn and accrue credits at his own pace and to accelerate education for older students.

3. Student supports that build character, leadership skills, and cultural identity
   a. Build relationships to bridge home and school life and increase communication among school, a student's family, and community agencies.

   b. Assign staff to monitor small groups of students in areas of attendance, behavior, and academic performance.

   c. Partner with community agencies to provide students with wraparound and social service supports.

   d. Develop programming opportunities that foster the formation of a positive cultural identity.

4. Community collaborations and cross-system supports
   a. Collaborate with the health and human services, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems to ease transitions across systems and help students and families access services.

   b. Engage the workforce system to maximize career exploration and access to work opportunities.

   c. Maximize the flow of information and data among all youth-serving systems to optimize the delivery of student supports.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AS A SOLUTION STRATEGY

The entire community must be engaged in a strategy to stem the dropout problem. Under-resourced schools often lack the capacity to address the academic needs of struggling students without outside supports. In high-poverty school districts, simply the number of students needing intervention often necessitates outside supports. In these communities, it is essential to leverage the resources and expertise of other youth-serving sys-

tems and community-based organizations to provide more comprehensive and holistic interventions. This is important for assuring school retention and academic progress, as well as for enhancing the students' personal development and exposure to broader horizons. Many successful school-community partnerships augment the student experience with cultural enrichment, career exposure, civic engagement, work experience, and mentorships, thus improving outcomes.

Additional unique needs and further considerations arise for students who live in poverty. Here again, community partnerships can and should play a significant role. Transportation and safety issues often afflict high-poverty communities, especially in neighborhoods with high rates of violence or gang activity. Students often face hunger, so providing meals may be a necessary element of educational intervention. Families may also face housing instability, mental health issues, or difficulty accessing public benefits, all of which are major distractions to students. Thus, partnerships with social service systems to address such needs also increase the likelihood of student success.

In addition, cultural identity formation is critical for boys and young men of color. In this area, cultural and faith-based organizations can play a significant role in partnership with schools. A boy's perceptions about who he is and what he is capable of becoming are directly tied to how he feels about himself as a person. Formation of a positive cultural identity leads to enhanced self esteem, reasoning ability, and healthy conflict resolution.[22] These outcomes help decrease behavioral incidents and increase academic achievement. Many boys and young men have had little opportunity to gain a deep understanding of their rich heritage. They have formed their cultural identities based on images in their communities and what they see in the media, neither of which provides much hope.

For older students who have dropped out of school but seek opportunities to complete their education, school partnerships with community-based organizations and other youth systems offer promise. By blending resourc-

es with other systems, school districts can provide new and varied pathways to graduation that consider the needs of diverse students. Many innovative school districts have partnered to create smaller supportive learning environments, contextualized and accelerated learning, competency-based award of credits, wraparound supports, and other innovative practices to support high-risk students whose needs cannot be adequately addressed in the traditional learning environment.

EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS

Diplomas Now operates primarily in high-poverty, high-minority communities in 11 cities: Boston, Chicago, Detroit, East Baton Rouge, Los Angeles, Miami, New Orleans, New York City, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Washington, DC. Drawing on the research of Robert Balfanz and the Everyone Graduates Center, its program model is based on the idea that middle and high schools in low-income communities and communities of color often have hundreds of students who are at significant risk of dropping out of high school. Schools are not prepared to handle this level of need; they require additional staffing support and resources to keep these students on a path to graduation.[23] By partnering with City Year and Communities in Schools, Diplomas Now programs train staff who work with small groups of students to ensure regular attendance, homework completion, good behavior, the provision of assistance with coursework, and wraparound or social service supports.

Diplomas Now reports impressive results. In Philadelphia, the program operates in three middle schools, with a reported 55 percent reduction in the number of students with attendance below 80 percent, an 82 percent reduction in the number of students receiving an F in math, and a 78 percent reduction in the number of students receiving an F in English. In a New Orleans high school, Diplomas Now reports a decrease in the proportion of ninth graders missing 20 or more days a year from 79 percent to 52 percent. In addition, there is a 19 percent increase in the number of students earning As and Bs and a 40 percent reduction in the average number of suspension days.[24]

FUTURES Works serves at-risk Baltimore City high school students. Students of color make up 92 percent of the student body of Baltimore City Public Schools, and 73 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. The program is a collaboration among the Baltimore City Public School System, the Mayor's Office of Employment Development, and the U.S. Department of Labor, and it operates daily comprehensive services in two Baltimore high schools.[25] The program targets youth who have a history of poor attendance and a grade-point average of less than 2.0 in 7th and 8th grades, or who have been retained at least once during a previous grade level.[26] The program provides the support of caring adult advocates, life skills workshops, cultural enrichment activities, mentoring, service learning, job shadowing, summer jobs, and incentives to increase attendance and academic performance. In the 2010-11 school year, FUTURES Works served 330 high school students. Participants had an 87 percent school attendance rate, which is far higher than other Baltimore City high school students. At the end of the year, 87 percent of students either graduated or successfully passed to the next grade.[27]

OPPortunity High School (OHS) in Hartford, Connecticut, is a partnership between Hartford Public Schools and Our Piece of the Pie, a local youth development agency. Students of color make up 93 percent of the student body of Hartford Public Schools, and 92 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Opened in 2009, OHS serves youth who have been unsuccessful in a traditional high school setting but are motivated to get a high school diploma. The school serves youth ages 18 and younger who have been in high school for at least one year but do not have enough credits for their age-appropriate grade.[28] OHS provides individualized attention and intensive support services in a smaller environment and with added supports help to mitigate the barriers to success that students face each day. The school operates a year-round, extended-day model of rigorous academics, enrichment activities, internships, and extension activities within the community. A Youth Development Specialist works with each student and his parents and teachers to assure he achieves his educational, personal skills, and employment goals. In its second year of operation, OHS reported that 95 percent of students earned more credits at OHS than in their previous year of high school, with 41 percent of students earning triple the number of credits than their previous year of high school. OHS graduated 81 students in June 2011.[29]

Conclusion

If education is to be the great equalizer and prepare all students for college and careers, then our system is desperately failing boys and young men of color. Far too few boys and young men of color complete high school on time, and outcomes for these young men, and for their communities, are often disastrous. The impact on their health, as well as the health of their families and communities, is significant.

Clearly, our nation has a long way to go to ensure that all students have equal access to a high-quality education and are appropriately supported to attain that education. An important part of that process is for schools to use information that is readily available to them to identify and target educational services to boys and young men of color who are struggling. Our nation's schools need to become places where educational excellence and completion are the primary goals, and where all policies and practices reflect those goals. And schools must be able to engage the community resources and supports around them to share responsibility for this task.

Like all youth, boys and young men of color require a strong education in order to have healthy and productive adult lives and become the leaders of our next generation. Providing that education is the promise America makes to all kids. We must live up to that promise for boys and young men of color.

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