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An Evidence-Based Commentary

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This paper is a revised version of a presentation made to the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco on August 15, 2004. The nonpartisan Urban Institute publishes studies, reports, and books on timely topics worthy of public consideration. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Urban Institute or its board of trustees. Please direct correspondence to Christopher B. Swanson, The Urban Institute, Education Policy Center, 2100 M Street NW, Washington DC 20037. For more information contact the Urban Institute Public Affairs Office at 202-261-5709 or visit www.urban.org.

THE REAL TRUTH ABOUT LOW GRADUATION RATES, AN EVIDENCE-BASED COMMENTARY

Christopher B. Swanson

Achievement testing is the centerpiece of the state accountability systems mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Accordingly, the public attention directed towards achievement scores has largely eclipsed the crucial role that graduation rates play in NCLB accountability, at least until recently. As a new body of research on graduation rates is gaining wider currency, we are just now coming to an uncomfortable realization – the nation appears to be facing a crisis in high school completion. These findings have prompted much-needed investigations into several key issues: the origins of the law's concern about graduation rates; status of graduates and dropouts for NCLB accountability; the consequences of using different ways to define and measure graduation rates; and state strategies for incorporating graduation rates into their federal accountability plans. This paper draws on recent research and analysis from the Urban Institute in an attempt to clarify these issues and to offer a foundation upon which to ground on-going policy debates, future research into the graduation and dropout phenomena, and the shape of the next generation of educational accountability systems.

ASLEEP AT THE WHEEL

In an age of data-driven accountability, it is hard to imagine being surprised by a statistic, especially a basic piece of information that we think we already know. During the past year, as states have gone about the business of implementing the federal No Child Left Behind Act, the performance of the nation's public schools in a fundamental albeit largely neglected area has been brought into a penetrating and increasingly unflattering light. As it turns out, graduation rates are lower than previously thought, probably much lower.

If asked to guess the graduation rate in the nation's public schools, the conventional wisdom would suggest a figure in the neighborhood of 85 percent. For decades, in fact, commonly-reported statistics from the Current Population Survey and Census would have pointed to an answer in that range.[1] Databases such as these are readily available and well-known, which have made them attractive sources of information. At the same time, however, it is important to note that statistics from these sources typically capture the characteristics of the general young adult population (e.g., age 18 to 24) rather than those of students who are attending or have recently left public schools.

In addition, estimates from such population-based data sources are not able produce reliable annual estimates below the regional level, cannot readily distinguish between public and private school students, and may reflect the educational attainment of young adults who no longer live in the place where they attended, graduated from, or dropped out of high school. Consequently, population statistics are ill-suited for measuring the performance of public education systems, which is now a primary concern under NCLB.

A much more sanguine picture emerges from a recent wave of reports based on data derived directly from the actual public school systems being held accountable under No Child Left Behind.[2] To take an example from a growing body of studies, research from the Urban Institute suggests that today slightly more than two-thirds of public high school students nationwide receive a diploma (Exhibit 1). Even more disturbing is the finding that little more than one-half of students from historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups finish high school. The situation appears to be even more dire for students in our nation's largest high poverty urban districts, where as few as one-third of *all* students graduate. In these places, completion rates among certain disadvantaged groups of students are often lower still.

Exhibit 1
Graduation Rates for the High School Class of 2001

	Public School Graduation Rate
National Graduation Rate	**68.0%**
National by Race/Ethnicity	
Native American	51.1%
Asian	76.8%
Hispanic	53.2%
Black	50.2%
White	74.9%
Selected Urban Districts	
New York City	38.2%
Los Angeles	46.4%
Chicago	48.8%
Houston	40.2%
Philadelphia	41.9%
Cleveland	30.0%
Oakland	30.4%

Source: Urban Institute.

SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

The responses to this news have run the gamut, from professions of disbelief, to accusations of deception, to charges that the federal government has been derelict in its duty to faithfully enact the law. These reactions have made for lively debate, not to mention attention-grabbing headlines. In particular, well-publicized incidents in certain large school districts have served to call increased attention to the gravity of this problem.

This heightened scrutiny to a neglected issue is welcome and might even be valuable, provided that we avoid the temptation to (perhaps inappropriately) over-generalize the experiences of a few high-profile cases. After all, first impressions and gut reactions must not be a substitute for careful thought and good-faith efforts to comprehend the more fundamental causes of the high school completion crisis we appear to be facing. In the end, there are the easy answers and then there are the more difficult and less obvious, but deeper, truths that lie beneath the surface. Only the latter will lead to lasting solutions.

DEALING WITH DISBELIEF

Depending on whom you ask, we have the No Child Left Behind Act either to thank or to blame for the unpleasant discovery of low graduation rates. Passed into law in January of 2002, this sweeping federal legislation for the first time holds the nation's public schools accountable for both achievement test scores and graduation rates.[3] Naturally, attaching high stakes to graduation rates has raised the profile of high school completion as a public issue. This has in turn prompted educators, policymakers and researchers to devote increased attention to this essential indicator of educational performance.

But perhaps more importantly, the new accountability also demands that we think about and measure graduation rates in new ways – not in terms of the educational attainment levels of the young adult population but in terms of how effectively the public schools provide a quality education to the students they serve. Old population statistics and new school system statistics are apples and oranges respectively. And in the era of No Child Left Behind, the standing order of the day is for orange juice.

That said, the task of developing methodologically sound but practical indicators for measuring graduation rates in a manner appropriate for school accountability purposes is bringing us into territory that is newer and more unfamiliar than many of us seem to realize. In fact, states have really only recently begun to devote careful attention to the way in which they collect and use information about dropout and graduation rates. Prior to the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, only a handful of states (eight) collected data on graduate rates and used those results to assign rewards and sanctions in their accountability systems (Exhibit 2). By contrast, thirteen states attached stakes to dropout rates and thirty-two had done so for achievement test scores.

No Child Left Behind now requires that all state accountability systems evaluate high school performance based on both the results of academic assessments and graduation rates. States may face a

Exhibit 2
State Accountability Systems in 2001

✓ = Stakes (rewards/sanctions) attached to performance

	Graduation Rates	Dropout Rates	Achievement Scores
Alabama			✓
Alaska			
Arizona			✓
Arkansas			
California	✓		✓
Colorado			✓
Connecticut			
Delaware			✓
Florida			✓
Georgia			✓
Hawaii			
Idaho			
Illinois	✓		✓
Indiana	✓		✓
Iowa			
Kansas	✓	✓	✓
Kentucky		✓	✓
Louisiana		✓	✓
Maine			
Maryland		✓	✓
Massachusetts			✓
Michigan			✓
Minnesota			
Mississippi			✓
Missouri		✓	✓
Montana			
Nebraska		✓	✓
Nevada			✓
New Hampshire			
New Jersey			✓
New Mexico			✓
New York		✓	✓
North Carolina			✓
North Dakota			
Ohio	✓		✓
Oklahoma	✓	✓	✓
Oregon		✓	✓
Pennsylvania	✓		✓
Rhode Island			
South Carolina	✓	✓	✓
South Dakota			
Tennessee		✓	✓
Texas		✓	✓
Utah			
Vermont			
Virginia			✓
Washington			
West Virginia		✓	✓
Wisconsin			
Wyoming			
Total	**8**	**13**	**32**

Source: *State Performance Indicators* (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, 2002)

long road towards achieving full compliance with these requirements if they have not collected information on graduation and dropout rates in the past, or at least if they have not done so in a systematic manner. The majority of states, in fact, are in just this position at present. The newness of graduation rate statistics may help to account for some of the disbelief expressed around the country in light of the surprisingly anemic performance that recent studies have revealed with respect to completion levels in the public schools.

In many places, solid information about graduation rates simply may not have existed in the past. While dropout rate statistics have been somewhat more widely available, researchers have long argued that dropouts tend to be systematically undercounted, for a variety of reasons. This factor has likely contributed to an overly rosy perception of high completion levels. For some decision-makers low graduation rates will be an uncomfortable truth that must be faced. And for some it will be necessary to progress through the stages of disbelief, denial, and acceptance before moving on and resolving to meet this challenge, armed with determination and better data about the hurdles ahead.

Graduation rates have long been relegated to a dark, dusty corner of the educational statistics enterprise. Only recently have concerns about high school completion started to inch toward center stage and steal a small part of the spotlight that has historically been (and continues to be) dominated by achievement test scores. Despite widespread agreement that obtaining a high school diploma represents a critical avenue for social, economic, and personal advancement, this is simply not an outcome we have spent much time or effort trying to measure in a uniform and careful way.

In fact, at present there is no widely accepted and scientifically validated method for calculating graduation rates that could be systematically applied to the data currently available to states, districts, and schools across the nation. Certainly this must change if we are to gain some traction on what at times seems to be an intractable problem. Accomplishing this goal will require taking a more thoughtful approach to statistical issues and applying more rigorous methodologies. So at the risk of repeating an old academic mantra, it would seem that more research is needed. It should also be added, however, that this is an area where we know much less than we suspect.

PRACTICING DECEPTIVE PRACTICES

During the past year, accusations have been raised that some school districts may be using deceptive practices to effectively mask the true extent of their dropout problems. Two school systems in particular have received a hearty dose of national scrutiny.[4] In the Houston school district over a dozen schools were accused of a combination falsifying data on dropouts and practicing poor record keeping. According to an independent audit, reported dropout rates in those schools were less than half of the true rates. Investigations into the New York City public schools have revealed what appear to be concerted attempts to push lower performing students out of regular high schools and into alternative educational programs. Students in such programs often remain on the schools districts rolls (and therefore would not count as dropouts) but stand little if any real chance of ever receiving a diploma. Because these students would tend to score lower on academic assessments, removing them would also boost achievement levels for the schools they left.

There is little mystery as to why goings-on in these two systems would cause a stir. On the one hand, the Houston schools were held up as a prime example of the "Texas Miracle" in education, a leader in a state accountability system that would become a model for No Child Left Behind. On the other hand, the New York City school district is the nation's largest, serving over one million students. Should worst fears prove to be true, the kinds of actions that have been reported would represent unethical and perhaps even unlawful attempts to whitewash real educational problems that need to be addressed.

Of course, the situation on the ground in these cities might very well prove to be more akin to benign neglect or a sin of omission than outright deception. Data systems may not have been up to the difficult task of keeping track of student who moved around from one school or program to another. The school systems may have been quick to move failing students into alternative programs but slow to label them as dropouts when the left school. On paper, these alternative programs may appear to offer the students they serve an opportunity to move back into regular schooling or otherwise obtain a high school diploma. But they may hold out very little promise in practice. Fortunately, investigations are currently underway to uncover the truth behind these accusations. Serious inquiries are necessary because charges that students have been deprived of a meaningful education are serious ones. But because the consequences for students and schools are also potentially very high, we should reserve final judgment on corrective actions until all the facts are known and their implications understood.

It is also quite possibly the case that events in Houston and New York City are just the tip of the iceberg. In order devise the right solutions to this predicament, however, we need to know how far below the surface the dropout and "pushout" problems go. There is a fairly strong consensus that we are undercounting dropouts, probably by a substantial margin. Although some share of the problem can be attributed to ill-intentioned attempts to hide the truth, we have no systematic way of knowing the extent of such deceptions. While this is all the more reason for continuing probes where these infractions are uncovered, we should also not lose sight of the fact that anecdotes are no substitute for systematic evidence.

Widely-publicized scandals certainly grab our attention. But they can also distract us from more fundamental matters that underlie and facilitate such deceptive practices. It is likely that the bulk of the dropout undercount results from a more benign albeit still troubling root cause – an underdeveloped and under-resourced data collection infrastructure. Genuine uncertainty often surrounds the status of a former student who is no longer enrolled at a particular school, even after good-faith attempts have been made to locate that student. Has she dropped out? Did he transfer to a different school or district, or even move out of state? It can be truly difficult for schools to tell the difference – although the distinction makes a tremendous amount of difference when it comes to calculating dropout or graduation rates.

When a statistic is cited in the press or used in public debates, it is all too easy to accept that number without a second thought. We can overlook the fact that these figures are based on data, and that those data come from somewhere. Ultimately, that *somewhere* is an overworked, understaffed school or district office where information about students is first compiled.

Furthermore, we often forget that data are hard to collect. Tracking down missing students can be exceedingly difficult, particularly in communities characterized by household instability and high rates of mobility. Finding these students requires time and effort and takes limited resources away from other, perhaps more central, priorities like improving student learning.

Faced with the reality of a student whose status is genuinely unknown, a decision must ultimately be made about how to categorize that individual. We should ask if it is realistic to expect accountable school systems to treat these unknown students as dropouts, particularly when administrative procedures may allow (or even require) these individuals to be classified as transfers or in other ways that will cast the system in a more favorable light. What would we do in their place? Perhaps much the same thing.

Administrative record keeping for the public schools can be exceedingly convoluted, to say the least. State administrative systems, for example, routinely have dozens of ways to categorize students who leave a school. As a result, information generated by such record systems can be constrained in such a way that important definitional and procedural decisions that affect the data (e.g., whether to classify a missing student as a transfer or a dropout) are made long before statistics like graduation rates are released for public scrutiny. So, we should also be asking why such Byzantine accounting procedures exist in the first place and whether they can be reformed in a way that brings more sunshine and transparency to accountability over graduation and dropout rates.

The solution to these dilemmas, in part, lies in keeping better tabs on our students. Unfortunately, relatively few states currently have functional data systems that allow them to track individual students over the course of their educational careers, particularly as they move from school to school. Increasing numbers of states are moving towards establishing comprehensive data systems that can be used to systematically collect large amounts of data on students. The potential benefits of carefully following students are self-evident. We will lose track of fewer students, we will know more about them, and it will become increasingly difficult to cover-up a dropout crisis. In reality, of course, it may be years before these data systems are widely available and fully operational.

Exhibit 3
Texas High School Leaver Codes

Completed High School Program	
01	Student graduated
19	Student failed exit-level TAAS but met all other graduation requirements
31	Student completed the GED, and district has acceptable documentation and student has not returned to school
63	Student graduated in a previous school year, returned to school, and left again
64	Student had received a GED in a previous school year, returned to school to work toward the completion of a high school diploma, and then left
Moved to Other Educational Setting	
80	Student withdrew from/left school to enroll in another Texas public school district
81	Student withdrew from/left school to enroll in a private school in Texas
82	Student withdrew from/left school to enroll in a public or private school outside Texas
21	Student who still resides in the district officially transferred to another Texas public school district
22	Student withdrew from/left school to attend an alternative program, is in compliance with compulsory attendance laws, and district has acceptable documentation that the student is working toward the completion of high school (diploma or GED certificate)
72	Student was court ordered to attend an alternative education program.
60	Student withdrew from/left school for home schooling
24	Student withdrew from/left school to enter college and is working towards an Associate's or Bachelor's degree
Withdrawn by School District	
78	Student was expelled under the provisions of TEC §37.007 and cannot return to school
79*	Student was expelled under the provisions of TEC §37.007 but can now return to school and has not done so
83	Student was withdrawn from school by the district when the district discovered that the student was not a resident at the time of enrollment or had falsified enrollment information, proof of identification was not provided, or immunization records were not provided
Academic Performance	
84*	Student withdrew from/left school for reasons related to academic performance such as low or failing grades, poor attendance, language problems, or TAAS failure
14*	Student withdrew from/left school because of age
Employment	
02*	Student withdrew from/ left school to pursue a job or job training
04*	Student withdrew from/ left school to join the military
Family	
08*	Student withdrew from/left school because of pregnancy
09*	Student withdrew from/left school because of marriage
15*	Student withdrew from/left school because of homelessness or non-permanent residency
66	Student was removed by Child Protective Services (CPS) and the district has not been informed of the student's current status or enrollment
Other Reasons	
03	Student died while enrolled in school or during the summer break after completing the prior school year
10*	Student withdrew from/left school because of alcohol or other drug abuse problems
16	Student withdrew from/left school to return to family's home country
30	Student withdrew from/left school to enter a health care facility
61	Student was incarcerated in a facility outside the boundaries of the district
99*	Other (reason unknown or not listed above)

** Students in this category are considered dropouts.*
Source: 2002-03 PEIMS Data Standards, Texas Education Agency.

To be truly effective, however, these tracking systems must also be both transparent and adequately resourced. Even where these systems currently exist, there might be so many ways to classify students who leave schools that administrative sleight of hand could still be used to make dropouts disappear. Texas is a prime example in this regard. The state has a sophisticated data system that tracks individual students but that also offers thirty different administrative codes for classifying students who leave school (Exhibit 3).

It is widely understood that setting up statewide information systems can be a complicated and expensive undertaking. But we should not lose sight of some additional facts – these systems are also costly to properly operate on an *on-going* basis and the brunt of the work and expense will be borne by local school staff who compile the data at the source. State data systems must be continually nourished at the grassroots if they are to flourish and yield reliable results at the state level.

DELINQUENT REGULATION

To give credit where credit is due, the No Child Left Behind Act must be recognized as a wide-reaching, complex, ground-breaking piece of legislation. But it also poses tremendous challenges for effective implementation. In practice the regulation of such a law, much like governing itself, often becomes a matter of assigning priorities and making choices. So while the language of NCLB clearly calls for meaningful accountability over high school graduation rates, accusations have been leveled against the Department of Education for failing to make this aspect of the law a sufficiently important focus for aggressive implementation.[5] It needs to be said that these charges do have some merit. The Department had a real opportunity to introduce uniform and rigorous standards for accountability over graduation rates through two major mechanisms – drafting regulations to guide states in implementing the law and withholding approval of state accountability plans unless those states adequately addressed the legislative requirements and the law's intent with respect to graduation rates.

There are specific areas where it appears that the Department has failed to seize upon these opportunities to fully live up to the spirit of the law or has chosen not to do so in light of other higher-priority goals. For instance, graduation rates must be taken into consideration when determining whether a high school has made its goals for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). But accountability for graduation rates is effectively held to less stringent standards than is the case for achievement test scores (Exhibit 4). The states have been afforded a tremendous (and arguably an unacceptable) amount of latitude in implementing several key elements their accountability systems. These areas include the choice of methods for calculating graduation rates and the amount of weight attached to graduation rates when determining whether a school is performing adequately. In short, the federal government has not enforced consistent approaches to accountability over high school graduation rates from state to state. At the very least, a much greater degree of uniformity appears to be required under the law with regard to academic assessments.

Exhibit 4
Achievement, Graduation Rates and AYP

	Proposition is True or False when applied to …	
Proposition about NCLB Accountability	**Academic Achievement**	**High School Graduation**
NCLB sets a final performance goal to be met by the 2013-14 school year	**True** (100% of students "proficient")	**False** (Goals set by states)
States **must** establish Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs) as annual interim performance goals	**True**	**False**
Performance results must be ***publicly reported*** in the aggregate for all students and disaggregated for specific subgroups	**True**	**True***
To make AYP in the "first instance" schools must meet goals: 1. in the aggregate ***and*** 2. disaggregated for each subgroup †	**True**	**False**

** States are required to publicly report graduation rates for subgroups. However, states may decide whether these disaggregated graduation rates are actually used for the purposes of AYP determination.*

† High schools that fail to make AYP in the first instance have a second chance to avoid being labeled "in need of improvement" under the law's "Safe Harbor" provision, if they: (1) reduce the proportion of students in the applicable category who are non-proficient on assessment scores by 10 percent, and (2) make the performance goal for graduation rates for that category.

Prospects for the future, however, may not be as bleak as they appear at first or actually may be at present. The accountability systems mandated under No Child Left Behind are very much a work in progress, with states continuing to refine their plans in both large and small way. Further revisions are also likely in the years to come in many states. As a result, the federal government may yet have another chance to reassess its priorities and take a more aggressive stance towards graduation rate accountability. In a sense, this would require the Department to make a midcourse correction that could prove unpopular among states that would rather remain on their current, and perhaps smoother, course. Only time will tell whether the Department has desire and political will to take such steps.

Finding fault with federal educational initiatives sometimes has the tendency to degenerate into a mudslinging contest. This is particularly true when there is real fault to be found, as may arguably be the case here. But it is equally important to acknowledge the significant contributions that the new federal law has made. For the first time, the No Child Left Behind Act introduced significant performance-based accountability over graduation rates into federal legislation, with the intent of preventing schools from raising test scores at the expense of pushing low-performing students out of school.[6] Of course, that safety valve only works if the law is aggressively enforced, which seems not to be the case at present. A strong federal authority for exerting leadership to implement meaningful accountability over graduation rates is clearly written in to the law. So despite lax enforcement now, there is no legal impediment barring the Department from adopting a stronger position on this issue in the future.

In this particular line of debate surrounding the graduation crisis, as in others discussed above, a more basic yet broader issue has rarely sparked discussed. Namely, few people are asking what kind of spirit we want this next generation of educational accountability systems to embody. Too often No Child Left Behind has been characterized as little more than an excuse for a distant federal government to impose punitive sanctions on local schools. Some critics allege that low performing schools are singled out and stigmatized as failures but that the resources needed to turn these schools around are not being provided. (Other far less charitable and conspiracy-minded portrayals of the situation have gone much farther. The most extreme accounts suggest that federal government, in fact, has no intention of actually improving struggling schools and that the secret agenda of No Child Left Behind lies in privatizing the nation's public schools).

There is some truth to be found in at least some of the *more reasoned* arguments about the new accountability. But for the most part they miss a more important point. For federally-initiated accountability over graduation rates to work effectively and to actually improve the education being provided to students, it must evolve as a true partnership among federal, state and local actors. Why? Because each of these parties has a critical role to play when implementing these systems and an important stake in the outcomes of the process. Federal authorities may be responsible for putting the law into effect in a general sense – setting broad guidelines and seeing that they are adhered to. The states, however, draw up the detailed blueprints for building the mandated accountability systems and they customize the broad federal plans in ways that best meet the needs of their own local constituencies.

Although these accountability plans are subject to federal approval, the states maintain exclusive legitimate jurisdiction over critical elements of the process. With respect to graduation rates, for instance, the states – not the federal government – retain the authority to establish the requirements that their own students must meet in order to receive a high school diploma. These might include completing certain courses, performing community service, or passing a high school exit exam. Not only do these standards for graduation vary from state to state, but they may also be altered over time at the state's discretion.

In this regard, accountability over graduation rates is no different than that for achievement assessments. States choose the specific test (or tests) used to measure student performance and may set and later change their expectations for acceptable levels of mastery on mandated assessments. In fact, in the wake of No Child Left Behind a number of states have reset (that is, lowered) the test score thresholds that define the "proficient" level of performance required under the federal law.[7]

Local actors have perhaps the most important jobs in this enterprise – actually educating students, implementing interventions for those at risk of dropping

out, and monitoring whether students graduate or dropout or end up somewhere in between. There is a great deal of potential for engaging in both non-compliance and mischief on the ground. Either of these possibilities could hobble a new accountability system before it even leaves the starting gate by eroding public confidence in reported graduation data. Negative impulses might be kept in check through strict, heavy-handed, top-down enforcement strategies. But they could also be minimized by ensuring that local actors, alongside federal and state authorities, have a meaningful role in developing and implementing school accountability. Remove or weaken one link in this federal-state-local chain, and the accountability system could fall apart.

THE REAL TRUTH

What is the real truth about high school graduation rates? Is it well-founded disbelief, deceptive practices, or delinquent enforcement of the law? Like most complex issue, there is no single right answer. All of these explanations have a kernel of truth, and perhaps a good deal more than that. But here we also stand before a more uncomplicated reality that is often brushed aside in our enthusiasm to expound, postulate, and opine. Quite simply, too many of our children finish their education without a high school diploma and that cannot be acceptable. How many? Of the roughly four million ninth graders attending public schools each year, about 1.3 million will fail to graduate. The majority of these non-graduates are members of racial and ethnic minority groups.[8]

Lacking solid data on the true depth and breadth of this crisis, it has been tempting in the past to explain away the problem as an isolated one that only the most troubled urban or rural areas need to worry about. But when almost one in three entering high school students nationwide fails to earn a diploma, this becomes everyone's problem. This is a problem that was around well before No Child Left Behind entered the national stage. And this is not just an isolated crisis that will quickly pass by once we tinker around the edges of the federal regulations and state accountability schemes or clean house in a few very badly-behaved school districts.

Those are good places to start, but we are facing an epidemic that will demand systemic remedies. Finding a cure calls for a renewed and fundamental commitment to making sure that all students are provided with the knowledge and skills they need not just to survive but to thrive in the world of tomorrow. That will require at least a high school diploma and also the meaningful education to back up that credential. Specifically, we will need at least three basic things to make all of this happen – *Knowledge*, *Accountability*, and *Commitment*.

Knowledge is an essential tool because only by developing better methods for empirically measuring the high school completion crisis will be know exactly how serious the problem is, where the pain is most acute and in need of remedy, and what the most effective cure will be. Important steps in the right direction are already under way. These range from the growing body of research on the issue being produced by independent analysts to a new expert panel convened by the Department of Education that has been charged with the task of identifying the most scientifically-rigorous ways of collecting data and measuring graduation and dropout rates.[9] Statistics may not always be sexy or sell papers, but they can sometimes help to solve problems.

Accountability systems, if they are to function properly, must involve all affected parties in a meaningful way and establish clear expectations and responsibilities for each respective agent. Buy-in can be as critical a factor for building an accountability system as it is for carrying out a potentially unpopular school reform or intervention. Thoughtful accountability must be about more than just sanctions and rewards – it must be about providing students with the opportunities they need to achieve to their fullest potential. There are six principles of ***smart accountability*** that policymakers should keep in mind when it comes to high school graduation.

1. States should calculate graduation rates using methods that research indicates are valid and reliable. Unfortunately, the existing research base can provide only limited guidance in this area at the moment.

2. It may not be necessary for all states use the same method for calculating graduation rates. But the federal government should provide a short list of recommended approaches and perform an independent analysis of graduation rates to serve as a reality check against state-generated results.

3. There should be meaningful and (eventually) attainable goals for graduation rates. States should map out a year-by-year improvement schedule and persistent failure to make progress should carry real consequences.

4. If we are serious about closing the high school completion gap, principles smart accountability and social justice demand that real stakes must attached to the graduation rates of individual student subgroups. Otherwise, it will be all too easy to lose sight for our most disadvantaged students, as has happened so often in the past.

5. Concern about graduation rates must also go hand-in-hand with high standards for academic achievement. A diploma without the knowledge and skills to back it up is nothing more than a worthless scrap of paper.

6. Accountability must evolve beyond its current punitive spirit, to become relentlessly and constructively focused on providing children with the supports and services they need to succeed. Only when educational accountability becomes a true partnership among federal, state, and local stakeholders will it be able to serve its intended purpose, improving the education and lives of our nation's youth.

Finally, the public education system from top-to-bottom must have the ***Commitment*** necessary to make this knowledge-driven, highly-accountable mission of school improvement a success. Some educational leaders will have to face the unpleasant truth that they are not serving their students as well they should be, or thought they were. Implementing lasting change will also require significant investments in the basic infrastructure of teaching and learning and innovative solutions to persistent problems, not to mention a large dose of political will.

This will not be easy work. In fact, it will be exceedingly difficult. The road toward making every student a high school graduate will be a long and steep one. Along the way, we will have to face uncomfortable realizations about the quality of the education we provide in this country. But, like it or not, we stand on the threshold of a new era for public schooling in which performance-based accountability is the coin of the realm. If we seize upon the opportunities that lie before us, great things may be accomplished. If not, we run the risk of relegating much of the next generation to a life of mediocrity, at best. And that is not a risk we should be willing to take with the future.

ENDNOTES

1. The Current Population Survey has been a primary sources of information on high school dropout and completion rates reported by the U.S. Department of Education for several decades. See, *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

2. Several reports released by the Urban Institute have contributed to this new wave of research on high school graduation: *Keeping Count and Losing Count: Calculating Graduation Rates for All Students under NCLB Accountability* (Washington, DC, Urban Institute, 2003); *Who Graduates? Who Doesn't? A Statistical Portrait of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001* (Washington, DC, Urban Institute, 2004); *Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis* (Cambridge, MA, The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and the Urban Institute, 2004). Other organizations have arrived at similar findings regarding the extent of the high school completion crisis: *Telling the Whole Truth (or Not) About High School Graduation* (Washington, DC, The Education Trust, 2003); *Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates in the United States* (New York, The Manhattan Institute, 2003); *Locating the Dropout Crisis* (Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University, 2004)

3. The No Child Behind Act of 2001, was signed into law as Public Law 107-110 on January 8, 2002.

4. Events in Houston and New York City have received extensive coverage from national and regional media, including in: *The New York Times* (Questions on Data Cloud Luster of Houston Schools, July 11, 2003; To Cut Failure Rate, Schools Shed Students, July 31, 2003; High School Under Scrutiny for Giving Up on Its Students, August 1, 2003; Lawsuit Says Manhattan High School Illegally Discharged Students Without Hearings, October 15, 2003; A Miracle Revisited, Gains in Houston: How Real are They? December 3, 2003), *The Houston Chronicle* (HISD Granted 6 Months to Improve Record Keeping, State Agency Lowers Rating at 15 Schools, August 8, 2003); and *Education Week* (Houston Faces Questions on Dropout Data, July 9, 2003; Houston Case Offers Lesson on Dropouts, September 24, 2003).

5. The accountability provisions of concern in this paper are contained in Title I Part A of the No Child Left Behind Act. More specifically, the graduation rate definition is located at 20 U.S.C. 6311((b)(2)(C)(vi); 115 STAT.1447. Additional analysis of NCLB accountability and implementation issues related to graduation rates can be found in several recent Urban Institute reports: *NCLB Implementation Report: State Approaches for Calculating High School Graduation Rates* 2003); and *Ten Questions (and Answers) about Graduates, Dropouts, and NCLB Accountability* (2003).

6. See Joint Explanatory Statement of the Committee of Conference to House Report 107-334 at note 137 accompanying the Conference Report.

7. The practice of lowering proficiency standards on state assessments following the implementation of No Child Left Behind has been reported in Education Week (States Revise the Meaning of 'Proficient' October 9, 2002) and other sources.

8. These statistic are taken from *Projections of 2003-04 High School Graduates: Supplemental Analyses based on findings from Who Graduates? Who Doesn't?* (Washington, D.C., The Urban Institute).

9. Department of Education press release December 19, 2003, "Paige Announces Expert Panel to Review High School Dropout and Graduation Rates."

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