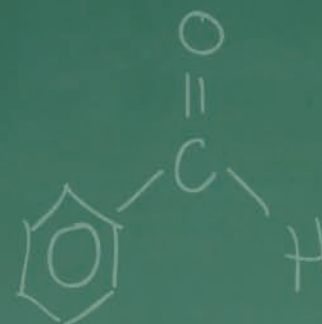


# RAISING THEIR VOICES

Engaging students, teachers,  
and parents to help end the  
High School Dropout Epidemic

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A REPORT BY CIVIC ENTERPRISES

IN ASSOCIATION WITH PETER D. HART RESEARCH ASSOCIATES  
For the AT&T Foundation and the America's Promise Alliance



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**“Until we start having  
these sit-down  
conversations,  
nothing’s going  
to change.”**

— A teacher from Dallas



## LETTER TO COMMUNITIES

Last year, President Barack Obama issued a challenge to the American people to become more actively engaged in reforming the K–12 public education system. Although the President emphasized that students are responsible for their own educational progress, he extended this responsibility to all Americans. “It’s up to their parents. It’s up to their teachers,” he said. “It’s up to all of us.” This challenge came amidst a troubling crisis in our nation’s schools: every year, nearly one-third of all public high school students—and almost one-half of minorities—fail to graduate with their class. These high dropout rates have negative consequences for dropouts themselves, our economy, and the civic fabric of communities. The success of our young people is ultimately a collective endeavor, and we know that students, parents, and teachers are central to finding solutions.

After conducting research and issuing three reports on the perspectives of high school dropouts (*The Silent Epidemic*, 2006), parents (*One Dream, Two Realities*, 2007), and teachers (*On the Front Lines of Schools*, 2009), we discovered that these constituencies share different and often conflicting views of the causes and cures of dropout. We found that students, parents, and teachers have perspectives that exhibit significant disconnects that, if not more fully understood and bridged, will continue to set back efforts to keep more young people in school and on track to graduate prepared for postsecondary education. We brought together these three key constituencies, from the same schools, in Baltimore, Maryland; Dallas, Texas; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Kingsport, Tennessee. In each case, individuals remarked that this was the first time that teachers, parents, and students had been brought together to talk about any issue, including the dropout crisis. The discussions were

enlightening and constructive and fostered an atmosphere of mutual respect.

A primary purpose of this report is to present the findings from the candid discussions that were held in these four communities and to provide deeper insights around the disconnects that have inhibited communication. We found that the act of bringing these individuals together shed light on the barriers that each group faces and led to a collective will to combat the problems that stand in the way of student success. In order to arm other communities with the tools they will need to have similar dialogues, and to engage these three vital constituencies in common solutions to combat the epidemic of student dropout, we have attached the discussion

guide we used in each of the four communities that contains all the guidelines needed to facilitate this conversation in a productive and action-oriented manner. Although these discussions varied from community to community and are not nationally representative, the findings from these focus groups have national implications that will serve other communities well as they strive to reverse the disturbing trend of high school dropout.

We hope the following report will help communities bridge the gaps among parents, students, and teachers, and smooth the pathways to high school graduation, postsecondary success, a more productive workforce, and a more prosperous nation.





## INTRODUCTION

High dropout rates continue to be a silent epidemic afflicting our nation's schools. Although some measurable progress is being made in some school districts and states to raise high school graduation rates, and federal, state, and local policies and practices are changing to meet the dropout challenge, the nation's progress is too slow and the individual, social, and economic costs continue to mount.<sup>1</sup>

Four years ago, we released a report—*The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*—to understand why nearly one-third of all public high school students, and almost one-half of African American, Hispanic, and Native American students decide to discontinue their education. We wanted to understand who they were, why they had dropped out, and what might have helped them graduate. We discovered that while some students dropped out because of academic challenges, most believed they could have graduated if the right supports from their schools, communities, and parents had been provided. Indeed, real world events, such as having to get a job to make money or becoming pregnant, were cited by many of these students as the main reason for dropping out. Others said they were failing in school or had missed too many days to stay on track. For almost all of these students, the decision to drop out was not made quickly, but was a slow process of disengagement from school.<sup>2</sup>

The leading reason cited by students for dropping out was surprising. Dropouts reported not seeing the connection between classroom learning and their own lives and career dreams. Nearly half cited “boredom” and classes not being interesting as principal reasons for dropping out. They talked about “taking classes in school that

you're never going to use in life" or at least not understanding well enough why those classes were valuable. In addition, the majority of dropouts said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard, and many said they would have worked harder if more had been demanded of them. These students said they longed for better teachers who kept classes interesting and more one-on-one instruction from teachers who knew their names and what their interests actually were. They cited low levels of parent engagement in their education, and for those whose parents did engage, parents' getting involved too late.



The insights of these young people provided much needed clarity regarding the factors that cause ap-

proximately 1.2 million students to drop out every year. The response to their perspectives initially prompted a national dialogue that brought together policymakers from the federal government and all 50 states, in addition to a nationwide coalition of leaders in education that prompted action at the federal and state levels to address the dropout challenge. Following an action-forcing summit, a federation of organizations led by the America's Promise Alliance convened more than 100 summits in all 50 states to address the dropout epidemic in our nation's communities, prompting locally-developed

dropout prevention and recovery plans with accountability for results.

In the context of these state and local summits, we soon discovered that the perspectives of parents, teachers, and administrators were missing. Thus we subsequently released *One Dream, Two Realities: Perspectives of Parents on America's High Schools* and *On the Front Lines of Schools: Perspectives of Teachers and Principals on the High School Dropout Problem* to capture these distinct points of view.

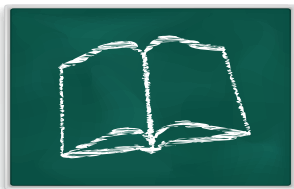
Our report from the perspective of parents helped explain why many parents seem difficult to engage in the education of their children, despite the fact that parents, regardless of their income, race, ethnicity, or the schools their children attend, share common beliefs about the importance of education and see how important their own engagement is to their child's academic success. These parents were very clear on the concrete steps that would help engage them, including prompt notification of academic or other problems, earlier contact in 8th and 9th grades on what constitutes success for their child, homework hotlines, clear information on graduation and college admission requirements, and a single point of contact at the school.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, our report from the perspective of teachers gave voice to the daunting challenges they face in the classroom: adapting curriculum expectations to fit the inconsistent



preparation of their students; feeling alone in their efforts to be teachers; being asked to take on the additional roles of parents and social workers; and needing more supports at all levels, including from states, administrators, parents, communities, and students themselves. These teachers showed strong support for reforms to increase high school graduation rates, such as alternative learning environments, reducing class sizes, connecting classroom learning to real-world experiences, and expanding college-level learning opportunities for students.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Disturbing Disconnects*



The insights and perspectives of dropouts, parents, and teachers, married with what research over the decades

tells us about the causes of and solutions to the dropout challenge, informed a plan of action that includes new tools for schools and communities to draw on best research and practice to fashion local dropout prevention and recovery plans.<sup>5</sup> But those plans of action will not be nearly as effective as they could be without the input and cooperation of students, parents, and teachers.

Among our three reports we have identified a series of disconnects relating to why students decided to leave

high school, whether all students should be held to high standards, and what roles teachers and parents played in exacerbating the crisis. While dropouts cited boredom as the leading cause for dropping out, many educators we surveyed did not see this as the central cause. In fact, only 20 percent of teachers saw a student's lack of interest in school as a major factor in most cases of dropout. More than twice as many believed students were making excuses for their failure to graduate. Additionally, although students said that higher expectations would have mitigated the factors leading to their dropping out, only 32 percent of teachers agreed that we should expect all students to meet high academic standards and graduate with the skills that would enable them to do college-level work, and that we should provide extra support to struggling students to help them meet those standards.<sup>6</sup> Finally, even though parents of students trapped in low-performing schools saw the need for a rigorous curriculum and their own involvement as vital to student success, large majorities of teachers felt that the lack of parental engagement was a key factor in cases of dropout and reported how infrequently many parents were engaged in their children's education.<sup>7</sup> These disconnects are not peripheral, but central to the dropout debate; we wanted to explore these issues with a view toward bridging the divides.

## *Bridging the Divides*

The first step in addressing these serious disconnects over causes of failure, expectations, lines of communication, regularizing contact, and working cooperatively in the interests of children, is recognizing their existence and fostering dialogues across America among these three vital constituencies. Indeed, after hearing these divergent perspectives in our three reports, it was clear to us that we needed to get representatives of these three audiences, at the same school, convened around one table to talk through these issues and see if these gaps could be bridged.

The central message of this report is that the dialogues held between these three constituencies demonstrated that students, parents, and teachers largely agree on the barriers that students face and the interventions that could be provided to smooth the pathway for more students to move

from high school to college, career, and active citizenship in their communities. These discussions demonstrated that the disconnects that we identified in previous research, including why students choose to drop out of school and what can be done about it, can be effectively bridged through structured dialogue and a spirit of mutual respect. Although the specifics of the discussions varied, the dialogues spurred the three constituencies to move beyond the blame game to forge a collective will to ensure more students graduate from high school. These discussions, which we hope will be replicated in communities across the country to develop robust dropout prevention and recovery plans, are vital and need to be tailored to local conditions; they will inform schools and communities and help foster collaboration in our continuing efforts to increase the number of students who graduate ready for college, career, and life.



## RAISING THEIR VOICES

Last fall, at-risk students, as well as parents and teachers of at-risk students, from public high schools in Indianapolis, Indiana; Kingsport, Tennessee; Dallas, Texas; and Baltimore, Maryland came together to share their perspectives on the high school dropout challenge and what they would be willing to do to keep more students on track to graduate. These dialogues allowed each constituency the opportunity to educate the other groups on the unique pressures and barriers they face and to share their thoughts and ideas for increasing the number of students who graduate from their high schools ready for college, career, and life. They filled in important gaps in information and helped to dispel stereotypes and reveal many areas where these three constituencies share common goals for their schools and communities.

Each student, parent, and teacher had his or her own story to tell. These stories, while not always producing consensus on every issue, enabled each group to better appreciate the perspectives of others, move beyond blame, and take collective responsibility to increase the number of students who graduate from the schools in their communities. Clearly, there is an appetite and appreciation for constructive dialogue among these three important stakeholders in our nation's schools and an environment of mutual respect. As one teacher in Dallas so rightly put it, "Until we start having these sit-down conversations, nothing's going to change." Their conversations, which we hope will be the first among many, began to lay the foundation for reforms to bridge important disconnects among students, parents, and teachers, and to promote student success in their schools and communities.

# LOCATING THE CAUSES OF STUDENT DROPOUT

All students, parents, and teachers in the focus groups knew someone who had dropped out of high school and offered a range of theories about why students continue to make this choice. Participants asserted that boredom was a predominant factor in many cases of student dropout and one of the more straightforward issues that students, teachers, and parents could work together to address. Most participants in our discussions agreed, however, that there were often other, more complex factors at work, even in cases where students cited boredom as the principal cause.



Most students, teachers, and parents recognized that a failure to connect classroom learning to career interests and the real world was a problem underlying high school dropout and that this failure, compared to many other causes, was something that could be addressed with dynamic, engaging teachers, students receptive to learning, and parents willing to engage.

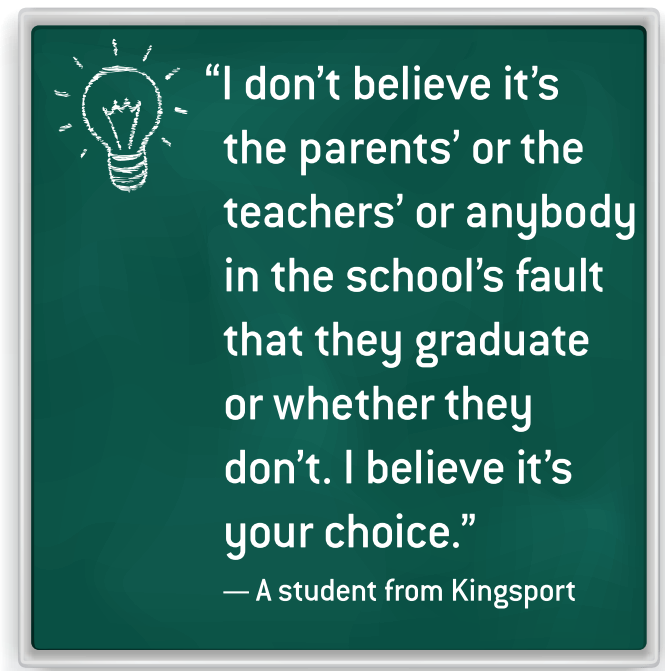
Regardless of whether they agreed that boredom was a valid explanation for dropping out, students, parents, and teachers acknowledged that the dropout problem is complex and that it does not have a single cause or precipitating factor. Most participants offered reasons for dropping out that echo findings from previous research: student apathy, boredom, and perceived lack of relevance; student absences, lack of academic preparedness, and inability to catch up once behind; uninspiring teaching; lack of parental support; and a

difficult home environment or other responsibilities and real life events. Many participants said that the accumulation of tough circumstances and other barriers students face, rather than one particular problem, better explained many students' decision to drop out. "The parents are working many, many jobs. The kid is responsible for the younger children...so there's so much going on at home," said one teacher in Indianapolis. "Everyone is on that kid, and that situation, when it's compounded by having really weak skills...it's a really nasty situation."

Many parents and teachers acknowledged that, for the dropouts they knew, a lack of social, emotional, and academic support compounded the barriers students face and contributed to their ultimately dropping out. As one parent put it, "Students in Baltimore have a lot that they're dealing with...in the inner city with gangs and drugs and things of that nature. And if they don't have a support system, it's easy for them to drop out." Students themselves strongly asserted

that a lack of commitment or work ethic by dropouts was a major factor in their decision to discontinue their educations. Students in the discussions who contemplated dropping out saw their personal commitment, initiative, and hard work as the reason they stayed in school or returned after previously dropping out. “I don’t believe it’s the parents’ or the teachers’ or anybody in the school’s fault that they graduate or whether they don’t,” one student in Kingsport said. “I believe it’s your choice.” These views strongly echoed a key finding in *The Silent Epidemic*—that dropouts themselves accepted personal responsibility for their decision to leave high school.

Although most participants asserted that the causes of student dropout were complex and multifaceted, student apathy, boredom, and a perceived lack of relevance surfaced early in the discussions. “To me, high school is like elementary and middle school. It’s all the same,” one Indianapolis student said. “We’ve been doing the same thing over and over again.” Several students cited boredom as a reason why they had skipped school in the past. Students in these discussions talked about subjects that were not interesting and teachers who did little to engage them. Speaking of their peers, students in the discussions also said that those who lost interest in school were more likely to skip classes, hang out with the wrong crowd, or initiate drug or alcohol use. They talked of the downward spiral of failure, from boredom in the classroom and

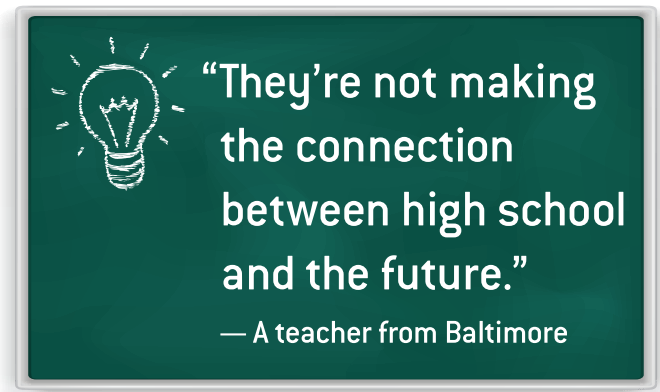


occasionally skipping class, to long absences from school, engaging in risky behaviors, and becoming part of a sub-culture that thinks it is cool to drop out. As one student in our dropout study shared, “The streets would call me.”<sup>8</sup> Many students in our discussions in the four communities often found the world outside of school far more interesting and engaging than the world within.

For many of the students, however, some level of boredom in school was to be expected. They did not see boredom as an obstacle that should cause students to drop out or that would hurt their own life chances. High school was viewed as something that must be tolerated as a stepping-stone to better job opportunities, and particularly to college where they anticipate their educations will connect more specifically to

their future careers. As one student from Baltimore remarked, “If you just fight your way through it now and get through school...eventually it will be interesting when you get into your career field and you are on your way to doing bigger and better things.” Ultimately, students in all the cities described high school as a springboard to a better future. Students even saw boredom as a barrier to overcome that could strengthen their work ethic and commitment to finish tasks. “I’m going to be honest: school is really, really boring. I hate coming here,” one Kingsport student said. “But I know I have to do it, you know, [to] get out there and make it in the real world.” Despite these obstacles, teachers, parents, and students themselves focused on the importance of students’ taking responsibility for their education by showing a commitment to trying to do the work required of them in high school.

Although nearly all students understood the importance of a high school diploma and post-secondary education and training to their future in the labor force, few understood what the content of their current educations had to do with that success. One student in Kingsport said that many of her peers could not understand how writing a paper about *The Canterbury Tales* would help them obtain employment. A teacher in Baltimore expressed similar sentiments, “I think there’s a very large disconnect between students’ understanding that what they’re doing now in high school will relate to their reality



and where they see themselves going.” Some teachers even admitted that some lessons held little relevance for students’ future success. Indeed, students, parents, and teachers acknowledged that students had a difficult time making a connection between the skills and knowledge gained in the classroom and their future careers. Many teachers and parents remarked at how difficult it was to compete with a culture of technology that fosters instant gratification. These comments conform to models of adolescent psychology that have found adolescents have difficulty with long-term planning and delayed gratification.<sup>9</sup>

Although many parents and teachers in the discussions said that student boredom in the classroom was precipitated by students’ increasing need for instant gratification, some teachers acknowledged that teacher ineffectiveness could cause some lessons to be less than engaging for students. Many teachers agreed they must do a better job showing the relevance of classroom learning to career dreams and the



lives of students. “I’ve been in a classroom where a teacher was standing up and reading a textbook, I mean literally reading the textbook, and then asking the kids to answer questions based on it,” one Baltimore teacher said. “If I were sitting in some of those classrooms, I’d drop out.”

Many parents and teachers linked boredom to the lack of relevance students see in their high school curriculum. Some suggested that what students are required to learn may not be relevant or appropriate for all students. “We have students that have all types of ability, and all of them are not going to be able to succeed in college, but they might succeed in other areas,” one Baltimore teacher said. “Post-secondary success for some will be college, for some trade school, for some it will be going [in] to the service.” A student in Dallas agreed with this assessment, “In reality...not everybody’s going to use everything they have to learn here. And they forget it once they leave the door.”

Many students, parents, and teachers strongly asserted that high school should be made more relevant for students by offering more vocational and technology courses that demonstrate explicitly the link to students’ future careers. One teacher in Kingsport said that high schools should offer “different programs to help [students] transition from high school to the world of work to see that what they’re here for is to become something; school is what you do to become what

you want to be.” In Baltimore, course relevancy was emphasized as a way to keep students who may not yet understand the delayed benefits of a high school education on track to obtaining their degrees. “They see their neighbor where everybody in the house is selling drugs, and they’ve got the big TV, and they’ve got all the great clothes, and they see the parent next door, the single parent who’s got a job and they’ve got a smaller car,” one teacher said. “They’re not making the connection between high school and the future.” These suggestions to provide more vocational classes were seen as reforms that would create a viable alternative for students who may not attend college.

In addition, all participants—students, parents, and teachers—thought making classes more applicable and emphasizing their connection to the real world would motivate more students. Studies have noted that clarifying the links between classroom learning and getting a job may convince more students to stay in school.<sup>10</sup> As one parent in Kingsport put it, “People will work really hard at something they see as important and relevant.” Ultimately, while participants were less likely to assert that mere boredom was the principal cause of dropping out, students, teachers, and parents from each group agreed that it was important for coursework to be relevant to post-secondary pathways and that teachers should continue to explain these connections to students in

an effort to increase enthusiasm and encourage students to continue their education. Job shadowing programs were almost universally embraced as smart ways to reach every student and address the issue of relevance head on. All three groups also agreed that students should take personal responsibility for their decisions and make efforts themselves to apply classroom lessons to their lives.



## Recommendations

It is clear from these discussions that boredom and a perceived lack of relevance are key factors in many cases of dropout. It is also clear, however, that a range of other issues both inside and outside the classroom contribute to student disengagement. Addressing boredom is not just the responsibility of teachers. Students, parents, and others in communities also have roles to play to connect classroom learning to the real world. Reforms should be instituted to help keep students engaged while they are in the classroom and to

provide students with the extracurricular supports they need outside of school.

Teachers should make more explicit connections between coursework and the real world and draw on resources in communities to make these examples tangible. Teachers might enhance efforts to explain how skills acquired in the classroom—learning to write clearly, giving oral presentations, and demonstrating core knowledge of various subject areas—are essential skills in gaining better-paying jobs. Research from Chicago indicates that high schools that make a greater effort to show the relevance of classroom instruction tend to have more students stay on track to high school graduation.<sup>11</sup> Even efforts in class that might seem distantly related to work or life, such as writing a paper on *The Canterbury Tales* or another literary work, will help students develop the critical analytical and writing skills that many employers prize. All of these efforts need community support to be effective.

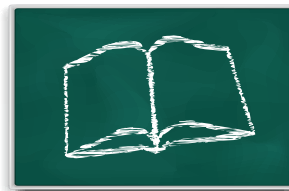
Schools need to engage business and community leaders as resources for teachers, either as classroom speakers, or through interactive workshops in which leaders provide hands-on examples of how teachers’ assignments connect to the work they ask of employees. Furthermore, teachers might enhance efforts to explain how knowledge of various readings will help students cope with real issues in their

lives and understand references in our culture, especially at a time when cultural diversity is dramatically expanding. Here, too, community and business leaders can be invaluable in connecting classroom skills to real world issues.

Distance learning opportunities abound, offering students the opportunity to engage interactively with businesses, museums, scientists, artists and any number of resources connecting classroom learning to the real world. Many of the costs for distance learning and video conferencing capabilities can be covered by grants, and schools need to be proactive in seeking grants and offering current technologies to their students and staff.

Programs such as job shadowing, service-learning, internships, and work-study should be provided to help students make the connection between school and their future success. Research on career academies, for example, shows that students who participate in structured programs that relate schooling to career can achieve higher levels of educational attainment and better labor market outcomes.<sup>12</sup> Teachers should be offered in-service opportunities to interact with leaders in their communities to discuss practical ways for teachers to relate classroom learning to employment and active citizenship. In addition, alternative learning environments should be developed that offer students more pathways based on their interests and

strengths. These models would provide engaging courses that are both relevant and interesting to students and that prepare them for both college and a range of post-secondary education and training options.



Given the primacy of tough life circumstances in the lives of many of our nation's young people, adult advocates who connect community-based supports to struggling students should be made available to students so that they can get the help they need inside and outside of the classroom. Many of the participants in our focus groups told stories of extremely tough circumstances that students had to overcome to remain in or return to school. Some teachers spoke of students who had babies and could not keep up with their work when they returned to school. Others told stories about students' losing their homes or losing members of their immediate families to terminal diseases. Adult advocates will be crucial not only in keeping track of the various barriers and pressures that some students face, but also with providing them with the much needed community-based supports and guidance to stay on track in school. Studies have shown that school models that provide coordinated wraparound supports increase the number of students who graduate from their schools on time with a regular diploma.<sup>13</sup> Parents of children who are succeeding in

school and who have time to volunteer might organize efforts to engage parents and mentors to be advocates of children at-risk of dropping out. Student peers, particularly those who are close to at-risk students, should be given opportunities to support and mentor their friends and help surround them with the support they need to stay on track to graduate. Studies have shown that organized and faculty-supported peer

mentoring results in the significant decline of problem behaviors along with an increase in attendance and academic achievement.<sup>14</sup> Local and national non-profits, particularly those who can mobilize national and community service participants into the schools in large numbers to act as adult advocates, mentors, and tutors, have extremely valuable roles to play.

# HIGH STANDARDS AND EXPECTATIONS

Although no one in the discussions endorsed lowering expectations or standards to ensure that more at-risk students graduate, many were skeptical that these students would work harder to meet higher academic standards. They asserted that while teachers should have high expectations for all students, these expectations should factor in the challenges students face. They emphasized that academic and other necessary supports need to be significantly ramped up so that students have the tools to meet higher expectations through continuous improvement.



Research has shown that the expectations that teachers have for their students have an effect both on student performance and whether they drop out of school.<sup>15</sup> Numerous studies have shown the connection between a teacher's sense of efficacy and increased student achievement,<sup>16</sup> student motivation,<sup>17</sup> and students' own sense of efficacy.<sup>18</sup> Many students in our discussions emphasized how the expectations teachers have for students can be self-fulfilling. As one struggling student in Indianapolis put it, "I'm not going to do good in no class that no teacher already don't like me in." Other students in the discussions who had been labeled as having behavior problems or as struggling academically were aware of their labels and found them difficult to overcome. These students spoke of losing motivation when they did not have the ability to wipe their slates clean.

One student talked about the power of "word curses"—"You're stupid; you're dumb; you're slow"—in discouraging students from fulfilling their potential. Some students said they felt as though some teachers made up their minds about how much to invest in a student before they actually got to know him or her. Sometimes the legacy of a family with older students who had failed carried down to younger sisters and brothers who were labeled before they were given a fair chance to excel. "If the teacher don't see the potential in the kid then...they don't push that child as hard as they would with somebody making, like straight A's or straight B's," one student in Indianapolis said. "They don't push the child as they should." Low expectations also took another form for some of the students in the discussions. By holding low expectations, some teachers failed to notice talent in their classrooms. One student in Dallas explained that she liked her English classes because they were "easy," instead of realizing that this was a subject in which she was very capable.

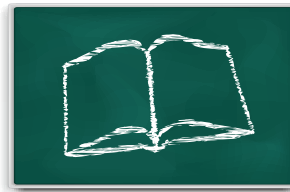
It was clear that no teacher had recognized or encouraged her gifts. In these discussions, students longed for their teachers to believe in them, expect more from them, and support them in achieving their future goals. These perspectives echoed findings from our study on dropouts.

In some instances, students asserted that not only teachers, but the school systems themselves could reinforce low expectations through different academic tracks. Some even noted that their state allows a student to drop out at the age of 16 or 17, and worried what signal the state was sending about expectations. Many high schools use a system of tracking that relegates low-performing students to low-level classes with unchallenging work.<sup>19</sup> One student in Indianapolis said that teachers “should push us to do good and not just expect us to fall back on the hair business.” Parents said that teachers’ holding low expectations could lead to students with failing outcomes. As one parent in Dallas put it, with those low expectations, “You’d rather fail than try to succeed.”

While students said that high expectations were important in the classroom, they said that misaligned expectations among teachers could put a lot of stress on a student. “When you have five, six, or seven different teachers who demand a lot from you, it could cause a lot of stress for the student,” one student in Indianapolis said. “They get into the part where, ‘I don’t want to do all this work. I just want to sit here.’” For some

teachers, this was something they had not considered before.

“We get myopic, we get one-sided about what we’re doing, and we get excited about what we’re doing,” one teacher in Kingsport said. “It’s really, really good to hear from the students and remember that...it is a balance.” For other teachers, especially those in Baltimore where they team-teach, they agreed with one of their colleague’s assertions that, “It’s not so much about demanding more as expecting more.”



For students in these discussions, high expectations were synonymous with the teacher’s belief that they could

and would meet those expectations. High expectations also suggested a teacher’s willingness to engage with students to help them meet goals rather than simply leaving students to fend for themselves and miss the marks set for them. Students said they felt most confident when the teacher not only expected more from them, but also made sure they had the necessary tools to successfully complete assignments. Speaking of a teacher that she liked, one student in Dallas said that not only did this teacher make the subject matter interesting, but she also made sure the students understood the material. “I enjoy the teacher, but it’s like I’m good at math and it makes me feel good when I know that I know how to do it,” this student said. “It makes me feel smart.” For many





**For many students in our discussions, it was the sense of accomplishment that came after a teacher supported them in the classroom that encouraged them to stay on track in school.**

students in our discussions, it was the sense of accomplishment that came after a teacher supported them in the classroom that encouraged them to stay on track in school.

Participants in our focus groups, including teachers, acknowledged that this kind of support could be rare for students who are struggling academically. As one Baltimore teacher succinctly put it, “[For students,] in some cases, low-performing schools are not a friendly environment.”

Both teachers and students recognized that there are some teachers who actively discourage students in the classroom. Not only do these teachers not hold high expectations for students, but they also actively reinforce low expectations.

Although teachers in our focus groups recognized the importance of high expectations for student success, many said that the climate of high stakes standardized tests and complicated, confusing state standards were huge pressures that caused them to worry about students’ meeting certain benchmarks, not high expectations. Teachers, especially those in Kingsport, said that some teachers feared serious repercussions for not having their students meet the high academic goals teachers had set. This resulting atmosphere has caused them to be more cautious in setting high goals, some teachers said. “The bottom line is, we’re held accountable for every failure. Every F that goes on a report card, we have to answer for,” one teacher in Kingsport said. “It stinks that that has become our motivation. And it’s no longer, ‘Gosh, I really want Matt to succeed,’ it’s ‘I’m going to be in trouble if he fails.’” Despite these pressures, teachers maintained that holding high expectations was important. “I find myself, over the years, starting to kind of dumb down,” one Kingsport teacher said. “But I think the more you ask, the more you expect, the more you will get.” As another teacher in Kingsport succinctly put it, “I’ve never had a student come back and tell me... ‘Thank you for expecting less of me.’”

But teachers also emphasized that high expectations alone will not lead to student success. “There’s a lot more that goes into making a successful student,” one Baltimore

teacher said. “If there’s not a home life that supports that... as much as [teachers] demand, it doesn’t necessarily mean that that student is going to step up and do that.” Some students said that high expectations could even be damaging to students who do not already believe in themselves. “If it was pressed harder on them, then they would lose motivation for everything,” a Baltimore student said. A parent in Kingsport also said that a lack of hope was a critical problem in students’ being able to live up to expectations that they themselves and others set for them. “I think you’re born with [hope], but somebody takes it away,” she said.

Teachers also said that students who struggle in elementary and middle school and arrive at high school unprepared are further frustrated and demoralized by high academic expectations in the later grades. Research shows that academic failure or inadequate preparation for high school is a significant cause of dropout.<sup>20</sup> The reality of having students enter grades that they are not academically prepared for is a real challenge for educators. Research has shown that more than 8 million students in grades 4–12 read below grade level.<sup>21</sup> In a typical high-poverty urban high school, approximately half of incoming 9th grade students read at the 6th or 7th grade level.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, 9th grade is often considered the “make-it or break-it” year. More students fail 9th grade than any other high school grade and a disproportionate number of

students who are retained their freshman year ultimately end up dropping out.<sup>23</sup> These facts mean that high school teachers, particularly those who teach 9th grade, not only have a responsibility for teaching their subject matter to students, but they have the additional responsibility of teaching foundational literacy and numeracy techniques.



Social promotion was a topic that came up consistently in all the conversations as causing more academic barriers for students. Although some students will have diplomas from their middle schools, one Indianapolis parent said, it’s not really a diploma; it’s a certificate of participation. “They’ll feel like failures because when they get to a certain point, they can’t make it, or they get a teacher who sticks by the rules,” she continued. Ultimately, teachers emphasized that it was important to provide students with the extra supports they need in the classroom to get on track for high school and live up to higher academic standards. In Baltimore, for example, teachers emphasized the importance of “double dosing” their students in reading and math when they arrived as freshmen. Additionally, many of the schools had credit recovery programs to help students who are behind academically in the 9th grade. Teachers in all four cities asserted that while they held high expectations for their students,



**“You will not leave  
my classroom in  
the same place  
you entered my  
classroom.”**

**— A teacher from Indianapolis**

additional supports needed to be provided in the classroom to ensure that all students meet these standards because some students start in different places academically. They said the ultimate goal is to help every student meet high expectations. As one teacher from Indianapolis put it, “You will not leave my classroom in the same place you entered my classroom.”

## ***Recommendations***

In our discussions, it was clear that students long for their teachers to have high expectations for them in the classroom that correlate to their future success. High expectations alone, however, will not guarantee student success and in some cases could result in more frustration and unwillingness to try. Steps must be taken to hold all students to high expectations, while also providing them with the support they need to achieve their goals.

Students should be exposed to a rigorous curriculum aligned with post-secondary standards and other opportunities to develop skills so that every student has the opportunity to graduate ready for a post-secondary education, whether it be college, an appropriate trade school, or other advanced training. Providing a rigorous curriculum for students has been shown to have a positive effect on keeping students engaged in school and raising graduation rates at high schools.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, students were acutely aware of the expectations their teachers had for them and acted in accordance with those expectations.

Teachers should assess where each student is at the beginning of the school year and then devise a set of ambitious but realistic goals with a plan, including individualized instruction and other necessary supports, to ensure that students have the tools to meet these expectations. As students achieve their goals, teachers should accordingly raise their expectations for students. This is an enormous undertaking for teachers; supports need to be provided, including administrators who help provide smaller class sizes that permit more individualized instruction, time to coordinate with other teachers and counselors to share information, and parent engagement strategies to ensure parents are active in supporting their children. Students themselves have to engage in their own educations and make it clear to their teachers what additional



**Initiating dialogues among teachers, parents, and students across America will foster a critical ingredient in addressing the dropout challenge: mutual respect.**

support they may need. The burden of helping students rise to the level of expectation cannot be left to teachers alone, especially in the low-performing schools where the student to teacher ratios can be very high. Furthermore, it is critical that schools not penalize teachers for setting high expectations for students, but should rather ensure that teachers have the supports, including help from the guidance staff, adult advocates, and tutors, to help students achieve success.

It is also clear that coordination across classrooms and team teaching would enable teachers to create more supportive, coherent, and consistent learning experiences for each student. Students urged teachers to realize that they attend more than one class and to talk among themselves to help students manage their schedules and meet high standards.

Coordinating expectations, and even staggering exams and due dates for projects accordingly, would enable teachers to generate expectations for students that encourage success, but do not burden students with overwhelming workloads or undue pressures, which could be especially damaging for students already struggling. Teachers should be encouraged to provide a weekly syllabus to students or create a class calendar to allow students to predict and plan ahead for homework intensive nights. When appropriate and practical, teachers might offer sliding due dates (a window of a few days when homework should be turned in) to give students the opportunity to turn in homework at a time that works with their other school demands. In turn, students would be encouraged to learn time management skills that will be invaluable to them in college and any workplace. This flexibility raises expectations by placing the responsibility on the student for making the best choices to meet those expectations.

As important as it is to hold high expectations for students once they arrive at high school, it is also important that in middle school, and even elementary school, standards and approaches are aligned to ensure that students who leave their doors are prepared for the rigors of a high school education. Indeed, 9th grade can be a trying transition for students who have left middle school unprepared, thus all middle school and elementary school teachers should strive

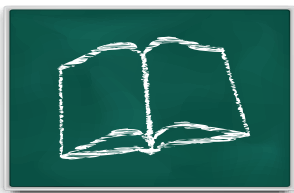
to clearly articulate to their students what will be required of them in high school and beyond. Concurrently, high schools should enhance programs aimed at getting freshmen up to speed in English and math so they can not only perform in those subjects, but in their other subjects, from history to science, as well. Summer preparation courses should be offered to bring students identified as falling behind on par with their grade level. After-school programs should be offered to help students complete homework and to provide tutoring to students who need extra supports to stay on track with their grade level. These programs may require late buses and extended teacher contracts, so schools may need to look to the business community to help bear the costs of some of these programs. Schools and teachers should also look for ways to reward students who make significant progress, whether in attendance or academic achievement.

Finally, initiating dialogues among teachers, parents, and students across America will foster a critical ingredient

in addressing the dropout challenge: mutual respect. Until these three groups came together to discuss issues openly and work toward solutions, they each harbored stereotypes and misconceptions that inhibited cooperation. Human nature suggests that when students feel disrespected by a teacher, they are significantly less likely to apply themselves, and when teachers feel disrespected by a student, they too are less likely to invest in helping that child learn. Even a parent or teacher who feels disrespected by the other could be unwilling to intervene on behalf of the student who most needs the help. Respect is key to student achievement. Recent studies confirm that trust is an essential element of successful school reform.<sup>25</sup> Bringing these three groups together to foster a relationship of trust is fundamental, particularly with regard to the issue of setting and meeting expectations, not only for students, but also for the teachers and parents.

# PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

Echoing a key finding from the survey research, teachers expressed frustration with the lack of engagement and support on the part of some parents. Many parents responded to this frustration by urging teachers to realize the multiple barriers that parents face, to be more practical in engaging them, and above all, not to prejudge them.



The role of parents in the educational achievement of their children is profound.

Students with involved parents, regardless of their family income or background, are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, enroll in higher level classes, attend school and pass their classes, develop better social skills, graduate from high school, attend college, and find productive work. The opposite is true for students whose parents are less engaged.<sup>26</sup> Research has shown that dropouts themselves feel that more parental involvement would have been helpful in keeping them on track to graduate.<sup>27</sup> Contrary to our research, which found that parents understand the integral importance of their role in the future success of their children, teachers often expressed the opposite view. Teachers' frustration with a lack of parental engagement was a prominent feature of all of the discussions. In each of the cities, teachers told stories of parents who did not attend open houses or respond to requests for parent/

teacher conferences.

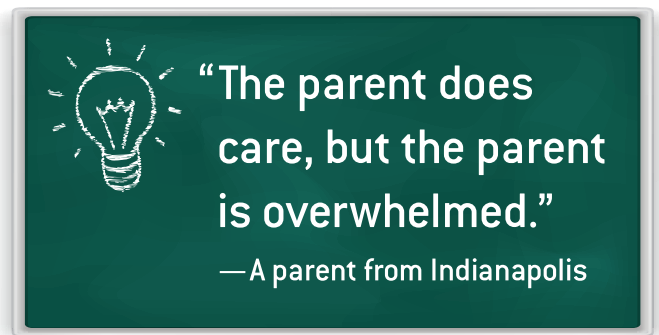
Teachers expressed frustration that parents did not respond to repeated attempts for contact and were sometimes hostile toward teachers' efforts to support those students who need it the most. Research shows that parent/teacher conferences and phone conversations between parents and teachers are associated with student achievement.<sup>28</sup> The teachers' experiences confirmed that the parents who did show up to parent/teacher conferences and were responsive to contact from the school were frequently the parents whose children were the most successful. "I have a syllabus that I give out the very first day of class. It's got my email address on it. It's got my telephone number, my classroom telephone number. It's got the telephone number of the school. It's got the address here," one Kingsport teacher said. "I mean, teachers are essentially begging parents to say something, anything."

Teachers in all of the discussions said that not only do they not feel supported by some parents, but they have also found their role as teacher expanded to encompass key



aspects of parenthood. One teacher in Baltimore said she often has to attend to the basic needs of her students, ensuring that they are well clothed, well fed, and not being bothered by their peers. “I’m training [students] as a parent would train a child...about being a person. And [that’s] not to say that as a teacher I don’t think that’s my responsibility because teachers do have [the responsibility of]...creating an individual, a better citizen for the world,” she said. “But I wasn’t planning to be a parent.” A teacher in Dallas expressed similar sentiments. “That’s not my job to raise your child. It’s my job to teach them what I’m certified to teach,” she said. Other teachers talked about wanting to be teachers, not social workers. Although this frustration was shared primarily among teachers, parents agreed that some of their peers could be unresponsive once their child makes it to high school. “It was standing-room only at the elementary school,” one Baltimore parent said. “You can’t seem to get that many parents to come to the high school.” Studies have found that high poverty schools tend to have a lower rate of parental involvement.<sup>29</sup>

Although most teachers, and some parents, maintained that parents needed to be doing much more, many parents in the discussions asserted that parents have their own set of challenges that may prevent them from being as involved in their students’ lives as they might like. “You may have a child



incarcerated. You may have to work eight hours, a part-time job, a husband gone, a disabled parent...you’re trying to juggle everything in life, and you forget a parent/teacher conference or you forget student night,” one Indianapolis parent said. “The parent does care,” she continued, “but the parent is overwhelmed.” Many studies confirm that time is a major barrier to parental involvement.<sup>30</sup> Text messaging is being piloted in low-income districts to facilitate communication between parents and schools.

For parents in the discussions, it was important that teachers not draw conclusions about their involvement unless they had adequate information about their circumstances. As one parent in Baltimore said, “I think teachers don’t always understand maybe a parent’s work schedule. I mean, I’m a single parent, you know, so everything falls to me.” While many parents urged teachers to take their unique challenges and barriers into account, some parents said that it was the unresponsiveness of the school itself that stymied communication between these two groups. These parents

told stories of failures to return phone calls or inadequate or infrequent updates from teachers on the progress of their children. Parents told stories of not realizing that their child did not have enough credits to graduate or not understanding the requirements for different academic tracks until it was too late to intervene. One parent in Dallas did not know that her daughter had missed nearly 40 days of school because she appeared to keep her school routine and the school had never informed her of the absences. She only found out by accident when the subject of her daughter's many absences surfaced during a conversation with a teacher about another matter.

Ultimately, many parents simply longed for enhanced communication with their children's schools. "I want us to know what's going on daily," said one parent in Dallas. "Some teachers think that's too much work...but I think that's their job to be involved in that, to let the parents know what's going on." A 2005 survey concluded that a higher percentage of families above the poverty level feel that their child's school "makes it easier for the family to be involved" than families below the poverty level.<sup>31</sup> In our own research, we found that only 43 percent of parents of children in low-performing schools said their school was doing a very or fairly good job communicating with them about their children's academic performance, compared to 83 percent of parents with

children in high-performing schools.<sup>32</sup> Although the communication gap appears to be difficult to bridge, most agreed that technology was a huge boost and should be used more regularly.

Although some teachers acknowledged that their peers could be unresponsive at times, many of them emphasized the multiple barriers and pressures they face inside the classroom. Many of them spoke of having to keep track of more than 100 students and being emotionally drained at the end of the day. "I would never say to a parent, 'Well, you've had your time for the year. I've got 149 more [students]," one teacher in Indianapolis said. "But it's a busy day." Although parents and teachers gained an appreciation of the challenges that they each face, it is clear from these discussions that more must be done to facilitate on-going and productive communication between these two groups.

## ***Recommendations***

Parents and teachers understand the importance of parental engagement in ensuring student success. There are, however, barriers that prevent many parents from engaging with their student's education as much as they would like. Additionally, teachers are often too overwhelmed by their classroom duties to facilitate parental engagement. Parents and teachers identified a number of reforms that could facilitate their

coordination to keep more students on track in school.

Parents and teachers agreed that parents need a single point of contact at the school whom they can contact regarding attendance, performance, or graduation concerns for their children. In any case, parents need to know whom to contact regarding attendance, performance, or graduation concerns for their children. Schools should use online technologies to share syllabi, homework and test schedules, and other information parents need to better engage with their student. That information might include resources concerning high school graduation and college admission requirements, together with information about what tests a student must take, financial aid that might be available for postsecondary education, and tools that can help students and parents understand the college application process.

One way the high school in Kingsport is working to ensure parents without technological capabilities at home have access to such information is by providing a central location—a simple conference room with a computer and online access—on campus where parents may make use of school technology to keep updated with respect to their students' grades and attendance, as well as high school and college requirements.

Parents and teachers agreed that schools need to keep accurate lists of parents' phone numbers and email address-

es and create systems to promptly notify parents of student absences and other signs of disengagement from school.

Parents longed to be contacted not only when there were problems with their child, but also when there were positive achievements to report. In order to maintain consistent communication, parents must take responsibility for updating their contact information with the school. Due to disconnected phones and lack of email access, teachers and administrators often have the most difficulty communicating with the parents they most need to reach.

Finally, enabling parental involvement should not just be left to teachers and parents to work out on their own. Rather it should be viewed as a fundamental component of comprehensive school reform, particularly at the secondary level, and schools should implement research-based strategies to increase and enhance parental involvement. Research has shown that schools that make concerted and thoughtful outreach efforts can increase parental involvement.<sup>33</sup>

Universally, teachers, parents, and students said that the discussions spawned by the focus groups should continue and should inform other concrete steps for how these three groups can work together to keep students on track to graduate from high school ready for postsecondary education, the workplace, and active citizenship.

# CONCLUSION

The success of our nation's students is up to all of us. Although the specifics of the discussions varied from city to city, with respect to reducing dropout rates, there is a consensus that teachers, students, and parents all have crucial roles to play and that together they can break through many of the barriers that are leading students to drop out of high school. Like our former research, these discussions leave us feeling hopeful about the concrete steps that can be taken to boost student academic achievement and graduation rates. Most participants feel that all members of the school community, including the students themselves, must assume responsibility for the roles they play in achieving student success, and they strongly believe that all sides must continue to communicate with and respect one another.



Despite this collective will, it is also clear that each group faces unique barriers and pressures that not only inhibit them from engaging in productive dialogue, but also prevent them from engaging in other behaviors that they know to be helpful in achieving student success. In the groups we observed, students, already facing the pressures of adolescence, failed to see the relevance in some of their coursework. Parents dealt with the struggles of multiple jobs and responsibilities, lack of community resources, and oftentimes, single parenthood. Teachers were overwhelmed by large student-teacher ratios, lack of support from the school and community, and the pressures of a high stakes performance era. While each group emphasized the importance of ownership and personal responsibility in tackling

student dropout, they made it clear that key reforms must be undertaken to make courses more interesting and relevant, to facilitate parental involvement, and to provide each group with the supports they need both inside and outside the classroom to foster more student success. All of the groups realized that their collective efforts on these issues will be crucial if they want to increase the number of students who graduate from high school. They also understand that the health, economies, and civic vibrancy of our communities and nation depend on it. They are ready to listen to one another, to cooperate, and most importantly, to act.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND NOTE

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The authors, together with Peter D. Hart Research Associates, would like to give thanks to the students, parents, and teachers who shared their insights and reflections with courage and honesty.

The views reflected in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the AT&T Foundation and the America's Promise Alliance.





## APPENDIX

### *Appendix I—Research Methodology*

In fall 2009, Hart Research conducted dialogues on behalf of the AT&T Foundation at four public high schools across the country—one each in Indianapolis, Indiana; Kingsport, Tennessee; Dallas, Texas; and Baltimore, Maryland. The dialogue at each school included approximately 15 participants, with an even mix of students enrolled at the school, parents of students enrolled at the school, and teachers. The four schools where the groups were conducted were selected to provide a diversity of geographic locations and demographic characteristics. The groups at each of the four high schools included students at-risk of dropping out and parents of at-risk students, as well as teachers of at-risk students. The schools are at varied stages in the implementation of educational reforms and innovative approaches to improve high school graduation rates.

These sessions were undertaken as a follow up to surveys that Hart Research has conducted among high school dropouts, parents of high school students, and high school educators on the dropout problem. The impetus for these discussions was to explore key disconnects revealed in the three surveys and to provide greater context and understanding of the findings from those studies through a forum for students, parents, and teachers to share their perspectives, opinions, and hypotheses related to the dropout problem.

## Appendix II—Focus Group Recruiting Instructions

### Overview

- Identify a point person at the school who will be in charge of recruiting the student, teacher, and parent participants, selecting and briefing the moderator, securing the room, collecting parents' permission slips for students, and coordinating the recording/transcribing of the conversation.
- Recruit a third party moderator from the community, who can act as an impartial moderator. A local business leader, elected official, involved citizen, with community knowledge and an interest in solving the drop out crisis is important. This needs to be a person the parent, teacher, and student participants can trust and view as a fair moderator.
- This will be a two-hour discussion. Food and drink should be provided. We recommend doing this after the school and work day and providing transportation to those who need it. Some sort of compensation for participating, if possible, would be appropriate.
- The discussion should be recorded and transcribed so it can be used appropriately to inform the community plan around the dropout issue, with the consent of participants and the understanding that the confidentiality of individual participants will be protected.
- For this discussion we are focusing on the “at-risk” community. We would like to recruit students who are struggling in school and at-risk of dropping out of school or not completing their education on time. In addition, the group will include parents and teachers of at-risk students.
- Recruit **15 participants**—**5** students, **5** parents, and **5** teachers.

***It is important not to recruit participants who are directly related – the parents should NOT be parents of the students in the focus group, and the teachers should NOT currently have any of the students in their classes.***

- Participants should reflect the racial diversity of the school.
- Recruit a fairly even mix of male and female participants.
- Specific instructions for these audiences are on the opposite page.



## GUIDELINES FOR PARTICIPANTS:

### *Students – recruit 5*

- Recruit a mix of at-risk 10th, 11th, and 12th graders who attend [HIGH SCHOOL].
- It is important to ensure that these students are truly those at-risk of dropping out. They may have failed one or more classes, had excessive absences, or other indicators of academic disengagement and underachievement. We do not want to include students who take advanced, AP, or IB classes and are clearly on-track to graduate and attend college.
- None should be the child or current student of any parent or teacher participant.
- Recruit 2–3 boys and 2–3 girls, none of whom are related to one another.
- They should reflect the racial diversity of the student body.
- Parents of these students will need to sign a permission form for the students to participate.

***Please distribute the description of the focus group with the permission slip.***

### *Parents – recruit 5*

- Recruit parents of at-risk students who attend [HIGH SCHOOL].
- Recruit a mix of parents of 10th, 11th, and 12th graders
- Recruit 2–3 fathers and 2–3 mothers, none of whom are married to one another.
- They should reflect the racial diversity of the student body.
- Do not recruit parents of students who are in the focus group.

### *Teachers – recruit 5*

- Recruit a mix of 10th, 11th, and 12th grade-level teachers who teach at [HIGH SCHOOL].
- They should reflect a mix of tenures – some who have been teaching a long time, some new teachers.
- Recruit a mix of those who teach academic subjects and would be great to have a guidance counselor. Please do NOT recruit teachers of physical education/gym, art, drama, music, or any electives.
- Do not recruit those who currently teach students who are in the group.

### *Appendix III—Information About Upcoming Focus Group and Permission Slip*

A focus group will be conducted among a group of [high school] students, parents, and teachers on [date] in [city]. The discussion will be held at [location].

This discussion is being conducted to help improve educational opportunities in our community. In the focus group, we will be discussing the challenges facing students, teachers, and parents today and ways to address these challenges and improve student success. Results of these conversations will be used to supplement our district's goal to increase the number of students who graduate from high school ready for postsecondary education and training and the workforce.

An honorarium of [\$ dollars] will be provided to each student, parent, and teacher who chooses to participate in this discussion. The discussion will last two hours (from [time]), and a light dinner will be provided.

For research purposes only, the group will be electronically recorded. These recordings will be used for internal research purposes only and will never be released to the public. All names and responses are completely confidential. No names will ever be used outside of the focus group.

## PERMISSION SLIP

In order for students to participate in the discussion, parents of students participating in the focus group must complete this permission slip.

PARENT'S NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

CHILD'S NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

CHILD'S AGE: \_\_\_\_\_

*I have read and filled out all of the information above.*

Signature of parent: \_\_\_\_\_

Name (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

## *Appendix IV—Parent/Teacher/Student Discussion Guide*

### **INTRODUCTION AND WARM UP [10 MINS]**

#### **Moderator:**

Basic explanation of the focus group

1. Purpose of discussion, ground rules of respect and honesty.
2. Anonymous – first name basis only. Confidentiality.
3. Participant Introduction:
  - a) First name
  - b) If you are a teacher: what subject you teach and in which grades, and how long have you been teaching and for how long at this school?
  - c) If you are a parent: what grade your child is in, and if you have any other children, what are their ages/grades?
  - d) If you are a student: what grade are you in this year, and if you have any brothers or sisters, how old are they?

#### **A. Perspectives on Their School Today [10 mins]**

1. How do you feel things are going at your high school today?
2. From your perspective, what are the positive things happening at your high school today?
3. And what are the biggest challenges facing your high school today?
4. In an ideal world, if the school were working very well and doing the job that we would want it to do, what would be different than it is today?

#### **B. The Dropout Problem [20 mins]**

1. One thing that a lot of people talk about as an important goal is increasing high school graduation rates and reducing the number of students who drop out before finishing. Is this an important goal?
  - a) Why?

2. Is dropout a problem at your school?

a) Why? What makes you say that?

3. When you think about the kinds of students who don't make it through high school on time, who are they? What's their story? I would like each of you to visualize one particular student who could have graduated but didn't and tell me about that student.

4. Generally speaking, why do you think students at your school drop out of school or fail to graduate? Let's start with students in the group, then hear from parents, and finally teachers.

[DISCUSS AND WRITE ON EASEL]

PROBE: What factors or problems lead to a student deciding to drop out?

[PROBE AND DISCUSS DIFFERENCES IN IMPRESSIONS AMONG THE THREE GROUPS OF STUDENTS, PARENTS, AND TEACHERS.]

5. Looking at this list, what do you think are the top two or three most common reasons kids drop out?

a) Which of these are the easiest to solve? What would it take to address these issues?

b) Which of these reasons or problems are the toughest to solve?

i) Why are they so hard to deal with?

ii) What might it take to make an impact in these areas?

### **C. Roles and Responsibility [30 mins]**

*Give official dropout rate for the school so they have concrete numbers to work with for following questions.*

1. What would it take to cut the dropout rate at your school in half in 5 to 10 years?

a) What are the biggest changes that would have to take place to cut the dropout rate in half?

2. What role do teachers, parents, and the students have in reducing the problem of students dropping out before they finish their high school degree? What is each group's role in addressing this problem?

a) How can teachers better help their students stay in school? What should they be doing differently or in addition to what

they already do? What can they do in the classroom? Are there things they could do outside the classroom that would help?

b) What can parents do to help their children stay on the right track and engaged in school? What should they be doing differently or in addition to what they already do?

i) What are the barriers to parents doing such things?

c) What is a student's responsibility when it comes to successfully graduating from high school? What should they be doing differently or in addition to what they already do?

i) And what about when it comes to their peers – who they interact with and how they interact? What should students be doing differently when it comes to the peers?

d) Are there any other groups that need to be involved, such as principals, school district leaders, or those in local, state, or national government? What is their role?

3. I would like you to visualize the same student who could have graduated but didn't. Do you feel there was anything more you could have done to help that student stay in school and complete their degree?

a) Looking forward, what would you be willing to do that you are not doing now to help reduce the problem of dropout at your school?

4. What if, to help reduce the number of students who drop out and do not complete high school, teachers, parents, and students all agreed to do their fair share in a sort of "contract"? What would the contract look like? What would each person's role be in increasing the number of students who graduate? [Write on easel.]

a) What should each group – students, parents, and teachers – be willing to do as their fair share?

b) Which of these things would YOU be willing to do?

c) Are there any you would not be willing to do?

[WRITE ON EASEL]

#### D. Discussing Disconnections [30 mins]

Research among high school dropouts, high school teachers, and parents of high school students reveal some disconnections in the perceptions of these three groups. I would like to get your thoughts on these differences in opinion and ask you to help me understand them based on your experiences.

1. One disconnect involves differing opinions on the role of parents.

On the one hand, the majority of teachers felt that a lack of parent engagement was a key factor in cases of dropout.

On the other hand, parents of students in low-performing schools see the need for a rigorous curriculum and their own involvement the most, and most of these parents don't feel their children's schools effectively communicate and engage with them.

- a) How do you think about these issues?
- b) What is your reaction to the findings? Why do you think teachers and parents have such different perceptions?
- c) Is there a part of this story that is missing that would help us understand these different perspectives?
- d) How can we bridge this divide and address this problem to help students stay on track to graduate?

2. Another important disconnect involved the expectations and demands placed upon students.

On the one hand, the majority of dropouts said they would have worked harder if more were demanded of them through higher academic standards, more studying and homework. They wanted to be inspired and motivated to work harder.

On the other hand, the large majority of teachers we surveyed did NOT believe students at risk of dropping out would work harder if more were expected of them. In addition, the majority of teachers did NOT believe we should expect students to meet high academic standards and graduate with skills to do college-level work, with extra supports.

- a) How do you think about this issue?
- b) What is your reaction to the findings? Why do you think there are such varied expectations from these two groups on

whether at-risk students would work harder if more were demanded of them?

- c) Why do you think most teachers believe we shouldn't expect all students to meet high academic standards and graduate ready for college?
  - d) Is there a part of this story that is missing that would help us understand these different perspectives?
  - e) How can we bridge this divide and address this problem to help students stay on track to graduate?
3. We also found that many former students said they stopped going to school because they found it boring and uninteresting or they did not see the relevance of school to real life. Teachers, however, were divided about whether these students were speaking to an important cause of dropping out or were just making excuses.
- a) How do you think about this issue?
  - b) Is there a part of this story that is missing that would help us understand these different perspectives?
  - c) How can we bridge this divide and address this problem to help students stay on track to graduate?

### **E. Dropout Prevention Proposals [15 mins]**

1. [HANDOUT] We have been talking about some ways to keep students in school. Now I'm going to mention a small number of proposals that have been made for reducing the dropout rate, and for each one, let's do a quick tally of who thinks it's a good idea, who thinks it's a bad idea, and why. [CANVAS GROUP. TALLY ALL FIRST AND THEN DISCUSS EACH]
- a) Providing a single point of contact at the school for parents to get information about student attendance, successes and challenges for students, and what parents can do to help keep students on track to graduate.
  - b) Establishing electronic tools that enable schools and teachers to communicate with parents so they can be more informed and engaged in their child's day-to-day education. These tools could include websites, text messaging, and a homework hotline where parents can get up-to-date information on his/her child's homework.
  - c) Providing parents information on requirements to gain admission to college and how to secure financial aid.
  - d) Requiring all students to meet high academic standards linked to a rigorous college and work preparatory core curriculum for high school, with extra supports to help them succeed.



- e) Connecting classroom learning to real-world experiences for students (e.g., through service-learning, work-study, job shadowing) so they see the relevance of classroom learning to their career dreams and job prospects.
- f) Providing alternative learning environments with more individualized instruction that gives students at-risk of dropping out more choices to make school more relevant to the lives and goals of students, such as schools of technology, sciences or the arts, 9th Grade Academies that support incoming freshmen, or more personalized learning environments with high expectations and more supports.

[DISCUSS REACTION TO EACH POLICY PROPOSAL.]

[PROBE FOR DETAILED REACTIONS ON REQUIRING HIGH ACADEMIC STANDARDS FOR ALL.]

#### **F. Wrap Up [5 mins]**

1. Do you have any other thoughts you want to share about how we can increase graduation rates and reduce the number of dropouts?

THANK AND DISMISS PARTICIPANTS.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Johns Hopkins and Civic Enterprises, in partnership with the America's Promise Alliance, Target, and Pearson will be issuing a report to the nation on where our country stands in addressing the high school dropout epidemic and proposed next steps to ramp up efforts.

<sup>2</sup> Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, J.J. & K.B. Morison (2006). *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Civic Enterprises and Peter D. Hart Research Associates. For the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, J.J., Streeter, R.T. & J.R. Mason (2008). *One Dream, Two Realities: Perspectives of Parents on America's High Schools*. Civic Enterprises and Peter D. Hart Research Associates. For the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

<sup>4</sup> Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, J.J. & R. Balfanz (2009). *On the Front Lines of Schools: Perspectives of Teachers and Principals on the High School Dropout Problem*. Civic Enterprises and Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the AT&T Foundation and the America's Promise Alliance.

<sup>5</sup> Balfanz, R., Fox, J., Bridgeland, J. & M. McNaught (2008). *Grad Nation: A Guidebook to Help Communities Tackle the Dropout Crisis*. Everyone Graduates Center and Civic Enterprises for the America's Promise Alliance.

<sup>6</sup> Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, J.J. & R. Balfanz (2009).

<sup>7</sup> Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, J.J., Streeter, R.T. & J.R. Mason (2008).

<sup>8</sup> Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, J.J. & K.B. Morison (2006).

<sup>9</sup> Green, L., Fry, A. F., & J. Myerson. (1994). *Discounting of Delayed Rewards: A Life-span Comparison*. *Psychological Science*, 5(1): 33.

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<sup>11</sup> Allensworth, E. & J.Q. Easton. (2007). *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A Close Look at Course Grades, Failures and Attendance in the Freshmen Year*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

<sup>12</sup> Kemple, J.J. (2008). *Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Labor Market Outcomes, Educational Attainment, and Transitions to Adulthood*. New York: MDRC Publications.

<sup>13</sup> Initial findings from a national evaluation of the Communities in Schools model indicates that the program, which brings resources, services, parents, and volunteers into schools to address the needs of the student body, increases the number of students that graduate on time with a regular diploma. Results from that evaluation are forthcoming this year.

<sup>14</sup> Hannaway, J. & A.M. Senior. (1989). *An evaluation of the peer leadership training program: An examination of students' attitudes, behavior and performance*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

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<sup>16</sup> Anderson, R., Green, M., & P. Loewen (1988). *Relationships Among Teachers' and Students' Thinking Skills, Sense of Efficacy, and Student Achievement*. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 34(2): 148–165. See also: Armor, D., Conroy-Oseguera, P., Cox, M., King, N., McConnel, L., & A. Pascal (1976). *Analysis of the school Preferred Reading Program in Selected Los Angeles Minority Schools*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation; Ashton, P.T. & R.B. Webb (1986). *Making a Difference: Teachers' Sense of Efficacy and Student Achievement*. New York; Longman; Ross, J.A. (1994). *Beliefs that Make a Difference: The Origins and Impacts of Teacher Efficacy*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies.

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<sup>22</sup>Balfanz, R., McPartland, J.M. & A. Shaw (2002). *Re-conceptualizing Extra Help for High School Students in a High Standards Era*. Baltimore, MD: Center for Social Organization of Schools, John Hopkins University.

<sup>23</sup>Herlinhy, C. (2007). *State and District-Level Support for Successful Transition into High School*. Washington, DC. Accessed at <http://www.betterhighschools.org>.

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<sup>25</sup>Bryk, A.S., Sebring, P.B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S. & J.Q. Easton. (2010). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>26</sup>Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, J.J., Streeter, R.T. & J. R. Mason (2008).

<sup>27</sup>Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, J.J. & K.B. Morison (2006). While 59 percent of students said that a parent or guardian was involved in their education, it was often the result of being notified that the student was having behavioral problems or was at risk of failing or dropping out. In addition, respondents who said that their parents were not involved in their education were more likely to drop out of high school during the first two years. A significant majority of students (71 percent) advocated for more parental involvement and said that improving the lines of communication between teachers and parents would be beneficial.

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