



**Recommended Changes to the No Child Left Behind Act to
Address Workforce Issues**

Submitted to the House Subcommittee on Higher Education,
Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness
of the Committee on Education and Labor

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by

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Thank you for giving the Center for Law and Social Policy the opportunity to recommend ways in which No Child Left Behind (NCLB) could better address the workforce challenges faced by this country. CLASP is a nonprofit organization engaged in research, analysis, technical assistance, and advocacy on a range of issues affecting low-income families. We have focused considerable attention on issues related to workforce development, disadvantaged and disconnected youth, and higher education.

The reauthorization efforts underway for both the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and NCLB provide the opportunity to elevate attention to the role that high schools must play in preparing our youth for success in the future economy. They also serve as an opening to define a more active role for the workforce system and youth councils to play as a reauthorized NCLB pushes districts to undertake high school reform.

During the past few years, there has been an increased focus on the unacceptably high dropout rates in districts across the country and the growing disparity in graduation and labor market outcomes for minority youth. Hopefully, the measures of accountability in NCLB will be sharpened to intensify the focus on high schools, forcing school districts and communities to pay attention to cohorts of students as they enter ninth grade to ensure their graduation four years later, as well as their preparation for success in postsecondary education and the competitive labor market. With so many large urban and poor rural districts graduating fewer than half of the entering cohort of ninth graders, successful reform will require dramatic rethinking about the most effective ways to retain the interest of struggling students, provide the support, impart the skills, and award the credentials that will allow young people to compete and succeed in a dynamic and globally competitive labor market.. NCLB accountability can provide the impetus for the state and local districts to reach out to school-aged youth who have dropped out, and provide multiple pathways for reconnecting them to education options that will help them earn a high school diploma or equivalent credential, as well as access and succeed in postsecondary education.

Increasing educational attainment is essential for individual economic advancement and addressing the gap between the skills employers need and the skills workers have. Each additional level of education achieved pays off in the labor market in terms of employment and earnings. In 2005, the average annual earnings of a high school graduate were 48 percent higher than those of someone without a diploma, and the average annual

earnings of a college graduate were 88 percent higher than those of a high school graduate.¹

Addressing the educational attainment problem at the scale necessary to have an impact on the education and labor market outcomes for these students will require districts to engage other systems and sectors to help with the strategic redesign of high schools and the delivery of an enriched educational experience that will prepare youth for future success. It will require engaging with the community, the postsecondary system, and the business sector to define those attributes beyond basic academic mastery that schools should be teaching students and the role that business and the community can play in ensuring the alignment and enrichment of the curricular process to meet those demands.

We are losing an unacceptably high number of young people to education failure and labor market detachment. Across the nation, it is estimated that 2,500 students drop out of high school every day.² For the last decade, approximately 30 percent of high school students who enrolled in high school have failed to graduate four years later.³ For youth of color, the situation is even more dismal. In 2003, while 78 percent of white students graduated from high school, only 55 percent of African Americans and 53 percent of Hispanics graduated.⁴ Communities are losing the battle to successfully educate huge numbers of youth, despite the increased focus that has been placed on accountability and testing. Much of the early attention of NCLB has focused on the earlier grades. Measures of adequate yearly progress are based on third-, fifth-, eighth-, and 10th-grade tests. States are not required to disaggregate graduation rates for subgroups and are allowed to set their own benchmarks. Thus, NCLB puts little pressure on states and districts for aggressive reform in high schools.

The reauthorization of NCLB provides the opportunity to correct that balance. In a manufacturing production process, it would make little sense to invest heavily in the early stages of the production process only to allow poor quality workmanship and lack of attention to standards and details to produce a marginal product unfit for the market. Likewise, investments must be made, commensurate with the challenge, from early childhood up through high school and beyond to produce a quality graduate at the end of the education process—one who will be able to thrive economically in the labor market, provide adequately for self and family, and participate as an active, civically engaged member of the community.

Employers have emphasized that the key to labor market success is beyond just academic mastery. They are seeking individuals skilled in oral and written communication, teamwork, with leadership, and critical thinking ability, as well as a commitment to social and civic responsibility.⁵ Along with sound education in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), these “applied skills” have been identified as a critical need in the workplace of the future. The challenge at hand is that there are approximately 3.8 million youth who are out of school, without a diploma, and out of work. There are another approximately 2 million youth in the high school pipeline who, absent intervention, are destined for the same fate. Even many of the young people who do graduate from so many of our nation’s local districts are desperately lacking in the

requisite skills for entry-level employment and successful postsecondary matriculation. An assessment of high school graduates in 2002 determined that only 34 percent of these students possessed the abilities and qualifications to even apply for matriculation in a four-year college.⁶

In high-poverty districts, other community factors such as crime, violence, high-risk behavior, physical and mental health challenges, and culture of low expectations necessitate a more holistic approach to the education intervention. Much has been learned about successful education and labor market preparation strategies that have worked to increase school retention, postsecondary matriculation, and labor market outcomes for youth in high-risk situations. Numerous innovations, including small charter schools, dual enrollment college options, in-school support structures, career academies, competency-based diploma plus models, and alternative programs within the workforce system, have demonstrated success with youth who present very challenging profiles of risk and prior failure. Research has identified several key ingredients in effective programs, including:⁷

- Adult support, structure, and high expectations
- Creative forms of contextual learning
- Rich workplace connections and career guidance
- Access to wide network of resources to meet student's personal needs
- Engagement of youth as resources—youth leadership and civic engagement opportunities
- High-quality management and accountability

Schools alone can't turn this tide, but solutions exist, and the NCLB reauthorization provides the opportunity to infuse high schools with the best of what has been learned about what works, especially for high-risk populations.

NCLB reauthorization can catalyze the re-engineering of the high school experience in failing districts by stimulating action in several areas:

1. Encouraging the implementation of multiple pathways to high school credentials built on the research of best practice in this regard
2. Requiring districts and schools to more actively engage other systems and sectors in the communities, including the business community
3. Mandating greater accountability on the part of states and districts for ensuring dramatic improvement in graduation rates
4. Encouraging the development of comprehensive dropout prevention and re-entry strategies
5. Targeting resources to states and districts with greatest need to foster innovation, replication, and capacity building

IMPLEMENTATION OF MULTIPLE PATHWAYS

The graduation rate statistics provide evidence that 30 to 50 percent of youth are not thriving in the traditional high school environment. The population of students that are failing is not monolithic. The reasons for failure are a complex mix of personal crisis, learning style, learning disabilities, motivation, school climate, and home environment. These youth fall along a continuum, and the educational and support environment that is appropriate for one may not suit another. Local districts with large numbers of dropouts and youth at high risk of failure will need to put in place multiple pathways to high school graduation that connect youth to the most appropriate, high-quality education option that will meet their need and provide them with marketable skills and high school credentials. It is a different way of thinking about high school, but there is evidence that movement away from the large, impersonal structures to smaller, more supported environments, with opportunity for hands-on experiential learning and career exploration, works well for many youth that fail in the traditional structure.

Thus, we recommend the following:

- Elevate reform of high schools within NCLB with designated resources to be accessed by states and targeted to districts with greatest need to support the implementation of multiple pathways to high school certification that provide smaller, supported learning environments, opportunities for contextual learning, and opportunities for work and career exposure.
- Require states and districts applying for such resources to specify the role that employers will play in ensuring that the curriculum is relevant, the instructional materials and equipment are state of the art, competencies are being imparted and documented, and that youth have access to a wide array of internships, work study, work experiences, and career-exposure opportunities.
- Require states to develop content standards, assessments, and teacher quality standards that are aligned with postsecondary and industry standards.
- Promote dual- and concurrent-enrollment programs for secondary-postsecondary credentialing as a vehicle to accelerate learning while gaining technical and occupational skills, and as a vehicle for reconnecting out-of-school youth to a positive educational pathway.
- Assist states and districts with the development of competency-based methods of imparting and documenting the achievement of critical skills required both for graduation and labor market success.
- Assist states and districts with the implementation of robust integrated data management and accountability systems, such that the progress of youth in terms of credit accumulation, mastery of competencies, graduation, and postsecondary matriculation can be monitored regardless of the pathway or educational vendor.

REQUIRING ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF OTHER SYSTEMS AND SECTORS

Many of the most challenged youth are also involved with other systems such as justice, TANF, or child welfare, or are eligible for services through the workforce system or TRIO programs under the Higher Education Act. The reauthorization of NCLB and WIA can bring these systems together to promote articulation across these systems and greater alignment of their collective offerings with the needs and requirements of the labor market. Specifically:

- NCLB should require states and districts to expand possible partners in educational planning to include the local workforce investment system and youth councils (or similar entities) to ensure the necessary alignment and to coordinate access to workforce preparation activities and experiences. This includes coordinating with the workforce system in providing the programs and strategies needed to ensure successful transition support for youth who are transferring from juvenile justice and other institutions. Similarly, within the Workforce Investment Act, workforce boards, through their youth councils, should be encouraged to work with local school districts and with employers to accomplish the alignment across systems and to structure the supportive programming that youth will need to develop the skills they will need for labor market success. This will require a restructuring of the composition of the youth councils mandated under WIA to reflect the participation of employers, education, and critical systems.
- Both NCLB and WIA should require local workforce boards and local districts to develop a plan outlining how the needs of disadvantaged and disconnected youth will be addressed as part of the high school reform process, especially as related to preparing them for postsecondary education and labor market success.

MANDATING GREATER ACCOUNTABILITY

We applaud the National Governor's Association for their work on a uniform calculation of graduation rate and the compact among governors to adopt the four- year-cohort method. We recommend the following changes to NCLB:

- Require the use of the four-year-cohort method for calculating graduation rates.
- Require schools to disaggregate and report dropout and graduation data by subgroups, and place greater emphasis on high school completion rates in calculating Adequate Yearly Progress.
- Include in the graduation rate calculation all youth enrolled in district-sanctioned alternative education pathways and/or non-traditional environments, as long as those pathways lead to a high school diploma or equivalent.

- Provide the federal flexibility for reporting “extended-time” graduation rates for youth whose educational intervention and personal situation may require more time.

Such provisions within No Child Left Behind will foster greater collaboration among districts, the workforce system, the business community, and community-based organizations to put in place options that provide support which youth need while also providing the rigor necessary for high school credentialing.

DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RE-ENTRY

The dropout prevention and intervention act authorized under NCLB is substantially underfunded and provides for the implementation of school-wide activities that would promote better retention. This section should be expanded to allow the provision of a broader set of activities to assist struggling students in underperforming schools. Specific recommendations for changes to NCLB include:

- Allow community-based organizations, workforce development providers, and institutions of higher education with a proven track record of working with struggling students and dropouts to receive Title I funds to provide support to these students.
- Broaden the set of activities eligible for expenditure of supplemental education services funds to include those activities that address the broader set of barriers that contribute to student failure at the high school level.
- Allow dropout prevention funding to be expended on subgroups within the school population that evidence a higher likelihood of dropping out, not just on school-wide activities. Focus dropout prevention funding on activities and services shown to decrease dropout rates for students, which may include:
 - extended-day programs
 - summer enrichment/knowledge retention programs
 - wraparound social services located within the school
 - civic participation opportunities tied to school work
 - relevant, real-world learning opportunities
 - college tours and early exposure to college opportunities
 - partnerships with skills-based alternative education programs
 - non-traditional teaching to support alternative learning styles

INNOVATION, REPLICATION, CAPACITY BUILDING

To dramatically change the landscape of how high schools prepare youth for post-secondary education success and success in the workforce will require leadership, innovation, willingness to research, test, and replicate promising approaches, technical support, and professional development. Successful transformation will require expanding

the boundaries of where formal learning occurs from inside the classroom walls to the broader community, the workplace, college campuses, and beyond. NCLB should encourage the building of the capacity of the local districts to implement these changes and ensure that adequate resources flow to districts to accomplish the much-needed transformations.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2006*, Table 9, “Earnings in 2005 by Educational Attainment of the Population 18 Years and Over, by Age, Sex, Race Alone, And Hispanic Origin,” 2006, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2006.html>.

² Keith Melville, *The School Dropout Crisis*, The University of Richmond Pew Partnership for Civic Change, 2006, 1, http://www.pew-partnership.org/pdf/dropout_overview.pdf.

³ Jay P. Greene and Marcus Winters, *Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates: 1991-2002*, Education Working Paper No. 8, Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute, 2005, 15, http://www.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/ewp_08.pdf.

⁴ Jay P. Greene and Marcus Winters, *Leaving Boys Behind: Public High School Graduation Rates*, Civic Report No. 48, Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute, 2006, 10, http://www.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/cr_48.pdf.

⁵ The Conference Board, Corporative Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management, *Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers’ Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce*, 2006, 1-64, http://www.conference-board.org/pdf_free/BED-06-Workforce.pdf.

⁶ Jay P. Greene and Marcus Winters, *Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates: 1991-2002*, Education Working Paper No. 8, Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute, 2005, 1-7, http://www.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/ewp_08.pdf.

⁷ Samuel Halperin and Glenda Partee, *Some Things Do Make a Difference for Youth*, American Youth Policy Forum, 1999, vi.