DON'T CALL THEM DROPOUTS

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO LEAVE HIGH SCHOOL BEFORE GRADUATION

A Report from America's Promise Alliance and its Center for Promise at Tufts University

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TIME TO LISTEN

Let me begin with a simple request for readers of this report.

Please set aside your preconceptions and assumptions about young people who don't finish high school. Fight the instinct to reach for quick solutions. Just listen hard and try to understand their experience and perspective.

Young people who don't finish high school have few avenues for sharing their stories with adults, school professionals, community leaders, and policymakers. The goal of this report is to change that — to raise up the voices of young people who have not graduated from high school so that we all gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and choices they face.

With enthusiastic support from our partners at Target, the research team at our Center for Promise set out to discover what young people say about the experiences that lead them away from high school. By conducting interviews with more than 200 young people and surveying several thousand more, we listened deeply to what leads to leaving school before graduation. Throughout the process, our goal remained the same — to hear what young people say about their lives and decisions.

Readers of this report know the challenge our nation faces now: Approximately 20 percent of young people — about 800,000 per year — don't graduate from high school. We at America's Promise and our Alliance of partners and communities are dedicated to reducing that number dramatically. Together with the President and the Secretary of Education, we've set a goal of raising the graduation rate from its current 80 percent to 90 percent by 2020.

All of us — individuals, organizations, communities — share the responsibility and opportunity for creating the conditions under which all young people have a real chance to thrive. We make choices every day that can ease the path young people walk or make that path more difficult. These decisions should be informed by the voices and realities of the teens we want to support. We can't help them meet their own goals if we don't understand the lives they lead, the challenges they face and the perspectives they bring.

One small and important way for us to start changing course is captured in the title of this report. Let's grant the wish expressed in several of the group interviews to stop calling this group of young people "dropouts." Let's leave behind the "loser" and "quitter" undertones that word conveys.

And then let's get to work helping to build a future in which all young people can flourish and thrive.

John Gomperts
President and CEO,
America's Promise Alliance

Join the conversation and read the whole report at **GradNation.org/NotDropouts** and on Twitter using **#notdropouts**.

A MESSAGE FROM TARGET

The eduation achievement gap — or opportunity gap, as many have suggested—is not made up of statistics, it is made up of people; students — children — with hopes and dreams and challenges all their own. To paint them with a broad brush is to marginalize them. To render them merely as numbers is to refuse to see their faces, or hear their voices, or honor their stories.

In this compelling new report, "Don't Call Them Dropouts," America's Promise Alliance gives voice to the young people behind the numbers. These are the students who've left school behind for reasons that are often as reasonable as they are devastating. And they are coming back, or trying to, because these students have one thing in common: the desire to create better lives than the ones they have been given.

We are proud to sponsor this report. At Target, we have always believed that meaningful, lasting solutions begin with listening. Empathy is at the heart of all great, human-centered design. This is the approach we take to designing experiences for our guests, and to making investments in our communities.

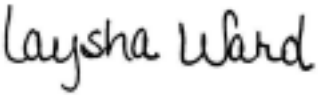
Our commitment to education is built on a simple belief: that *every* child deserves a quality education regardless of race or socioeconomic status. It's why we've committed $1 billion to the cause; an investment we'll reach by the end of 2015. It's why we give 5% of our profit — that's more than $4 million every week — and more than a million volunteer hours in 2013 from our team members nationwide. It's why we use our strengths as a national retailer to foster public/private partnerships, convene cross-sector leaders, and raise awareness of education. And it's why we support strong, action-oriented partners like America's Promise Alliance.

We also believe nothing is more important to the future of our children, communities and country than education. It is the key to moving young people out of poverty and into economic opportunity. It ensures they'll have the knowledge and skills to compete in a 21st century global economy. And it's critical to ensuring that we have a skilled workforce and leaders for the future.

There's good news to celebrate. Graduation rates are on the rise. Every year, fewer children are leaving school before graduation. But too many still do. And to read their stories is to understand in a whole new way just how much work remains. We still have cross-sector partnerships to build, solutions to design, and young people to engage.

This report is a good place to start. If we are to help our children in the gap, we must first understand them. Their future — and, indeed, our own future — depend on it.

Respectfully,



Laysha Ward
President, Community Relations
Target

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Center for Promise at America's Promise Alliance could not have completed this study without our partners, including a group of community-based organizations throughout the country, national leaders on the issues that impact young people, and the young people who agreed to be interviewed and surveyed. Their generous contributions of time and talent shaped Don't Call Them Dropouts from beginning to end.

The Center for Promise team that worked on this study is comprised of:

- Jonathan F. Zaff, Ph.D., Executive Director
- Elizabeth Pufall Jones, Ph.D., Research Scientist
- Sara E. Anderson, Ph.D., Post-Doctoral Research Associate
- Craig McClay, Lead Group Interview Facilitator and Qualitative Analyst
- Melissa Maharaj, Group Interview Facilitator and Qualitative Analyst
- Ana Carvalho, Graduate Research Assistant
- Steven Otto, Graduate Research Assistant
- Jen Elise Prescott, Doctoral Research Assistant
- Amber Rose Johnson, Research Assistant

The voices of the young people who participated in the group interviews and the survey are the foundation for this report. Although we are not able to acknowledge each young person individually, we are humbled by the ways they shared with us intimate details of their lives; and by their daily struggles, strength, and courage.

We are grateful to Stefan Hankin and Bennett Lipscomb from Lincoln Park Strategies for capturing the voices of these young people through our survey.

Our community partners graciously gave of their time and effort to recruit young people for the group interviews:

- Brotherhood, Inc., St. Paul, MN
- Center for Teen Empowerment, Boston, MA
- E3 Centers (program of the Philadelphia Youth Network), Philadelphia, PA
- Gateway to College, Minneapolis, MN
- Gateway to College, Portland, OR
- Gateway to College, Riverside, OR
- Homeboy Industries, Los Angeles, CA
- Houston Independent School District, Twilight High School, Houston, TX
- Learning Works Charter School, Pasadena, CA
- Magic Johnson Accelerated Achievement Academy (part of Magic Johnson Bridgescape Academy Network), Cincinnati, OH
- Ujamaa Place, St. Paul, MN
- United Teen Equality Center, Lowell, MA
- United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona, Tucson, AZ
- Y-Build, Nashville, TN
- YouthBuild, Boston
- YouthBuild, Providence
- Youth Opportunity (YO!), Baltimore, MD
- Youth United for Change, Philadelphia, PA
- Zone 126, Astoria, NY

In particular, we'd like to thank the community leaders and their teams at each of the partner organizations: Christa Anders, Pam Blumenthal, Gamal Brown, Gregg Croteau, Lea Dahl, Monica De La Rosa, Ernest Dorsey, Stephanie Gambone, Anthony Hubbard, Anthony Johnson, Amanda Kucich, Jill Marks, Mikala Rahn, and Anju Rupchandani.

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- Mary Ellen Ardouny, President & CEO, The Corps Network
- John Bridgeland, President & CEO, Civic Enterprises
- Thaddeus Ferber, Vice President, Policy Advocacy, Forum for Youth Investment
- Della Hughes, Senior Fellow at the Center for Youth and Communities of the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University
- Nick Mathern, Vice President, Policy & Partnership Planning, Gateway to College National Network
- Joel Miranda, Director of Leadership Development, YouthBuild USA
- Kristin Anderson Moore, Senior Scholar, Child Trends
- Mikala Rahn, President, Public Works, LLC
- Dorothy Stoneman, Founder and CEO, YouthBuild USA

Finally, this report would not be so powerful without its lead writer, Michelle Hynes. She translated complex quantitative and qualitative methodologies and findings into a compelling narrative that is true to the voices of the young people we interviewed and surveyed.

America's Promise Alliance gratefully acknowledges the generous support of Target for this study and its dissemination.

FOREWORD

There is power in listening. Almost a decade ago, we discovered with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that notwithstanding years of research on the high school dropout problem, no one had ever talked with the customers of American education — the non-graduates themselves.

When we listened to their perspectives in focus groups and a national survey in 25 cities, suburbs and rural areas across the United States, a powerful story started to emerge, one we captured in 2006 in The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts. Like other students, those who left school without diplomas had big dreams for their futures, wanted adults to have higher expectations for them, saw the importance of high school and college to their careers, and were confident they could have graduated. Yet, many saw little connection between what happened in the classroom and what they wanted to be in life. Often, attendance patterns were a clear and early warning sign, academic challenges grew, school seemed to be irrelevant to their career dreams, and the weight of real world events pulled them away. In hindsight, with jobs to find and families to raise, the vast majority said that leaving high school was one of the worst decisions of their lives.

For a variety of reasons, this problem was hidden from the American people or thought to be chronically unfixable. The Silent Epidemic told us more about who these young people were, why they dropped out of high school, and what steps could help others graduate and go on to college. We learned that the dropout epidemic is fixable and young people point the way forward. While these students took responsibility for their own decisions, they longed for: stronger connections between school and work; improved and more engaging instruction; access to supports they needed; a safe and welcoming school climate that fostered learning; a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school; and improved communication between parents and schools before it was too late. These findings were crucial blocks on which to build better supports for students.

A decade later, America's Promise Alliance and Tufts University come roaring forward with a groundbreaking report that goes deeper with these young people. While it illuminates the family, social, and financial pressures that may cause a young person to stop school, this study also emphasizes the resilience and determination shared by these "dropouts" as they work to overcome extraordinarily difficult life circumstances. Their persistence in the face of many setbacks should encourage us that, if we continue to listen to their voices and work to put the right supports in place, we can help even more young people stay in school and on track to a successful future and help those who have left school return to graduate.

Our nation is making important progress in reaching the GradNation goal of a 90 percent high school graduation rate nationwide by the Class of 2020. This is a goal that previous Presidents have set and missed. But our nation must not miss it this time. So let's listen to the perspectives, stories and insights shared in this new report and continue to galvanize a nation to respond. The futures of so many young people depend upon it.

John M. Bridgeland
CEO,
Civic Enterprises

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Don't Call Them Dropouts adds to the large and growing body of research about why some young people fail to complete high school on the traditional four-year timeline. While a high school diploma is only a starting line for adult success, it has become increasingly clear that it is crucial for taking the next steps in college and career. Over the past decade, there has been impressive growth in and commitment to helping more students graduate.

What has been missing from much of the recent research, however, is a vibrant portrait of young people's experiences, gathered in a way that deepens the national conversation about why some young people are still failing to graduate. Building on studies like Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison's *Silent Epidemic*[1], as well as the *Building a GradNation* reports and the work of The Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Network, this report from The Center for Promise (a partnership between America's Promise Alliance and Tufts University) begins to fill that gap.

The Center's research team gathered the stories of more than 200 young people through 30 facilitated group interviews in 16 high-poverty, geographically distributed urban communities across the country. In addition, nearly 3,000 more young people drawn from all 50 states responded to a survey; about two-thirds of those respondents had stopped attending school for at least a semester, while the remainder had finished high school uninterrupted. A group of partner organizations, described in Appendix II, assisted with recruiting participants for both qualitative and quantitative data collection.

Our research was designed to answer questions like:

- What do young people say about why they leave high school before graduating? What circumstances surrounded the decision to leave?
- What were students' lives like when they left school, and what effects has that decision had on them and on their families?
- Why do young people say they came back to school?
- What opportunities do young people have to re-engage after leaving school, and what barriers do they encounter along the way?

As we talked with young people, many of whom had already re-entered high school completion programs, we learned that they do not want to be called "dropouts." Further, because the majority of survey respondents had already returned to school, we avoid using traditional language about dropping out in this report. Instead, we refer to the interview participants as "nongraduates," and their decision to interrupt their high school education as "leaving school." We refer to the two survey populations as "continuous-enrollment" and "interrupted-enrollment."[2]

Analyzing the qualitative and quantitative data led us to four primary findings:

1. Both disengaging from and re-engaging with school result from clusters of factors.
2. Young people who stop going to school are likely to be navigating home, school, or neighborhood environments that they experience as toxic.[3]
3. Connectedness to others is a high priority for young

[1] Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J.J. & Morison, K. B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts.* Civic Enterprises. See also Bridgeland, J. M., Milano, J. A. (2012). *Opportunity Road: The Promise and Challenge of America's forgotten youth.* Civic Enterprises and America's Promise Alliance.

[2] We refer to the two survey populations as "interrupted-enrollment" and "continuous-enrollment" throughout the document, to emphasize the point that "dropout" does not accurately describe the young people who left school and subsequently re-engaged in secondary education. See the tables in Appendix III for demographic information.

[3] That is, young people described themselves as survivors of violence, exposed to violence, affected by adverse health events in their families, or subject to school climates and policies that are unsafe, unsupportive or disrespectful.

There are statistically significant differences between the interrupted-enrollment and continuously-enrolled survey respondents with respect to life circumstances.

people. The value placed on these relationships can lead young people away from or toward school, depending on other circumstances.

4. Young people who interrupted their high school education often "bounced back" from difficult circumstances, but individual resilience was insufficient to re-engage with school. Longer-term positive development, what we call "reaching up," required additional support.

While the four primary findings may not surprise readers who are familiar with American high schools, some unexpected emphases and themes emerged from our analyses of the data. For example, family members' health led young people into caregiving roles that pulled them out of school. Young people persistently pursued human connections — even if that quest led them into unhealthy intimate relationships, destructive behavior, or gang membership. While nongraduates took responsibility for the choices they made, they also shared insights about the impact of their unrelenting struggles, and they criticized adults who didn't listen to their larger stories as well as the school policies that impeded their efforts to stay engaged in school.

The stories we heard in interviews demonstrated that these young people were reaching up toward a more sustainable future, whether that meant returning to complete high school, finding ways to support their families, seeking opportunities to be better role models for their own children, or giving back to their communities. The nongraduates we interviewed[4] were primarily re-engaging in education and work through organizations focused on helping young people who have interrupted their high school education, and who live in high-poverty or other distressed circumstances. Survey findings, based on data drawn from all 50 states, called attention to specific strengths that nongraduates brought to their struggles. More than three-quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that what they'd learned in the past would help them in the future; nearly three-quarters said they have a five-year plan; and 84 percent said they don't give up on problems.

Finally, while we found that an accumulation of risk factors (as opposed to any one factor alone) is what leads to leaving high school, several survey findings suggest that school personnel, community leaders, and other helping professionals should pay extra attention to students who move from home to home or from school to school, particularly when also affected by foster care; have a parent in jail; or become homeless. There are statistically significant differences between the interrupted-enrollment and continuously-enrolled survey respondents with respect to these life circumstances. More specifically, we found that:

- Interrupted-enrollment respondents reported high levels of residential and school instability, with almost 50% moving homes and 50% changing schools during high school (compared with 30% of continuously-enrolled respondents moving and 26% changing schools);

[4] See the appendices for the demographics of the young people from the 30 group interviews.

Interrupted Enrollment Risk Factors Reported by Respondents

87% = Homelessness

79% = Incarcerated Parent

50% = Moving Homes

50% = Changing Schools

11% = Foster Care

- Interrupted-enrollment survey respondents reported being in foster care at a much higher rate (11%) than continuously-enrolled graduates (2%);
- A young person who experienced homelessness was 87% more likely to stop going to school; and
- Having an incarcerated parent was associated with a 79% higher likelihood of interrupting school enrollment.

Giving extra support to students in these circumstances could build on their strengths in ways that help them stay in or return to school.

Hearing similar narratives over and over in sixteen different urban communities and digging into complementary survey data convinced us that listening to what young people say about their own experiences is, in itself, an important action for adults to take. Without denying the harm that some of these young people have done through violence, gangs, and drugs, we invite readers of this report to also see the resilient, determined, and hopeful community members our team met in the summer of 2013. The stories and the statistics provide important clues to how we can learn more from, and be more supportive of, the diverse groups of young people who are leaving our nation's high schools. We strongly urge greater inclusion of young people's perspectives into future policymaking, policy applications, and practical community-based interventions. Our research confirms that how each of us sees these young people, how we talk to them, and what we expect from them matters very much.

All of us at America's Promise Alliance look forward to the ways that raising up young people's voices and listening to what they say can add new dimensions to our nation's conversation about raising the graduation rate.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized an exploratory sequential *mixed-methods design*.[5] Mixed-methods designs recognize that not all research questions can be answered using a single formulation of data. An exploratory design is most applicable where not enough is known about a given phenomenon to develop theories or hypotheses with confidence (e.g., what is the lived experience of youth who have stopped going to school?). In an exploratory sequential design, the qualitative component of the study is conducted first and facilitates the conceptualization of the quantitative component's design and analysis. In this study, designing, conducting, and analyzing facilitated group interviews preceded developing, implementing, and analyzing a survey. Organizing data collection in this way allowed the focus of the analysis to remain on young people's voices, with the quantitative data and analysis elaborating on and extending these voices.

From June through September 2013, the Center for Promise team conducted 30 facilitated group interviews in 16 communities across the United States. The interview method drew upon an interactive facilitation methodology developed by Teen Empowerment,[6] an organization founded in 1992 that focuses on raising the voices of youth and young adults in a community in order to effect social change.

The survey was developed in the summer of 2013 based on input from the interview facilitators and the Center for Promise qualitative researchers; existing literature on the reasons young people leave high school; and prior surveys of similar populations of young people. The final survey consisted of 58 questions related to youth demographics; the background of the respondents' parents; relationships with parents, peers, teachers, and others in their communities; individual strengths; experiences in school and other areas of their lives and young people's reported reasons for dropping out. Survey participants were recruited via email and phone, and through the efforts of national organizations with community affiliates that partner with America's Promise. Potential participants were invited to complete the survey if they were between the ages of 18 and 25. The survey was broadly distributed through email by a survey research firm, Lincoln Park Strategies, in Spanish and English.

In the end, 1,936 qualified individuals who had left high school for at least a semester completed the survey; these respondents constitute the final interrupted-enrollment sample.[7] In addition, 1,023 young adults who graduated high school in four years (continuous-enrollment) were recruited via the same sampling methodology in order to provide a comparison group. Although participants in the interrupted-enrollment survey are not a nationally representative sample, their demographic characteristics mirror that of the U.S. as a whole and when broken down by state. There is one exception: a smaller proportion of White participants were found in the interrupted-enrollment survey compared with the proportions within each state.

When reading the findings, it is important to note that the interview participants and the survey respondents are drawn from different populations. The more than 200 young people who participated in the 30 facilitated group interviews live in urban communities and are connected in some way to organizations that re-engage young people who have left high school. The nearly 3,000 survey respondents come from all 50 states and represent a more geographically and economically diverse group.

For a full description of the qualitative and quantitative approaches, please visit **GradNation.org/NotDropouts**.

[5] Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. (2007). Designing and conducting mixed methods research. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications.

[6] See the Teen Empowerment website for more information on the organization (http://www.teenempowerment.org); and the Moving Beyond Icebreakers website for more information about the facilitating techniques used (http://www.movingbeyondicebreakers.org).

[7] We chose not to call the survey samples "dropouts" and "graduates" because many of the students who stopped going to school for a semester or more had re-enrolled by the time they completed the survey. See the tables in Appendix III for demographic information.

THEMES AND FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

Colleagues like Robert Balfanz, John Bridgeland, Ruth Nield, and Russell Rumberger[8] who study youth development and young people's engagement with school have built an enormous body of evidence that has shaped research, policy, and practice over the last decade. The latest research and theory make clear that young people are not born "dropouts" or "graduates," nor does a young person's environment dictate his or her destiny. Rather, disengaging from school is a result of the dynamic relationship among individual characteristics (e.g. race, gender, income); known risk factors (e.g. failing courses, low attendance, behavior problems, or being overage for a particular grade);[9] and context (e.g. school climate; the interest teachers take in students; relationships with adults in the community; or the poverty level of the community surrounding the school).[10] Furthermore, a growing body of empirical evidence shows that disconnection from school is a long-term process, not a sudden event.[11]

Recent research has also focused on the size and scope of the graduation rate challenge in the United States — leading many to call the rate at which young people leave school before earning a diploma a "dropout crisis".[12] Approximately one-fifth of young people who begin 9th grade do not complete high school on time, if ever.[13] Of even greater concern are the statistics for urban youth and for members of specific minority groups. In many large urban areas, on-time graduation rates average 50% or less, with African American, Native American, and Hispanic youth showing the lowest rates.

These results create enormous costs for individuals and for society. Young people who do not complete high school are more likely to become unemployed, homeless, pregnant, become parents, or become involved in the juvenile justice or criminal justice system. While nongraduates may also experience some of these negative life events during their high school years, the lack of a diploma often closes doors to gainful employment and keeps them in environments that do not support longer-term academic and vocational achievement. Their contributions to the nation's economic and social growth — economically and socially — are far more limited than they could be.

The findings support looking closely at the structural and contextual factors that affect dropping out. In addition, the findings this report highlights point us toward new ways of looking at existing policies and practices that can help young people re-engage with school.

Nongraduates create enormous costs for individuals and for society.

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[8] Balfanz, R., & Letgers, N. (2004). *Locating the dropout crisis: Which high schools produce the nation's dropouts? Where are they located? Who attends them?* Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University.
Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J.J. & Morison, K. B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts.* Retrieved from http://www.civiccenterprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-6.pdf.
Nield, R.C. (2009). Falling off track during the transition to high school: what we know and what can be done. *Future Child,* 19(1): 53-76.
Rumberger, R.W. (2004). *Why students drop out of school.* In Orfield, G. (Ed.), *Dropout in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis* (pp. 131-156). Cambridge, MA. Harvard Education Press.

[9] Hammond, C., Smink, J., Drew, S. (2007). *Dropout risk factors and exemplary programs: A technical report.* National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University and Communities in Schools, Inc.

[10] Rumberger, R., Lim, S. A. (2008). *Why students drop out of school: A review of 25 years of research.* California Dropout Research Project. UC Santa Barbara.

[11] Neild, R.C. & Balfanz, R. (2006). *Unfulfilled promise: The dimensions and characteristics of Philadelphia's dropout crisis, 2000-2005.* Philadelphia Youth Network. John Hopkins University and University of Pennsylvania.
Nield, R.C., Balfanz, R., Herzog, L. (2007) *An early warning system.* Washington, DC: ASCD.

[12] Swanson, C. B. (2009). *Cities in crisis: Closing the graduation gap.* Washington, DC: America's Promise Alliance.

[13] Balfanz, R., Bridgeland, J. M., Bruce, M., Fox, J.H. (2013). *Building a GradNation: Progress and challenge in ending the high school dropout epidemic.* Washington, DC: America's Promise Alliance.

OVERVIEW

In June 2013, our team began traveling across the country to investigate these initial questions:

- What do young people say about why they leave high school before graduating? What circumstances surrounded the decision to leave?
- What were students' lives like when they left school, and what effects has that decision had on them and on their families?
- Why do young people say they come back to school?
- What opportunities do young people have to re-engage after leaving school, and what barriers do they encounter along the way?

Listening to the voices of more than 200 young people in sixteen different places gave the research team a vibrant picture of their experiences. Themes that began emerging from the facilitated group interviews informed the questions we developed for our broader survey. The subsequent responses from nearly 3,000 young people across all 50 states[14] allowed us to get a broader view of which young people are leaving school, why they say they are leaving, and what encourages them to return.

Through systematic analysis of the interviews and surveys, we found that:

- Disengagement from and re-engagement with school both result from clusters of factors. There is no single reason or factor that drives students to leave school, nor is there a uniform profile of students who fail to graduate on time.
- Young people who leave high school are likely to be growing up in home, school, or community environments we characterize as toxic.[15]
- Connectedness to others is both a risk factor and a protective factor for disengaging from school. Young people seek and prioritize connections with adults (parents, teachers, other family or community members); peers; and/or younger family members (a child, a sibling). The value placed on these relationships can lead young people toward or away from school, depending on other circumstances.

- Persistent resilience ("bouncing back") was evident among nongraduates. Our data suggest that this resilience is a necessary quality for coping from day to day and for re-engagement, but insufficient by itself for longer-term positive development (what we call "reaching up").

While we treat the four findings separately starting on page 13, they are inextricably related to one another.

Within and across each of these findings, we discuss specific themes that appeared frequently in the group interviews across multiple communities, as shown in Section 2 of the tables in Appendix III. While some of these themes fit easily into a single finding, several span two or more of the four primary areas. Cross-cutting themes include the effect of adverse health events on school completion, the impact of violence on young people's mental health, the influence of specific parent characteristics on youth well-being, and whether young people perceived school as responsive and relevant to their day-to-day concerns.

[14] As we explain in the methodology, although survey participants are not a nationally representative sample, their demographic characteristics mirror that of the U.S. as a whole and when broken down by state.

[15] All quotes are from a single individual, referred to by an alias. To protect the young people's identities, the quotes are not associated with the cities or the programs where interviews took place. A list of the cities and programs associated with the group interviews is included in the Appendices.

Nongraduates described their experiences of **multiple, prevalent stressors** — such as witnessing or being victimized by violence, living in unsafe neighborhoods, experiencing unstable home lives or homelessness, taking responsibility for earning money to meet basic needs (including relying on illegal sources of income), or becoming caregivers for parents or siblings at a young age. In the midst of these circumstances, the young people we interviewed are seeking and creating **connectedness** wherever they can find it. As their stories illustrate, this may mean choosing family caregiving, gang affiliation, or teen parenting over school attendance. Importantly, seeking connectedness led both to disengagement and reengagement with school; survey findings in particular suggest that being connected to others is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for staying engaged in school.

Finally, we heard a clear and powerful theme about **persistence and resilience**. The nongraduates we talked to consistently "bounced back" and coped with the stressors in their environments. However, in order to thrive — to "reach up" to a place where longer-term investment in the future was possible — a significant change in circumstances was necessary. Young people needed connections with adults and peers who cared about them, people who provided support and guidance, and access to relevant educational programs and social services. That is, a pathway to re-engagement depends on young person's individual strengths and perseverance meeting with social connection and institutional support.

FINDING 1.

Disengagement and re-engagement both result from clusters of factors.

"I was fifteen about to turn sixteen; I was in the tenth grade. I was smoking weed, growing weed. I lived in the country my whole life — I lived in this little tiny town of 200 people. You know, like, the only thing to do was ride dirt bikes and smoke bud. And my mom ended up coming down with HPV and ovarian cancer; that was the first thing. And the second thing was three months later, my mom had degenerative disc disease, she had to get a gastric bypass for it.

Well, my mom's laid up in bed, can't pay the bills. And I turned sixteen and I started roofing [working construction]. Well, eventually weed and everything played into it so much that I seen so much money in my hands that when I went to school it seemed to be a waste of time. You know, I would rather have been on the roof or out hustling making money to pay the bills for my mom cause she's laid up in bed and can't do shit. And my dad never been there; my dad's been in prison since I was ten — doing fifteen years in federal, and he actually gets out in three, no he gets out in two years. I eventually dropped out just 'cause the bills weren't getting paid and I knew I could pay the bills, step up. I never took on responsibility like that before in my life."
— Aaron[16]

Explaining why young people leave high school is at once quite simple and overwhelmingly complex. A single word — **relationships** — provides a true and accurate response. Yet the relationships that surround young people who stop going to school are hardly simple. The story above illustrates the interplay among incarcerated or incapacitated parents, a community that offers few options for legal work or productive recreation, and a sense of responsibility for family. School, in this context, simply felt like "a waste of time." While Aaron can name precipitating events that led to leaving school, only the totality of circumstances explains how a sixteen-year-old ended up working construction and selling drugs rather than attending his high school classes.

[16] All quotes are from a single individual, referred to by an alias. To protect the young people's identities, the quotes are not associated with the cities or the programs where interviews took place. A list of the cities and programs associated with the group interviews is included in Appendix II.

No group of survey respondents demonstrated involvement with delinquent behaviors (e.g. drug use or gang involvement) without also experiencing an unstable environment, death of a person close to them, or abuse.

Aaron's story, unfortunately, is not an isolated one. Across all sixteen interview communities, the research team heard story after story that suggested that a confluence of factors and life experiences can work together against young people's chances of graduating high school. In fact, there were twenty-five different factors that group interview participants mentioned five or more times, and that were mentioned in ten or more cities. (See Section 3 of the tables in Appendix III.)

Survey findings emphasize the "clustering" effect that appears as a theme in the group interviews. For example, survey analysis shows that no group of respondents demonstrated delinquent behaviors (e.g. drug use or gang involvement) without also experiencing an unstable environment, the death of a person close to them, or abuse.[17] Young people who stopped going to school also did not disengage from school exclusively because of antisocial behavior. These findings suggest that nongraduates experienced multiple life challenges that influenced their choices. Taken together with the qualitative findings, we see, for example, that some students weighed whether to stay in school or make money to support their families. Our findings are consistent with other existing research on risk factors for dropping out.[18]

Another participant described the underlying causes of dropping out this way:

"Pain, hurt, being abused, being raped ... just a lot of things like seeing my homeboy stabbed to death, multiple deaths, having a cousin that was murdered when I was five, just a lot of things. I started hanging around with the wrong people, gang members getting into crap like ... just a lot of stuff. And I don't want my kids to grow up thinking that it is okay to be doing all that."
— Sara

This participant's story emphasizes that "a lot of things" led to a decision about leaving school. Witnessing the violent death of a friend, losing a family member at a young age, experiencing rape and other abuse, and subsequently getting involved with "the wrong people" all added up to a world in which school wasn't a priority. The participant ends, though, with a resolution to be a different kind of role model: "I don't want my kids to grow up thinking that it is okay to be doing all that." In just a few sentences, Sara encapsulates a number of themes we heard in group interviews across the country.

While interview participants in 13 out of 16 cities mention gangs, and 11% of survey respondents report involvement with a gang, additional survey analysis found that this factor alone did not have a direct link to dropping out; and only 3.5% of survey respondents cite it as one of their reasons for dropping out. This is not to say that belonging to a gang did not have detrimental effects. Instead, as one of the quotes above suggests, joining a gang may have been a negative outcome of failing to find productive connections with adults and peers in a young person's families, schools, or their broader communities.

According to survey analyses, being a gang member, using drugs, or being abused also did not preclude re-engagement with school, perhaps because of related positive experiences that predict re-engagement such as participating in youth activities or having a sense of learning from past experiences.

The majority of young people with whom we spoke indicated that at the point they left school, they were "trying, trying, trying," but when exposed to so many risk factors, "I came to my breaking point."[19] At some point in the lives of these young people, something had to give. They were trying, but they were trying, in most cases, alone.

Similarly, returning to school results from both positive and negative personal experiences that together produce a turning point. Therefore, in order to create a sustainable shift that enables young people to thrive, changes are necessary across the contexts in which these young people live. This includes their connections to parents, peers, and professionals; to stable places, including housing; and to school policies that make sense for their lives. We explore this point further in the Connectedness and Conclusions sections of the report.[20]

[17] Latent class analysis (LCA) was used to examine clusters or profiles of interrupted-enrollment participants. See McCutcheon, A. L. (1987). Latent class analysis. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications.
[18] For example, see Rumberger, R., Lim, S. A., (2008). Why students drop out of school: A review of 25 years of research. California Dropout Research Project. UC Santa Barbara.
[19] From "Marty."
[20] Balfanz, R., Bridgeland, J. M., Bruce, M., Fox, J.H. (2013). Building a Grad Nation: Progress and challenge in ending the high school dropout epidemic. Washington, DC: America's Promise Alliance.

REFLECTIONS ON THE FINDINGS

By Craig McClay, Program Coordinator, The Center for Teen Empowerment

I am so grateful to all the focus group participants for allowing us the opportunity to hear their very personal and private stories. The sheer level of trust and intimacy that we developed in two hours enabled us to look beneath the surface to examine their lives. Their stories were filled with tensions between their learned strengths and weaknesses, their common threats and opportunities and most importantly their challenges and their triumphs.

On the one hand, their stories revealed a downright ugly underbelly of our society and the experiences of these young people. Tales of physical, emotional, psychological abuse were shared; things that should not happen to people ever, let alone in the 21st century. On the other hand, the focus group participants' stories inspired.

Either way, the real tragedy is that these stories are usually not heard or listened to. Further, not enough of us are effectively intervening or acting toward changing the circumstances that push or pull young people out of school and down riskier pathways, just to meet their individual and family needs. It's as if they're living on Neptune. Their realities could not be any further from our own. That may be the reason they go to extraordinary measures to hide the uglier side of their lives.

However, once the facts get uncovered we must respond appropriately. As we heard these incredible stories from the focus group participants many questions came to mind, some of which we asked immediately. Sometimes we'd ask, "Why didn't you contact somebody who could possibly help?" The refrain became, "We did and that only made things worse," or, "I did and they didn't do anything."

Not only are these young people facing serious obstacles, but when they try to connect they often find themselves worse off than they were to begin with. Some of our institutions are not meeting their needs and sometimes create even greater impediments in the lives of these young people. There are, however, many institutions that are very helpful — and that is where we found hope.

Hope is in the voices of these young people. It's time we scale the walls that separate us, and authentically connect with young people. The calls and cries are numerous and they vary. We hear them in terms of economics or the number of students whose attendance is interrupted or the unemployment and crime rates.

All of those things are important indicators, but what lies beneath is the stuff we must better understand. What can we really understand from our perspective? We can get a rudimentary picture but the masterpiece is what we need to see. The voices of those indicators make up the tape tries that come together to complete the masterpiece.

I'd like to invite you to become a masterpiece creator and an ambassador for young people. I invite you to not make assumptions about what young people need or want and to engage, connect to, play with, communicate with, adapt with and empower young people. Work with us to solve the ailments of our compromised society.

In addition, we must understand that our young people won't use terms taught in psychology and sociology courses. They will, however, speak a truth from a perspective we need to engage and include to better address the concerns and challenges they face and the skills and talents they bring to this work.

Finally, I learned another thing from sitting in these focus groups, which I think is important to this whole movement/campaign. I learned of the power of humility. In one respect, the young people who sat in those groups with us gave and received unconditional support to and from their peers.

Some of the most endearing moments happened when while sharing individual stories participants would soothe one another with gentle words of wisdom, provide tissues for tears, share resources and offer shoulders to lean on. Because each of them had been through hard times or made mistakes in their lives, they could better empathize with each other and recognize each other's humanity. They re-asserted the human dimensions of dignity and connectedness that had been denied them.

There is no doubt that addressing the problems illustrated in these stories is a major endeavor. Tackling these issues will be the difference between America sinking or floating in the 21st century global economy. Our success will take all hands on deck to put all oars in the water then commence rowing in the same direction. It can be done.

We see this principle in action in so many highly successful businesses in the 21st century for all types of products and services. Can it work to increase our national high school graduation rate? I think so, if we can re-establish the "you" in education.

Once we make our number one national goal improving life outcomes for members of our society who get shorted as a result of unfair disparities associated with class, we will build a graduation nation.

FINDING 2.

Young people who leave high school are often navigating toxic environments.

"Their daddy [the father of two of her three children] is childish ... always criticizing me ... and he try to come in and ruin us [she, her three children, and her boyfriend]. ... I done went through a lot of stuff with this man and he done shot at my car, he done shot at us, he done everything. ... and when you go to the police they don't do nothing ... they'll do something like ... when you get killed."
— Lucinda

"... [L]ike I said, my father used to beat on me. Never had my mom in my life; she was always on drugs. It was just me growing up watching over my little brothers while she was out in the street doing her thing. So me and my other brothers grew up too quick, took responsibility, we just ... it was too late to go back to school, there was nothing much else for us to do."
— Thomas

The 200+ participants in the group interview sample and — to a lesser extent — the respondents in the interrupted-enrollment survey sample, described growing up in toxic environments. The stories we heard from interview participants highlight three pervasive elements of this toxicity:

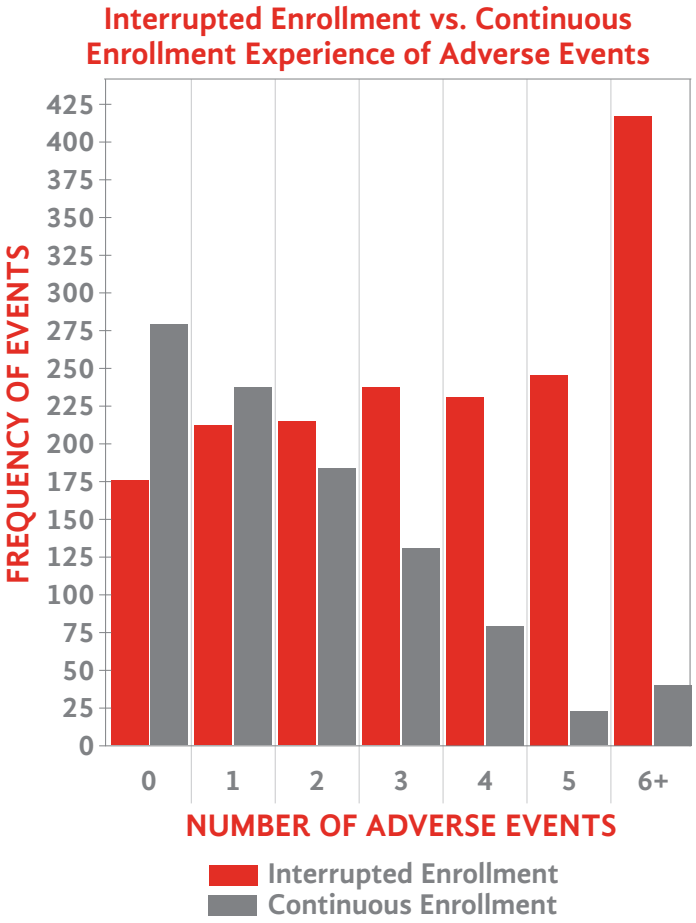
- exposure to, or being a survivor of, violence — at home, at school, or in their neighborhoods;
- personal and family health traumas; and
- school climates and policies that are unsafe, unsupportive or disrespectful.

Across all 16 cities, interview participants recounted experiences of being physically, emotionally, and sexually abused, bullied in school, and witnessing violence in their neighborhoods, schools and homes. In addition, as Thomas describes, in most communities[21] we also heard stories of parental absence or neglect — whether because of incarceration, drug use, or simply working multiple jobs to pay the bills. Young people who had absent or abusive parents were often forced not only into self-reliance, but also into caregiving for others in their families. In Thomas's words, they "grew up too quick."

Survey respondents identified an array of toxic experiences or environments in their lives that reinforce the frequent mentions in the group interviews. A large number of interrupted-enrollment respondents also reported being abused (30%), homeless (22%), or spending time in juvenile detention (18%). Comparing results from the interrupted-enrollment and continuously-enrolled survey samples, young people who stopped going to school experienced these three types of deleterious events with significantly greater frequency than continuously-enrolled high school students. (See Section 4 of the tables in Appendix III for a full list of the experiences included among the survey questions.)

To further understand the impact that toxic environments might have on dropping out, our research team analyzed the cumulative number of adverse life history experiences that interrupted-enrollment survey respondents reported. Only 10% did not experience any of the 12 listed challenges, compared to 28% of continuous-enrollment respondents. Among interrupted-enrollment respondents, 66% experienced from three to 12 of these adverse events, with almost one-quarter experiencing at least six of them. The number of young people who reported that they experienced multiple events like abuse, homelessness, suspension / expulsion, and involvement with juvenile justice reinforces the findings related both to toxic environments and to clustering.

[21] In 14 of the 16 communities.



Exposure to toxic environments can lead to toxic stress. Toxic stress has been found to have substantial, detrimental effects on the brain architecture of young children, the health and wellness of children and youth, and the ability of children and youth to effectively cope with future stressful events. The disruption of the developing brain, even into adolescence, can have life-long effects on learning if no intervention occurs, and it increases the probability of engaging in multiple risky behaviors.[22] What may result are chronically stressed youth who then make impulsive or otherwise compromised decisions.

All teens, regardless of socioeconomics or family background, may act impulsively. But looking at the differences in the number of adverse experiences reported by interrupted-enrollment and continuous-enrollment survey respondents points to the greater risks for the interrupted-enrollment group.

In short, both the qualitative and quantitative analyses, as well as existing research studies, support this finding about toxic environments. Below we explore how the research illuminates specific types of toxicity that young people described to us or that we saw in the survey data, including:

- family violence and abuse,
- school safety,
- neighborhood violence,
- family health challenges, and
- unsupportive or unresponsive school policies.

Violence at Home: Family Violence and Abuse

Many of the group interview participants could not depend on "home" as a safe or stable place. Violence in the home included neglect and physical abuse. Often, older youth bore the brunt of family violence for the sake of their younger siblings. For example:

"My mom would get drunk so I would take my little brothers outside. When she woke up, she would beat me up for taking them out. But it was whatever ... It was worth it for them."
— Janis

Other interview participants indicated that abuse at home was so pervasive that they could no longer engage productively in life outside the home. Janis's story echoed what our team heard in other cities. In fact, many young people recounted exposure to extreme levels of violence — giving voice to the survey results[23] we saw related to life events affecting youth who stop going to school.

[22] Garner, A. S., Shonkoff, J. P., Siegel, B. S., Dobbins, M.I., Earls, M.F., McGuinn, L., ... & Wood, D. L. (2012). Early childhood adversity, toxic stress, and the role of the pediatrician: Translating developmental science into lifelong health. *Pediatrics*, 129 (1), 224-231.

[23] Nearly 1 in 5 interrupted-enrollment youth reported being physically or emotionally abused by a parent; and nearly one-third reported being physically or emotionally abused by someone else (see Appendix III, Tables 24 and 40).

Interviewees also had provocative, introspective insights into the impact of these traumatic events. One young person summarized the effects this way:

"Being exposed to that [abuse that a parent calls "tough love"], think of the cycle of social developments and how that can imprint on somebody and even dealing with others ... you have this distorted concept of what love is and people become sadistic."
— Kenny

A participant who lived in multiple foster homes and survived a violent event reflects:

"And after that I got shot, I got shot in my leg, and they started sending me homework from school ... and I was doin' it and all of a sudden I started drinking and I got a little bit depressed, and just tired of it, you know, I don't want to do it no more, and I just quit."
— Paul

Violence at home appears to influence the choices nongraduates made about disengaging from school. For example, some young people reported that they chose to stop going to school because they needed to protect and support themselves and their family. Janis's story is one example.

Within the young people's stories, we heard not only anger and anguish, but also self-awareness, self-acceptance, caring for others, resilience, and strength. This does not minimize the negative choices many of the young people reported making, which included using and selling drugs, harming others, and damaging property. However, the research leads us to see illegal activity, risky or unsupportive peer relationships, and leaving high school as choices made in contexts that research indicates can compromise adolescent brain development and therefore decision-making. Other research suggests that such behavior is related to an accumulation of risk factors,[24] and that long exposure to high-risk situations can damage a person's ability to regulate stress.[25] Thus, evidence suggests that the environments and relationships around the young people in both the group interviews and the survey sample are significantly influencing these choices. Viewed another way, some of these choices may simply be seen as adaptations to the young people's environments.

Violence at home appears to influence the choices nongraduates made about disengaging from school.

Violence at School: School Safety

Many of the group interview participants could not depend on "home" as a safe or stable place. Violence in the home included neglect and physical abuse. Often, older youth bore the brunt of family violence for the sake of their younger siblings. For example:

School often did not provide a haven from violent home environments. Young people described school — both the grounds and the building — as unsafe in 13 out of the 16 interview communities. We heard stories about both overt threats and generally feeling unsafe. In one participant's words:

"People would be outside of the school waiting for us with guns, so I was forced to bring my gun to school."
— Lance

A participant in another city eloquently describes the emotional impact of this kind of environment:

"I just didn't like school. It wasn't because I'm dumb. I get sick just entering the building. I feel like I'm in prison. It's how the school was set up. They had iron bars like [the area prison]. Cuz back then [the prison] was like mad gangster, with gangbangers and whatever ... Cameras everywhere. I don't feel safe."
— Jeff

[24] Breyere, E., & Garbarino, J. (2011). The developmental impact of community violence. Juvenile justice: Advancing research, policy, and practice (pp. 267-285). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
[25] Evans, G. W., & Kim, P. (2010). Multiple risk exposure as a potential explanatory mechanism for the socioeconomic status — health gradient. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1186, 174-189.
Evans, G. W., & Kim, P. (2007). Childhood poverty and health: Cumulative risk exposure and stress dysregulation. Psychological Science, 18(1), 953-957.

For Jeff, leaving school represents a kind of self-protection — removing himself from a place where "I get sick just entering the building." This story emphasizes both the mental health impact of toxic environments, and the role school climate plays in students' engagement or disengagement.

Violence in the Neighborhood

Group interview participants described witnessing violence in their neighborhoods as well. Marty, a young man in Philadelphia, was only eight years old when he witnessed his older cousin get shot in the head. Marty carried his cousin's lifeless body into the nearest convenience store to call for help.

"I just looked at him and blood started coming out of his eyes and started rolling to the back of his head and I was numb. Right there I probably lost everything I had. It was just enough, and I got tired. I was by myself and I kept going to school. Trying, trying, trying and then I came to my breaking point and I was like I don't want to do shit no more. I don't want to go to school, I don't want to say hi to nobody, I just want to die. My life is over."
— Marty

Even in the face of extreme violence, Marty tries to persist at school. But he was "by myself," and he just gave up — not just on school but on himself and everyone around him. Marty's story is like many of those we heard from other nongraduates who experienced trauma. Stories related to young people's own mental health appeared in 11 out of 16 cities, and the violence that often contributes to poor health outcomes[26] was mentioned in 10 out of 16.

Personal and Family Health Challenges

Young people often found themselves in the role of caregiver or wage-earner not as a result of violence or neglect, but because a parent became ill. Group interview participants in 10 out of 16 cities mentioned family physical health as

a factor. These circumstances collided with unresponsive school policies or a lack of support that forced a student to choose between school and home.

"My mom had a hernia and needed an operation to get rid of it ... I went to go ask if I could get a month off school to help out with my mom and I was told that if I left to help my mom that I would have to stay for two more years in school and I was already on my last year so I just dropped out."
— Amy

This quote depicts another example of a young person who makes a short-term decision that competes with longer-term educational goals. On the surface, Amy's desire to help out at home conflicted with expectations and policies at school, and her response is "I just dropped out."

[26] Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science*, 277, 918-924.
Anderson, E. (1999). *The code of the street: Decency, violence, and the moral life of the inner city*. New York: W.W. Norton.
Foster, H., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2012). Neighborhood, family and individual influences on school physical victimization. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10964-012-9890-4

In 11 out of 16 cities, group interview participants said financial uncertainty or money was among the circumstances that influenced their decision to leave school.

Family caregiving could also lead to pressure to earn money. In 11 of 16 cities, group interview participants said financial uncertainty or money was among the circumstances that influenced their decision to leave school. Needing money also could lead young people to rely on illegal sources of income like selling drugs. Survey findings reinforce the qualitative data; 19% of survey respondents indicated that earning money to support the family was one of the reasons they left school, and 11% said it was the main reason they left. Adam's story illustrates several related themes:

"Growing up my mom had three kids, single mom, and she also took care of her brother who was mentally disabled. And uh, we were poor, grew up poor and we lived [in a little town] surrounded by methamphetamine and biker gangs. It's not the most kid-friendly place in the world to grow up ... When I was eleven my mom came home and told us she had cancer and that was ... a scary thing because I knew what cancer was, but I didn't really know what it meant. Over the next couple years of my mom going through chemotherapy treatment and radiation over and over again, um she eventually went into remission at one point, which was good. That was my seventh grade year, I think ... when she went into her first remission. But, she had lost her job going through chemotherapy treatment. She couldn't work and go through that kind of treatment. We didn't really have any other support. My grandfather had died when I was in sixth grade. He was kinda like my father figure up until that point. We were kinda on our own. We were broke living on food stamps ...We didn't have money, we couldn't feed ourselves. I had two sisters and my uncle. I found out in [town] with a bunch of little rich white kids that cocaine is a very, very, very valuable resource to have, that and marijuana. And so, I started selling drugs really young."
— Alex

Teen-aged Alex feels responsible for the family, saying, "I had two sisters and my uncle." Selling drugs became a way to fulfill that responsibility. Among interview participants, we often saw examples of this type of adaptable behavior. When faced with extreme adversity, resilience may mean focusing on basic needs rather than on achieving socially accepted milestones like a high school diploma.

19% of survey respondents indicated that earning money to support the family was one of the reasons they left school, and 11% said it was the main reason they left.

This finding also has implications for Connectedness, including the related theme of School Salience. Both of the examples above illustrate the connection between the stress of taking on adult roles at home and the relevance or responsiveness of school policies to students' circumstances.

Unsupportive or Unresponsive School Policies

School policies, mentioned in 12 out of the 16 communities, emerged as another factor in how interview participants approached school. As noted above in the Family Health subsection, school policies often worked against students' values and did not accommodate what was happening in their lives outside school.

The way that policies were applied also sometimes thwarted the efforts of youth who were trying to complete graduation requirements. When their efforts were met with indifference, these youth felt unsupported and disrespected, contributing to their disengagement. As one participant told us:

"Even though I was taking extra credit classes and doing after school work, they didn't give me any of my extra credits or any credits from the credit recovery program. So, then I just kind of fell off, I figured there was no point in trying. There was no way I could win. No matter what I said about my lost grades, they just had the same excuse."
— Donald

CLOSE THE OPPORTUNITY GAP

By Prudence L. Carter, Professor, Stanford Graduate School of Education

To fully solve our nation's problems of social and educational inequality, I believe that America's dispossessed youth must have their say, too. Don't Call Them Dropouts puts faces and voices to the critical issue of young people who leave school without graduating.

The evidence presented in this policy brief, complementing prior research, informs us of the multiple reasons why students drop out of school. Explanations generally fall under three domains: the material conditions of students' families, schools, and neighborhoods; the nature of their relationships with teachers, peers, and family; and students' desire to belong and to be cared for and seen.

Unequal life chances make numerous youth vulnerable today. Students from extremely disparate economic and social circumstances are expected to achieve and attain similarly. Some kids have a multitude of resources, including private tutors, high quality early childcare, expensive educational toys and tools, and all the capital that comes with having highly educated parents; they are wealthy.

Though not as flush with as many financial resources, middle-class kids, like their wealthier peers, are more likely to have parents with stable jobs, secure homes, and to attend high-performing schools and quality afterschool programs that enrich achievement, too.

In contrast, youth wedged at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder frequently come from unstable communities where poverty confronts them daily. Some are hungry; others are homeless; and others are moving continually from place to place as foster youth. Furthermore, many poor and low-income youth experience premature adulthood; they have to tend to younger siblings, or care for sick parents or even support the family through work. Their schools often are limited in resources with less experienced teachers — many of whom cannot relate to them socially and culturally, or who know very little about the taxing conditions from which they come.

Unfortunately, student non-graduates are disproportionately racial and ethnic minorities — African Americans, Latino/as, and Native Americans. Let's be clear: there is no plausible research to establish innate character traits in these groups that would predispose them to quit school.

History and social science inform us about the nature of cumulative disadvantages associated with unfair and unjust social, economic, and educational conditions — both historical and contemporary. National data indicates that nearly two-thirds of African American, Latino, and Native American kids are born close to the poverty line, compared to less than one-third of Asian and white youth.

To have even a modest chance of keeping up with their wealthier peers, on average, low-income youth of color require significant investment in their neighborhoods and schools. Although the circumstances of individual youths' births in no way fully determine their futures, we know that the rates of upward mobility from one generation to the next have remained consistent over the last several decades (Chetty et al. 2014).

Over the course of my years as a researcher, I have met youth who had either already left school or were on the verge of it. Two comments haunt me frequently. A student sitting in in-school suspension (ISS) told me once:

"They [our teachers] don't really care about us. All they want is for us to help make them look good on those tests."

A high school non-graduate described her shame at not understanding the material:

"I hated feeling stupid because I had to ask the teachers questions over and over again because I didn't understand the lesson."

Both declarations point to the issue of feeling cared for and valued. Promising social psychological research shows that students remain invested and engaged when they feel a strong sense of belonging and the belief that teachers care deeply about whether they grasp their lessons (e.g., Walton and Cohen 2007).

We all have to be mindful not only of how a lack of adequate schooling resources — good teacher quality, engaging and rigorous curriculum, technologically equipped labs and classrooms, good physical plant and so forth, leads to quitting school, but also the more invisible factors — the ones that are harder to measure and won't show up easily on surveys.

These include cultures of low expectations, bigotry carried by some educators in schools and classrooms, stereotyping, de facto segregation within schools, and patterned signals that we send to our youth about who is "smart" and "capable" and who is not.

We ask different social classes of students to graduate from high school (and eventually college) at comparable rates. If they don't, we wind up with glaring achievement gaps in dropout, graduation, and college completion. To understand and eradicate achievement gaps, however, we have to pay attention to the radical differences in youths' modes of getting through school — referred to as the opportunity gap. Opportunity and achievement are intricately linked.

Fortunately, policy and practice solutions are within our reach. Educators, policy makers, and all who care about our children and youth need to seize the knowledge that reports like Don't Call Them Dropouts convey. We can change the conversation and refocus the education debate on deeper, highly effective ways of making school and communities safer and supportive environments for all youth from early childhood to higher education. After all, they are America's promise for a better future.

Prudence L. Carter is Professor of Education and (by courtesy) Sociology and Faculty Director of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University. She is the author of *Keepin' It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White; Stubborn Roots: Race, Culture, and Inequality in U.S. and South African Schools*; and co-editor of *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give All Children an Even Chance* (all published by Oxford University Press).

Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, Emmanuel Saez, and Nicholas Turner. 2014. "Is The United States Still a Land of Opportunity? Recent Trends in Intergenerational Mobility." Working paper 19844 http://www.nber.org/papers/w19844

Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2007). A Question of Belonging: Race, Social Fit, and Achievement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92, 82-96.*

FINDING 3.

Young people consistently seek supportive connections with others; in toxic environments this search can lead them toward or away from school.

"And then I would try to go to school and teachers didn't seem like they really cared, then I didn't care anymore. You know what I'm saying, I was already upset ... like if I was in a relationship and I got everyone around me, and then I come home and I get none of my girl ... You know, so that's how I felt at school all the time, I was really down and depressed and I just stopped going."
— Darrell

Seeking connections with parents, other family members, school professionals, peers, and participants' own children was a prevalent theme. The presence or absence of these connections drove many of the choices that young people made, including about school attendance and completion. Across all 16 group interview cities, young people mention support and guidance from adults as a factor that influences their decisions about school. "Absent family" and "adults in school" (versus adults generally) came up in 14 of the 16 group interview cities.

In existing research literature, the idea of connectedness is fundamental to overall well-being. When individuals do not meet this basic need to connect to each other and sustain relationships, they suffer a number of adverse consequences.[27]

Many of the themes related to Connectedness — including family absence or abandonment, death in the family, unstable home environments, and gang involvement — overlap with the findings and themes related to Toxic Environment. Young people's relationships with their parents are particularly influential, in both positive and negative ways.

Many interview participants described unsuccessful efforts to connect to helping professionals. Antonio tried to reach

out at school to tell adults around him that he was having a tough time at home — with two parents absent for different reasons, a period of homelessness, and a period of incarceration for robbery.

"Teacher didn't care, principal didn't care ... I told my counselor and a couple teachers, but I didn't want to because they didn't care ... you know from the way that they come at me on a regular basis ... they don't try to talk to me."
— Antonio

Both qualitative and quantitative findings suggest that several different types of life experiences may contribute to feeling a lack of connection; that young people sought connection where it was offered; and that from connectedness both positive and negative decisions could emerge.

[27] Townsend, K. C., & McWhirter, B. T. (2005) Connectedness: A review of the literature with implications for counseling, assessment, and research. Journal of Counseling and Development, 83(2), 191-202.

"I've been in foster care since my twelfth birthday. So, I moved around a lot and I've never been consistent with school. Back to childhood, I've missed like months at a time and things like that. The biggest issue for me was when I went to high school was the teachers not understanding how to deal with kids like me. I was really behind; I had been moving around a lot. They weren't sure what to do with me, how to help me. They eventually ended up writing me off. I was moving around foster homes a lot so it's like you didn't get any support anywhere. After a while I just stopped going to class, stopped doing homework, skipped school and got into doing drugs and things like that. And uh, it took my sister and seeing how good she had done in [program] to get back into school because the reality was that I found out if I stayed in my high school I would have no chance of graduating on time. And the teachers just told me 'tough shit'."
— Denise

This example weaves together several sub-themes related to connectedness, including instability both at home and school, school personnel and foster-care systems that did not provide support for multiple transitions, and an eventual connection through a family member to an alternative pathway that re-engaged Denise in school.

One participant describes the frustration of being unseen at school, despite efforts to "stay engaged":

"I was trying to stay engaged as much as I could but it was like nobody was helping me, nobody. I would go to school. The teachers wouldn't even acknowledge me, I would say I'm behind, can you do this for me? They were like no, all I can do is give you this and try to do what you can do today. A lot of teachers didn't even know my name, it got really bad and came to the point where I wasn't going to graduate."
— Arielys

41% of survey respondents cite "someone encouraged me."

Connectedness was also a key factor in re-engagement. Just as nongraduates described the relationships they found in the organizations to which they reconnected, the survey respondents reported instances of connectedness leading to their return to school. Forty-one percent (41%) of survey respondents cite "someone encouraged me" as their reason for returning to school, and over one-quarter (27%) indicated that the support of their family was a critical reason for their return. For more information, see section 7 of the tables in Appendix III.

Family Abandonment (Death, Incarceration, Other Events)

"My dad left and my mom was in her own world."
— Shandra

"Then we found out that my dad was having an affair ... He really hurt my sisters and me. He left us with nothing."
— Carrie

Young people in 14 of the 16 group interview cities mentioned that their families were often absent. More often than not, family members were absent for negative reasons. In a subset of these cities — 10 of the 16 — young people specifically talked about being abandoned by one or both parents.

Half of interrupted-enrollment students whose parents have relatively high educational attainment — more than a high school diploma — go on to achieve something more than a high school degree (compared to 23% of those whose parents have less than a high school diploma). On the other hand, 46.5% with parents who have less than a high school diploma do not graduate.

For the most part, the young people felt they were without anyone to set them on a path to success.

We also heard about parents leaving young people "against their will" in 10 of the cities due to incarceration. Survey data confirms that this situation has a strong impact on school completion; when comparing interrupted-enrollment with continuous-enrollment respondents, parental incarceration was associated with a 79% greater likelihood of leaving school.

"First and foremost I came from a gang-related dysfunctional family. My mom and dad were on and off in my life for the first ten years."
— Bertie

Death in the family was another reason that caregivers were absent. Young people in 14 out of the 16 cities discussed experiences of significant family members dying. These losses had an impact on young people's mental health, which often led to negative behavior.

"I lost people that year, my great-grandma had died and my cousin had got stabbed to death... like, me and my cousin we was close... there was a lot going through my mind and I cracked under the pressure, and I couldn't handle it."
— Maurice

Some group interview participants reported feeling depressed, attempting suicide, and a general negative attitude toward others. As one young man says about the impact of his father's funeral:

"When I seen him in the casket it hurt me. It really hurt me. I changed. Mind state when from If 'I got it, you got it' to 'If you got it, I'mma get it.' Whatever you got I want it and I ain't asking for it. I'm gonna take it."
— Rudy

Survey data reveal a pattern similar to the qualitative data; whereas 53% of interrupted-enrollment respondents lost a family member or friend, only 38% of continuous-enrollment students experienced such a hardship. Again, as seen in the Toxic Environment findings, these losses have significant mental health impacts — what Rudy describes as "mind state."

Family Absence

In addition to circumstances of abandonment or neglect, interview participants also reported that their parents were

absent for reasons outside the parents' control, such as having to work long hours. For example:

"My mom was always working, so every time I got home, she wasn't there."
— Trevor

The varied reasons for the absence of family in a young person's life most likely had different effects; that is, a parent working long hours to put food on the table provides a different socializing agent than a parent who was in prison. Nevertheless, absence perpetuated participants' feelings of loneliness:

"It was me, just me alone."
— Alia

"I was never at home; I didn't know what a home was."
— Brayden

Nongraduates across all 16 group interview cities expressed the importance of support and guidance from adults in their lives. For the most part, the young people felt they were without anyone to set them on a path to success.

"You can blame someone else, because no one was there to steer you in the right way."
— James

Both group interviews and survey findings suggested that the relationships that young people had with their parents were particularly influential. For example, being abused by a parent was related to a 45% increased likelihood of leaving school. As noted in an earlier section, young people who have a parent in jail (who are 18% of the survey sample) are 79% more likely to interrupt their education.

About one-fifth of respondents had parents who had high educational expectations but were also verbally abusive.

A sizeable proportion of young people experienced verbal or physical abuse and witnessed antisocial characteristics in their parents. About one-fifth of respondents had parents who had high educational expectations but were also verbally abusive. A smaller, but still substantial group of survey respondents (13%) reported much more troubled relationships with their parents, indicating that their parents were likely to be physically and verbally abusive, to use drugs in front of them, and to be in jail. In addition, these respondents said their parents were much less likely to say they were proud of them or had high educational expectations.

Parents' expectations, even when negative, shift young people's behavior:

"I was the type that, alright you pick on me, hit me, push me, I wouldn't do nothing. But one day my father, I was on my way home and my sister went and told my dad, "Someone picked on him, they jumped him, he got a black eye," and when my father saw it he started whooping my ass. Um, so from that day he make me fight back. Start fighting, start carrying a knife to school, broke a teacher's leg, I just got fed up with all the bullshit, got tired of people telling me what to do, start arguing with people. Went after everyone that used to pick on me."
— Jeremy

In contrast to circumstances of abuse or other negative influences, parents' positive actions have an important protective influence. Young people who had a parent who said they were proud of them were 28% less likely to stop going to school. Young people who reported that their parents asked them about school work, or that their parents expected them to graduate from high school, were also less likely to leave school.

A sizeable proportion of young people experienced verbal or physical abuse and witnessed antisocial characteristics in their parents.

Perceived Parent Characteristics of Students with Interrupted Enrollment

Characteristic	% Sample
Expected me to complete HS	85%
Knew my friends	74%
Expected me to complete college	69%
Asked about my school work	69%
Told me they were proud of me	63%
Called me names	38%
Used drugs in front of me	19%
Were in jail	18%
Were physically abusive	18%

Survey analysis suggests that nongraduates had a wide variety of positive and negative experiences with their parents.[28] Across all respondents, we find that most (55%) had a pattern of responses suggesting they belong to a category of young people with "caring parents" — characterized by having high educational expectations, expressing pride in their children, and being involved with school and with their children's friends.

One question this analysis raises is why young people who have caring parents still leave school. Survey findings suggest that the presence of a caring parent does not overcome the barriers many young people encounter in schools and communities. For example, survey respondents who indicated that they had caring parents (55% of the sample) also experienced considerable life history challenges including loss of a family member or friend (30%) and school/residential mobility (30%) or delinquency and loss (19%). The presence of caring parents also does not mitigate the experience of failing courses (18%), being a new mom (9%), or being bored in school (9%). The majority of the reasons for dropping out that survey respondents who

[28] See Section 8 of the tables in Appendix III for the proportion of the sample who indicated their parents had particular characteristics (respondents could select more than one characteristic), which were used in LCA analyses to characterize parenting classes as described above.

reported having caring parents cited fell into a pattern of responses that suggests multiple factors precipitated their decision to leave high school.

Instability of Place (Residential Mobility, School Mobility, Homelessness)

"When I turned 18 I [aged out of foster care] and became homeless and that's where it all started. It just went downhill. I withdrew myself because I had nowhere to go. I was staying in tunnels, under highways, and deserts. I withdrew myself so that way I didn't have to worry about that and survival. I didn't have time to go and make what I needed for food and go to school at the same time. It don't work that way. You can't do both."
— Mandy

Mandy's story highlights three themes that appear frequently across the group interviews: involvement in the foster care system, homelessness, and the need to make money in order to survive. Residential mobility, including involvement in the foster care system, was a factor that interview participants mentioned in 14 of the 16 cities. Homelessness was a frequently-mentioned factor in 12 of the 16 interview cities. Being homeless is an even stronger predictor of dropping out than having a parent in jail; it is related to an 87% increased likelihood of dropping out of school. Both types of instability mean that young people lack a reliable home or neighborhood environment within which they can create strong connections.

Young people affected by homelessness are 87% more likely to leave school than those with a more stable place to live.

Interrupted-enrollment survey respondents indicated high levels of residential and school instability, with almost 50% of them moving and 50% changing schools during high school (compared with 31% of continuous-enrollment respondents moving and 26% changing schools); these are statistically significant differences. Changing schools also is associated with a greater likelihood of leaving school. Interrupted-enrollment survey respondents also reported being in foster care at a much higher rate (11%) than continuously enrolled graduates (2%).

Another interview participant describes extreme instability — 60 foster homes in 6 years — caused both by his behavior and by unsuitable foster parents.

"I've been in foster care for 6 years ... total ... that was my 60th foster home. It's kind of hard to believe. I was a major trouble maker when I was little ... from the age of 12-14 I was in over 40 different foster homes. A couple of times I got kicked out of foster homes it wasn't my fault. The foster parents were drug addicts or abusing the foster kids. So they took us all out those homes."
— Bryan

The young people who told these stories lacked both a place to live and people who cared about their well-being. Even worse, Bryan describes a situation in which both foster parents and the foster system fail him — "a couple of times."

School Salience

In 14 out of 16 communities, participants in group interviews said that school simply didn't meet their needs or engage their interest. It was not necessarily that these youth were bored, or that they were not academically capable, but that they did not have the opportunity to learn about things that would help them thrive. One participant said:

"The basic reason why I dropped out was because — a traditional high school setting like, I just couldn't learn very much. I guess I learn really hands-on and if it's shown to me in a really creative way then I get it right away. But, in traditional high

school you sit down and read a book and hopefully you learn this. I just couldn't do that. I used to really like to read things but once I got into high school and that's all I was doing, I started hating reading ... "
— Sharif

The survey presents a slightly different picture of school salience than the group interviews do. Analyses of the reasons that respondents gave for leaving school suggested several underlying patterns. We categorized all participants into one of five groups (classes) depending on their pattern of responses. The groups are characterized by similarities in responses to questions about reasons for stopping school, listed in Section 6 of the tables in Appendix III.

Approximately 1 in 7 of the interrupted-enrollment respondents were part of a group that reported being bored, disengaged while at school, and failing. Another group (26%) were likely to be failing, somewhat likely to be bored in school, or found school irrelevant. Of the three remaining groups, one represented extreme disengagement (1%), one was a group of new mothers (9%), and the final is a "disjointed" group that could not clearly be classified by a few sets of responses alone (50%). The nature of this relatively large group, whose members are difficult to classify, is likely to be an expression of the heterogeneity among students who become disengaged from school. In short, while some young people report leaving school because they were bored, analyzing their reported reasons for leaving along with responses to other survey questions suggests that "boredom" is a byproduct of a confluence of other factors in students' lives.

Survey analysis also used responses to questions about specific school experiences during high school to categorize common experiences across the interrupted-enrollment sample. About half (53%) of interrupted-enrollment respondents had a high likelihood that they had caring teachers, and friends who graduated from high school. They also had a low likelihood of having teachers or others pushing them to stop attending school. Another 14% noted the lack of relevance of school; their friends didn't necessarily graduate, but they did not feel pushed out (although respondents in this group were not entirely likely to see teachers as caring). However, 9% reported that they had unsupportive schools, teachers who tried to push them out, were unlikely to have teachers who cared about them, and did not see school as relevant to their lives. A final 16% reported having caring schools, except that they also had a teacher or other adult who pushed them to leave.

Given that the majority of participants reported relatively supportive schools, we investigated how patterns of school support and reported reasons for dropping out co-occurred. The individuals in supportive school contexts were less commonly in the "failing" or "bored in school" categories of reasons for leaving school. A larger proportion of this group (compared with the overall sample) was also new moms (11%). Over half of them fell into the disjointed category for leaving school, suggesting that there was likely a confluence of factors that precipitated disengagement among students who otherwise indicated a supportive school. Young people in this category could have physical or mental health problems, may have experienced bullying or unstable homes, or reasons that had a low frequency of response and did not pop up on the grouping analyses. In short, students who had supportive school environments cited reasons for leaving that were outside the scope of teachers and classrooms. These survey analyses reinforce our conclusion that to keep more young people in school requires attending to issues such as bullying and teen parenting that extend beyond the school day or beyond the characteristics of school staff.

Approximately 1 in 7 of the interrupted-enrollment respondents reported being bored, disengaged while at school, and failing.

The people with whom these youth engaged did not provide them with many positive options, but they did provide them with a sense of value, that someone cared about them.

Peer Influence and Support

Nongraduates we interviewed reported fulfilling the need their desire for caring relationships in their lives with actions that provided them with a sense of connection and support. The choices that the interview participants made were often negative — joining gangs, selling drugs, or bringing a weapon to school. However, at that time and place, these choices made sense because they filled crucial needs.

The young people with whom we spoke built connections in their lives in order to feel that they mattered, that they were respected, that they were supported and loved. The people with whom these youth "fell in with," were those in their immediate environment.

"Everybody I was around smoked weed. Everybody I was around didn't go to school. So it was either go to school by yourself or stay around here and smoke with my friends I grew accustomed ... we all did the same thing."
— Ernest

The people with whom these youth engaged did not provide them with many positive options, but they did provide them with a sense of value, that someone cared about them. They actively chose people and places that "showed me love":

"It was pretty much the streets I felt loved me, the homeboys I felt that loved me, instead of go to school and be around my half-assed family."
— Juice

"The gangs showed me love, showed me the ropes, showed me how to get money. After that I was like, what do I need school for?"
— Carl

In addition to seeking connection with a peer group in their immediate environment, interview participants also described getting pregnant or becoming a parent as a way to demonstrate that they mattered. While we do not know

from the research whether young women are actively choosing pregnancy or parenting, becoming a parent did offer some nongraduates — both men and women — a way of making the parent-child connection that had been missing in their lives. Considering qualitative and quantitative data together suggests that while pregnancy or the demands of being a parent (including the financial pressure it creates) can lead young people out of school, these experiences can also serve as a catalyst for positive change. As one participant relates:

"I feel good, I feel free anyways cuz I just left my baby daddy of four years because he was in jail two of the years we was together and he got out and he just was clownin'. Like he was good at first, we was cool, but he just started clownin' and it's like — I can't explain, like I lost myself because I was messin' with him when I was seventeen. So, from seventeen to twenty-one it was like I was in love with him so I lost myself. I gave him the world and my daughter the world, that's all I was focused on. Take care of a house, make sure we had ... I was the fool and it was because I was seventeen when I first started messin' with him so you know, I was in love. And then, I had our child, our first child. So it's like, I'm really in love now."
— Michelle

In many instances having a child was the impetus for dropping out of school, but it was never pregnancy alone that led to the decision. One of the groups that emerged from analyses of reasons for stopping school was a group of individuals who became pregnant (9%). These participants also were somewhat likely to cite financial hardships, an indicator of other contextual factors co-occurring.

In addition, survey findings show a statistically significant difference between the peer groups for interrupted-enrollment students and for continuously-enrolled students.

Among interrupted-enrollment survey respondents, more than 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed with a statement asking whether half of their friends completed high school. In contrast, only 5% of continuously-enrolled students belonged to a peer group in which half their friends failed to graduate — a three to one difference. This statistic reinforces the ways in which the qualitative data suggests that peers' behavior and expectations are important influences.

"For causes, I say, I didn't find drugs — drugs find me. Seriously, I was just hanging out with the wrong people, getting in to a lot of trouble that I had nothing to do with."
— Paul

School and Community Support

How adults interpreted school policies, how they implemented these policies, and the expectations that adults held contributed to how young people felt about connectedness, mattering, and engagement. Unfortunately, many of the nongraduates encountered a lack of support or even hostility from the adults around them. For example:

"In school I was reckless because no one cared and no one said anything. If someone was there to push me, maybe we would have all stayed in school."
— Vivian

"My teacher told me to put my money up and he'd put his money up that I'd be in jail in the next five years."
— Ernest

Those who reported that they had a teacher who cared about them were 45% less likely to leave school. Participating in after school activities, and thus having the support of youth development workers, was related to a 67% lower likelihood of leaving school, consistent with previous research on the benefits of afterschool activity participation.[29] However, having teachers who they perceived pushed them to stop going to school made young people less likely to graduate.

Other adults in the community also matter. Survey analysis indicates that when adults in the neighborhood expect young people to graduate from high school or from college, it is more likely that they will do so. Among interrupted-enrollment survey respondents, 56% of the sample lived in a "caring neighborhood." In this type of neighborhood, the youth reported that there was a high probability that there were adults in their neighborhoods who expected them to complete high school and who looked out for them. However, the remaining two groups had only a moderate (40%) or low (4%) probability of having adults who expected them to graduate high school, to look out for them, or who they considered caring adults. Despite the pattern of adult expectations, most of the survey respondents indicated they had an adult in the neighborhood who cared for them.

The responses from continuously-enrolled students suggests a more supportive neighborhood context than for interrupted-enrollment nongraduates. Among continuously-enrolled youth, 77% reported the experience of a caring neighborhood, with only 20% in the moderate category and 4% in the low category.

Finally, as noted above, the difference in graduation rates among the peer groups for students who stay continuously enrolled in school and those who do not are significant.

[29] Mahoney, J.L., Vandell, D. L., Simpkins, S., & Zarrett, N. (2009). Adolescent out-of-school activities. *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 228-269). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

FINDING 4.

Young people who stop going to school are persistently resilient in their day-to-day lives; they are bouncing back, but need additional support to "reach up" toward positive youth development.

"I'm trying to make it here, I'm trying to do good. Like it is possible for us to bounce back from negative situations we went through in the past, it's possible."
— Juice

"The barriers, the barriers was myself, cause ... when I get behind on something I doubt myself, and that was my tendency when I was younger. I just wasn't believin' in myself to do my own school work, so I prevented myself from going to school basically ... my skin is a lot thicker now and I'm thinking straight, that's what maturity did to me. I'm a grown man."
— Paul

"Do whatever I need to do to take care of my son."
— Kim

Persistence, personal agency, courage, and optimism about the future shone through the interview participants' stories. Within the context of the complex circumstances described in interviews and echoed in survey data, re-engagement with school seems like an extraordinary achievement. **Bouncing back** is the term we chose for the resilience we observed.

Resiliency, or the capacity to recover from adversity, is a relational dynamic between an individual and the environment around the individual.[30] Resilience is positive adaptation in the face of risk, where risk is the increased probability of an unwanted outcome, and cumulative risk is the increased probability of an unwanted outcome as a function of multiple risk factors occurring together within and/or across time periods.[31] Adaptations to these risk factors (i.e., resilient outcomes) are facilitated by protective factors, which are internal strengths and external assets that help to ameliorate the effects of risk factors.[32] Thus, if resilience is understood as successful coping in the context of risk, then the accumulation of risk factors may diminish an individual's resilience by undermining his or her ability to adapt to that situation; whereas protective factors may serve to promote resilience by strengthening the individual's ability to adapt or cope.

Developmental psychologist Dr. Ann Masten has noted that resilience is "ordinary, not extraordinary,"[33] meaning that the capacity for resilience is the norm, not the exception. For the young people with whom we spoke, resilience too often entailed bouncing back from traumatic and toxic situations — physical and psychological abuse, witnessing violence, experiencing significant health challenges, or early-age caregiving and financial responsibility. Bouncing back from such events meant marshaling the inner strength and perseverance to once again get up in the morning, earn money, take care of parents or siblings, or take care of their own child, among other expressions of coping.

Overall, we found that youth demonstrated resiliency in meeting short-term goals that allowed them to cope in difficult contexts. To meet long-term goals, to be able to go back to school and start making positive contributions to their lives and to the community, they had to do more. We call this extra step **"reaching up."** This perspective is

[30] E.g., Garmezy, Norman. (1991). Resilience and vulnerability to adverse development outcomes associated with poverty. American Behavioral Scientist, 34(4), 416-430. Masten, A. S. (2001) Ordinary magic. Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist, 56*(1), 227-238.
[31] Wright, M. O., Master, A. S., & Narayan, A. (2013). Resilience processes in development: four waves of research on positive adaptation in the context of adversity. *Handbook of Resilience in Children* (2. ed., pp. 15-37). New York: Springer.
[32] Rutter, M. (1985). Resilience in the face of adversity — protective factors and resistance to psychiatric disorder. *British Journal of Psychiatry, 147*, 83-104.
[33] Masten, A. S. (2001) Ordinary magic. Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist, 56*(1), 227-238.

consistent with the field of positive youth development, which is focused on young people achieving their full potential. When supports around young people — in their families, peer groups, and all aspects of a community — are aligned with their needs and strengths — it is more likely that they will achieve academically, connect socially and emotionally, and engage civically.[34]

Interview participants told us often that they did not want to be considered failures. They understood that they had the ability to make a positive impact on others' lives and on their own lives. Their reported reasons for "stopping going" and related actions illustrate this perspective. Consistently, the youth said they did not "drop out." Instead, they said they stopped going to school.

Many of them did so as a means to manage the risks present in their immediate environment — potential loss of shelter, a lack of money for bills, too little food.

"I eventually dropped out because the bills weren't getting paid, I knew I could pay the bills. I wanted to step up, I never took on responsibility like that before in my life."
— Aaron

These youth also never felt like they stopped going to school because they were not smart, despite what society may have been telling them. They felt that their resiliency, their ability to cope, was emblematic of their maturity and intelligence.

Despite their many strengths, the young people we interviewed could not reach beyond immediate needs without additional support from both caring adults and connected institutions in their communities.

"So I pretty much dropped out of school to make ends meet for my child and myself and at the same time be a complete father cause I knew if I was going to be at school I was still going to be on that thugging and trying to get around females and it was just that my folks weren't alive and I've been blessed too, cause one day I was going to the building of [name of program] ... a guy named R__, I call him my angel ... out of the blue he said whatcha need help with but I was so in tune with the conversation that I didn't ... I was like leave me alone get out of my face, I don't want people to see us talking, and he repeated himself and I was like yeah, and he took me up to program. Since I been at program I be done with school and I start at [technical school] next month ... cause I think everyone need to have that life experience to even get anywhere ... I love myself ...

"Ain't nobody going to change my life but me."
— Dennis

In the words of Martin Luther King — no, Malcolm X, "A man that stands for nothing will fall for anything," and I'll be dogged if I don't stand for anything."
— Juice

Juice's story integrates many of the themes we heard across communities: taking financial responsibility for one's family in the face of loss ("my folks weren't alive"), the desire to be a more positive role model for a child, and the importance of a persistent, caring adult who could connect the young person with different opportunities.

Reaching up was always facilitated by connectedness to institutions, such as those listed in Appendix II, Partner Program Descriptions, and to individual adults and peers, typically at the institutions. Approaches like integrated student services, as well as comprehensive re-engagement programs, recognize the confluence of factors that can lead students out of school. They therefore show promise for resolving the factors that lead too many young people to disengage from school or facilitating young people's re-engagement.[35] As one [program] participant describes,

[34] Brandstadter, J. (1998). Action perspectives in human development. *Handbook of Child Psychology, Theoretical models of human development* (5th ed., pp. 516-568). New York: J. Wiley.
Zaff J. & Smerdon, B. (2009). Putting children front and center: Building coordinated social policy for America's children. *Applied Developmental Science, 13*(3), 105-118.
Lerner, R.M., Bowers, E.P, Geldhof, G.J., Gestsdottir, S., & DeSouza, L. (2012)., Promoting positive youth development in the face of contextual changes and challenges: The roles of individual strengths and ecological assets. *New Directions in Youth Development, 135*, 119-128.

[35] To learn more about Integrated Student Supports, see Moore, K.A., & Emig, C. (2014). Integrated Student Supports: A summary of the evidence base for policymakers. Washington, DC: Child Trends.

More often than not, connecting with a helpful program or place began with a particular person in a young person's life.

"I do need an education in this society unfortunately to excel to places I want to be. Eventually, I found this place, [program name], and I feel like this a great school system. It's not traditional but it's a good place for misfit kids or kids that can't work well in the traditional schools and just belong here. That's what we are all here for because we ain't working well in traditional society or school."
— Beverly

More often than not, connecting with a helpful program or place began with a particular person in a young person's life. The person was often a family member, a maternal figure who provided support and guidance, or a child for whom the young person wanted to be a positive example.

"I called her my second mother. She never gave up on me. Even though I called out her name, later we saw each other and she invited me back. I've been going ever since then because of her."
— Rudy

These family members were motivators to make a positive change. In Rudy's example, the mother figure offered a source of support, of respect, a feeling of mattering. Even though the young man "called out her name," saying she was not an important person in his life, this mother forgave him and invited him back into the reengagement program where she worked. Such forgiveness and giving are signs of support, value, and love.

"If I didn't have my daughter I would be dead ... that's why I went to school, that's why I had to get up out of there."
— Lance

Lance's quote echoes many of the stories that we heard across the country. Many of these youth had children; and men and women alike indicated that they needed to be a better example for their children. Having a child meant that the young person mattered to someone, and he or she wanted the children to know they mattered too.

Some young people named a peer or an outreach worker as the impetus for positive change in their lives.

"My homies told me about this program. My friends are the only reason why I'm here."
— Marcus

"My friend actually told me about this place ... it got to the point where I almost didn't even want to come back to school and my friend she pushed me ... like literally pushed me into here, and now I'm doing so much better. If it weren't for her, I'd probably be kicked out of my house by now."
— Amy

"I started going here because I was still talking to my counselor, he was a really cool counselor ... probably saved my life. He was getting me into all these different programs that were not working at all, and then he told me this is your last resort if you want a high school diploma."
— Kayti

Just as they followed their peers in the neighborhood into delinquent behavior patterns, these young people also followed their peers to make a positive change in their lives.

The patterns of resilience we saw in the group interviews were also present in survey findings. A large percentage of our survey sample of interrupted-enrollment young people had strengths that would be important for bouncing back and reaching up in school and beyond. This group, representing 85% of the sample, reported that they were able to solve problems, had a 5-year goal that they wanted to achieve, and that they had learned from their pasts. Individuals who indicated a sense of agency were more likely to complete high school or college.

Fifteen percent of the sample, however, indicated low levels of goal orientation and capacity to solve problems in their lives, and high levels of pessimism about what they could achieve now and in the future. Those who were pessimists were less likely to go on to complete high school.

Despite these challenges, the young people in our interrupted-enrollment survey sample were overwhelmingly on a path to reaching up. All but 36% had completed high school; 18% had completed at least some post-secondary education. Almost half were employed either full — or part-time. Of those who were not employed, 23% were in school. In the context of the adverse life events we see in the survey data, combined with the qualitative findings, these achievements demonstrate enormous strength and resilience. Moreover, we see individuals in the survey sample with adverse life history experiences who returned to high school and college. Although experiences like foster care set youth back from obtaining a college degree (77% less likely), those experiences do not hinder high school completion.

In addition, young people's strengths were visible in the reasons they indicated for returning to school. Just over half of students who re-engaged in school noted the importance of more education for getting a job, 40% returned because someone encouraged them to do so, and nearly one-third said that they had the time to devote to education.

Interview participants reported that the programs with which they are currently involved not only help them get more education — they also provide them with a feeling of love and connection. A relationship with someone in the program acts as an impetus to reengage with other people in their lives, building up feelings of mattering to others, love for themselves and others, and an emerging feeling of trust in others and with the society in which they live. One participant describes some of the program features this way:

[Program name] structure your life as a young man ... It's really about how much love is growing, it's about growing and it's about making yourself a man. If you're not a factor out here — I mean you have to be a factor out here if you want to be known as someone that did something, that tried to do something at least and not just give up.

We go to the capital ... a lot of us we never did stuff like that, like "we're going to the capitol to talk about second chances." You know and we got felonies and we just ignore it and we should be up there talking to these people cause we're the ones, cause there's a lot of people that don't have felonies that be out there supporting us, we should be supporting ourselves. — Paul

The programs that are re-engaging nongraduates create supportive structures for the young people they serve, help connect them to new opportunities, and foster civic engagement activities like "going to the capitol to talk about second chances." Young people therefore have opportunities not just to complete their high school education, but also to develop networks of support that help them succeed beyond graduation day. And to bring the story full circle — these relationships matter. What young people who are at risk for "stopping school" need most are more people in their lives who not only care about their success, but who listen to what they say they need and offer them opportunities toreach up beyond the obstacles that they encounter in their daily lives.

All but 36% of the interrupted-enrollment survey respondents had completed high school; 18% had completed at least some post-secondary education. Almost half were employed either full — or part-time. Of those who were not employed, 23% were in school. In the context of the adverse life events evident in the quantitative and qualitative data, **these achievements demonstrate enormous strength and resilience.**

REALIZING THE POTENTIAL OF OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

By Paul Luna, President and CEO, Helios Education Foundation

In our country's race to ensure that our students graduate with the competitive, high-level skills they need to succeed in college and career, there is a cohort of students who aren't leaving the starting line. Struggling through high-risk factors such as poverty, little or no parental guidance, violence at home and even homelessness, many of these students choose to "stop school." Feeling like their world is caving in on them, these students believe that they have no chance of achieving a high school diploma.

Every day in classrooms in Arizona, Florida and across America, students are disappearing, disengaging and dropping-out, or in their own words "stopping school". According to America's Promise Alliance, as many as one in five students who begin 9th grade don't graduate on time, if at all. Perhaps this is truly the silent tragedy playing out in our school systems today.

In Arizona, we know that a disproportionate number of students stopping school are low-income and Latino. Even more troubling is that the existing Latino academic achievement gap could be exacerbating the problem, leading to increased numbers of low-income and Latino students dropping out.

These students have chosen to enter today's globally competitive marketplace ill-prepared and lacking a high school diploma, the most basic requirement for entry into college and career. We as education leaders and advocates must work with a sense of urgency to re-engage and reconnect them.

Don't Call Them Dropouts suggests that school personnel, community leaders and other professionals must recognize the red flags that have become reliable indicators for students dropping out. Examples include students who experience the deathof a family member or friend; students who move from home to home or change schools, particularly when also affected by foster care; students who have a parent in jail; and students who become homeless.

Don't Call Them Dropouts gives a voice to those one-in-five students who have disappeared from our classrooms. We hear firsthand the powerful and painful reasons why so many of them have disengaged. But as the report points out, adults matter in the broader effort to re-engage and reinvigorate these forgotten voices.

Our efforts to better prepare students for the future must include every student, regardless of socio-economic status, gender, race or current academic standing. Our future depends on our recognition that every student deserves to and must possess the competitive edge that will not only propel them to future success but secure the very economic fabric of our country.

It is encouraging to know that a national effort like the Opportunity Youth Network led by the Aspen Institute is reaching out, connecting with and re-engaging millions of youth ages 16-24 who are not in school and not working. They are called opportunity youth because of the powerful opportunity they represent for the economic vitality of our nation. Helios Education Foundation is proud to support these efforts in Tucson, Arizona.

We cannot afford to leave anyone behind. Now is the time to work collectively to re-engage all students and ensure that they are on a path to college and career readiness. Every student must be part of a pipeline of future leaders that will help secure the economic vitality of our nation.

The dropout crisis isn't just about those students stuck at the starting line; it's about us, our community and our future.

Paul J. Luna is President and CEO of Helios Education Foundation which is dedicated to creating opportunities for individuals in Arizona and Florida to succeed in postsecondary education. Created in 2006, the Foundation is investing its expertis and resources across the education continuum to advance student academic preparedness and to foster college-going cultures within the two states it serves. As of February 2014, Helios had invested over $138 million in education programs and initiatives in Arizona and Florida. For more information, visit www.helios.org.

CONCLUSIONS

When the America's Promise Alliance team embarked on this research project, we expected to hear about the many barriers to success that young people who fail to graduate high school encounter. What we did not expect was the resounding message about these young people's overpowering quest for connection, the ways that their closest relationships led them both away from and back to school, and their determination to bounce back over and over from difficult circumstances.

It would take an enormous investment of human and financial capital to change the troubling circumstances that group interview participants described and that survey findings reinforced. Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers still have much more to learn about the most effective ways to intervene in the multi-faceted challenges that many young people in urban communities face. Nevertheless, we know enough to take positive steps forward now by giving extra attention to students who are navigating challenging circumstances, leveraging the strengths young people bring to their struggles, and building on the promising and evidence-based practices that are already helping young people stay in or return to school.

The findings in this report about dis-engagement and re-engagement from school lead us to five primary conclusions.

Students who leave school before graduating are stronger than popular opinion and current research literature describe. These strengths could, with the right supports, allow them to stay in school; and they do, ultimately, help many to re-engage. On the whole, the young people who participated in interviews and responded to the survey display enormous strengths — including personal agency, problem-solving, and positive life goals. As both qualitative and quantitative data demonstrate, these characteristics enabled young people to re-engage in their education. These same qualities could also have enabled them to stay in school if adults at home, at school, and in the community had helped them navigate around barriers so that consistent school attendance aligned with their life circumstances.

Students who leave school before graduating are often struggling with overwhelming life circumstances that push school attendance further and further down on their priority lists. Students leave school not because of a particular event or factor, but because circumstances accumulate in ways that push school further and further down their list of priorities. The reasons they cite for dropping out are the breaking point, the end of the story rather than the whole story. Early attention from every available adult — extended family members, school professionals, youth workers, religious leaders, neighbors, and others — to specific events such as the death of a family member, parent incarceration, changing schools, or homelessness could slow the rate at which a cluster of events pushes or pulls a student out of school.

Young people who leave high school need fewer easy exits from the classroom and more easy on-ramps back into education. Some young people who stop going to school find it easier to leave school than to stay in or get back in. In other words, there are too many off-ramps and exits that are too easy to take, and too few on-ramps that are too hard to access. Asking teachers, parents, and students to examine the formal policies related to both leaving and re-entry could point out specific ways to help students stay in school or create opportunities for them to re-engage more easily.

Young people who leave high school are telling us how much peers, parents, and other adults matter. Parents, teachers, other school-based professionals, afterschool leaders, neighborhood adults, and peers all influence young people's expectations, behavior, and decision-making. Caring connections that follow students from home, through their neighborhood, to the school building are important. However, caring is not enough. The young people who are experiencing multiple adverse

"All students should have the opportunity to achieve in high school and thrive in whatever career or college they pursue. We owe 100 percent of our students that chance."
— U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, 2/14/14

events in their lives need caring combined with connections to people and places that help them solve problems that get in the way of school achievement.

Everyone in a young person's life and community can do something to help. Everyone — teacher, school administrator, bus driver, clergy, program leader, parent, grandparent, business owner — can make a difference by listening to what young people are experiencing at and outside school. While teachers, counselors, and administrators in high-need schools are often overwhelmed themselves, attentive school leadership, community oversight of graduation patterns, and greater support for an environment that encourages positive connections could all be counterweights to the lack of consistent support that young people say they are often encountering from the adults closest to them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Listen. Our overriding recommendation relates to the importance of listening to young people. Too often, what we think we know stands in the way of knowing what is true for young people who have left school. Take time to understand the circumstances affecting young people who have already stopped attending school or who have recently re-engaged after interrupting their education. Include their voices in discussions about policies, programs, and community activities that affect their lives. Being curious and inquiring about what is happening in young people's lives can inform future action so that solutions are closely aligned with the true nature of the challenges. America's Promise Alliance and our partners can do this through additional research efforts, community dialogue sessions, and including young people in policy and program planning. The more we can create the circumstances for constructive personal connections with and around young people who are struggling, the closer we will get to building a nation in which everyone graduates high school.

Surround the highest-need young people with extra supports. The Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University has developed school-based early warning systems that allow educators to identify students whose attendance, behavior, and course performance suggest that they need extra support to stay in school. We recommend that communities consider how to create similar early-warning supports and systems beyond the school building for young people who are affected by risk factors like a death in the family, an incarcerated parent, housing instability, or shifting from school to school. This could be as simple as a religious leader noticing that a family is struggling, and reaching out to ask the school-age young people what they need. Formal systems might include a city — or county-level coordinating council that meets regularly to share information about what is happening with young people in the community. A wide range of neighborhood adults can communicate caring support and high expectations for young people through informal, day-to-day contact.

Create a cadre of community navigators to help students stay in school. The young people affected by multiple "adverse life events" like incarcerated parents, foster care, loss of someone close to them, witnessing violent events, or financial struggles need a person or series of people who can help them navigate through these challenges and persist at school. Communities can mobilize program-based, faith-based, and school-based leaders to be the "whatever it takes" adults for these young people, working alongside caring parents when they are present.

Follow the evidence. It is essential to identify, support, and spread proven and promising approaches — not just programs, but methods that have worked in one place and could work elsewhere. Both large-scale studies and evaluations of individual programs to date suggest that what it takes is an all-in, never-give-up, holistic approach that responds to each young person's needs and strengths. The places where we conducted interviews are just a few of the examples across the country. (See short descriptions in Appendix II.) The findings in this report add to a growing body of academic and practical evidence that can shape future actions and investments.

Place young people in central roles in designing and implementing solutions that will work for their peers. Research confirms that peer influence matters. It's important not only to listen to young people but also to involve them in crafting solutions. Decision-makers in and outside school can seek formal and informal opportunities to include young people's voices and their activism in efforts to boost graduation rates. Young people themselves can tell their stories — to each other and to decision-makers — to create a growing chorus of voices that help to change the national conversation about graduating from high school.

APPENDICES AND TABLES

APPENDIX I: Study Methodology

This study utilized an exploratory sequential *mixed-methods design*[1]. Mixed-methods designs recognize that not all research questions can be answered using a single formulation of data. An exploratory design is most applicable where not enough is known about a given phenomenon (e.g., what is the lived experience of youth who have stopped going to school?). In an exploratory sequential design, the qualitative component of the study is conducted first and facilitates the conceptualization of the quantitative component's design and analysis. In this study, designing, conducting, and analyzing 30 group interviews in 16 communities preceded developing, implementing, and analyzing a survey. Organizing our data collection in this way allowed the focus of the analysis to remain on young people's voices, with the quantitative data and analysis elaborating on and extending these voices.

Qualitative Method

From June 2013 through September 2013, the Center for Promise team conducted 30 group interviews in 16 communities across the United States. Group interviews included approximately 8 participants per group; facilitators conducted two group interviews in each community (with two exceptions). Each participant was given a $40 gift card for his or her participation in the group. Two individuals facilitated the group interviews, one female and one male. One facilitator took the lead in conducting the group while the other acted administratively. Group interviews were audio recorded, and facilitators also took copious field notes during and after the group interviews, for later analysis.

The group interview method drew upon facilitation techniques developed by Teen Empowerment,[2] an organization founded in 1992 whose focus is on raising the voices of youth and young adults in a community in order to effect social change. The two individuals who ran the group interviews have extensive experience and training in these techniques, as well as extensive experience working with and organizing youth who have disengaged from school.

Facilitators started each group interview with a brief introduction, outlining the expectations and purpose for conducting the group interview. Along with the facilitators, participants engaged in several group exercises to engender trust, establish norms, and build connection and comfort among participants. Once rapport was established, each participant shared his or her story including their reason(s) for leaving school, their reason(s) for returning to an academic path, and the attendant barriers and opportunities that supported or impeded their efforts to re-engage with school. Facilitators closed the group interviews with participants' reflections and thoughts about the session.

Group interview participants were recruited through America's Promise Alliance community partners who serve youth who have dropped out of high school or who have not engaged productively in society. (See Appendix III for the cities in which we conducted group interviews and the program(s) in each community who helped with recruitment.) A total of 212 youth took part in the group interviews, between the ages of 18 and 25 (Mean = 19, SD = 1.92). There were slightly more males (117) than females (85), as well as youth from a diversity of racial and ethnic backgrounds (see tables in Section 1, Appendix II). All participants were recruited based on their self-reports that they had dropped out of school for some period of time and their self-reported age (18-25 year-olds). They were not recruited based on the risk expressed in their life experiences. That is, although qualitative sampling methods are not designed to create a representative sample, we have no reason to believe that the experiences of these participants are more or less severe than others in their communities. However, these young people's willingness and capacity to participate in the group interview activity may mean that they differ from some of their peers on some individual characteristics, such as their levels of optimism, ability to cope effectively with adversity, and existing, positive adult relationships in their lives.

[1] Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

[2] See the Teen Empowerment website for more information on the organization (http://www.teenempowerment.org); and the Moving Beyond Icebreakers website for more information about the facilitating techniques used (http://www.movingbeyondicebreakers.org).

Quantitative

The Raise Up survey was developed in the summer of 2013 based on input from the group interview facilitators and qualitative researchers, extant empirical literature on the reasons young people drop out of school, and prior surveys of high school dropouts and re-engaged youth. A regular debrief of findings and themes from group interviews grounded the development of the survey. The survey's goals were to capture information on youth demographics; the background of their parents; relationships with parents, peers, teachers, and others in their communities; individual strengths; experiences in school and other areas of their lives, and young people's reported reasons for dropping out. The final survey consisted of 58 questions related to these characteristics. Approximately 15% of the survey questions were drawn from previously validated and peer-reviewed measures of neighborhood characteristics and individual strengths[3]. The remaining questions include common demographic characteristics, life history experiences drawn from group interview results, and reasons for dropping out derived from existing literature.[4] The median Flesch-Kincaid reading level for the survey was 8.3.

Participants were recruited via email, phone, and through the efforts of national organizations with community affiliates that partner with APA. Potential participants were invited to complete the survey if they were between the ages of 18 and 25. Potential respondents were initially asked about their education background and only participants who reported that they stopped attending high school for at least one semester (or approximately four months) were able to take the full survey. The survey was broadly distributed through email by a survey research firm, Lincoln Park Strategies, in Spanish and English.

Lincoln Park Strategies (LPS) contacted 68,037 individuals nationwide between the ages of 18-25. Of that larger list, 2,191 met the demographic and educational requirements and started completing the full survey. In the end, 1,942 qualified individuals completed the entire survey; these respondents constitute the final "interrupted-enrollment" sample.[5] Most of the surveys were completed through LPS email distribution, with the exception of 94 that were completed through partner organizations' outreach and 6 that were completed through phone calls. No nationally representative surveys of dropouts have been conducted, thus, it is impossible to say whether the response rates for our sample are within the norm. That said, a response rate of 3-5% for online polls is the norm, and our response rate falls within this range.

In addition, 1,023 young adults who did not drop out of high school ("non-interrupted enrollment") were recruited via the same sampling methodology. Lincoln Park Strategies emailed the survey to 3,761 people using the same strategy as for the interrupted-enrollment sample to obtain this comparison-group sample. The survey that the comparison group completed was the same except that questions related specifically to dropping out of high school were excluded. The response rates are in line with norms for young adults, which tend to be higher than that of the U.S. population as a whole.

Although not a nationally representative sample, the demographic characteristics of the participants of the interrupted-enrollment survey mirror that of the U.S. as a whole and when broken down by state. As an exception, a smaller proportion of White participants were found in the interrupted-enrollment survey compared with the proportions within each state.

[3] Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science, 277*, 918-924.
Snyder, C. R., Harris, C., Anderson, J. R., Holleran, S. A., Irving, L. M., Sigmon, S. T., . . . Harney, P. (1991). The will and the ways: Development and validation of an individual-differences measure of hope. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 60*(4), 570-585.
Scheier, M. F., Carver, C. S., & Bridges, M. W. (1994). Distinguishing optimism from neuroticism (and trait anxiety, self-mastery, and self-esteem): A reevaluation of the Life Orientation test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67*, 1063-1078.
Karcher, M. J. (2011). The Hemingway: A measure of adolescent connectedness: University of Texas San Antonio.
Peng, Y., & Lachman, M. E. (1994). *Primary and secondary control: Cross-cultural and life-span developmental perspectives.* Paper presented at the 13th Biennial Meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

[4] Cite here: Silent Epidemic and a Balfanz paper.

[5] We chose not to call the survey samples "dropouts" and "graduates" because many of the students who stopped going to school for a semester or more had re-enrolled by the time they completed the survey.

Differences in racial/ethnic background of participants in the interrupted-enrollment and continuously-enrolled surveys emerged, but were small in magnitude. There were slightly more African Americans and Hispanics in the interrupted-enrollment group (19% and 15% respectively) compared with the continuously-enrolled participants (16% and 13%). More participants of Asian descent also participated in the continuously-enrolled survey (10% grad vs. 5% dropout), which was the largest discrepancy.

Supplemental analyses of the interrupted-enrollment sample and nationally representative samples of U.S. high school students conducted in 2002[6] and 2009[7] revealed differences between the interrupted-enrollment sample and U.S. dropouts found in other national surveys. For example, the interrupted-enrollment sample is more heavily weighted toward White youth. Differences in parental education were also evident; however, differences between the 2002 and 2009 samples were also evident. Lastly, the interrupted-enrollment survey over-sampled female participants, who are less likely to drop out according to national figures. To compensate, we weighted all analyses such that results reflect findings where males and females were each 50% of the sample.

[6] As study of the Institute of Education Sciences, The Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 followed a nationally-representative sample of 10th graders starting in 2002 into the postsecondary years.

[7] The High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 followed a nationally-representative sample of 9th graders starting in 2009 through the postsecondary years. The HSLS was also a study of the Institute of Education Sciences.

High School and Educational Longitudinal Studies Compared to the Don't Call Them Dropouts Survey*

Gender	HSLS09 — Dropouts		ELS02 — Dropouts		Interrupted-Enrollment	
	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total	Percent
Male	1101	55.8	623	56.5	968	49.8
Female	871	44.1	480	43.5	968	49.8

Race/ Ethnicity	HSLS09 — Dropouts		ELS02 — Dropouts		Interrupted-Enrollment	
	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total	Percent
Asian	80	4.1	67	5.6	95	4.9
Black	283	14.3	222	18.7	366	18.8
Hispanic	404	20.5	234	19.7	294	15.1
Mixed Race	161	8.2	70	5.9	N/A	N/A
Native American	29	1.5	15	1.3	96	5
Native Hawaiian	16	.8	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
White	909	46	470	39.5	1293	66.6
Other	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	35	1.8

Parent's Education	HSLS09 — Dropouts (Highest of both parents)		ELS02 — Dropouts (Highest of both parents)		Interrupted-Enrollment (Mother's Education)		Interrupted-Enrollment (Father's Education)	
	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total	Percent
N/A, Missing	705	33.5	96	8.1	140	7.2	254	13.1
Less than HS	223	11.3	157	13.2	327	17	332	17
HS or GED	670	33.9	330	27.7	710	36.6	787	40.5
Associates	170	8.6	113	9.5	104	5.4	62	3.2
Some College (2 and 4 year)	N/A	N/A	259	21.7	392	20.2	239	12.3
Bachelors	136	6.9	145	12.2	185	9.5	166	8.6
Post-Grad School	75	3.8	90	7.6	44	2.2	53	2.7
Technical	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	41	2.1	51	2.6

*HSL09 is the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009; ELS02 is the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002

ANALYSIS PLAN

Qualitative

For our analysis, we took a *phenomenological* approach, uncovering themes ("phenomena") through the perspective of those who are the focus of study; in this case, through the voices of those young people who stopped going to high school. The process of analysis follows three stages applied iteratively: *description, thematization,* and *interpretation*.[8]

Description is the collection of, and reflection on, the stories heard during the group interviews, the group interview dynamics, and field notes taken during the group interviews. During this part of the analysis process, we reflected on the stories we were hearing from the youth, making note of how the youth described their life experiences. We did this during scheduled reflections after every group interview. During these reflections, we made note of similarities and differences among the life experiences of these youth. Members of the research team (the two group interview facilitators, the director of the project and the two post-doctoral associates) took copious notes, which were collated by the qualitative post-doctoral research associate.

Next, for thematization, the post-doctoral fellow organized these reflections into themes and codes related to the life experiences of the participants. These themes and codes were presented to the full research group and revised and organized in order to be most reflective of the life experiences of the participants. The qualitative post-doctoral research fellow then reduced these themes to categories and sub categories to collate frequencies (see Table 13 in Appendix II). The group interview facilitators then returned to the audio from the group interviews and counted how many individuals indicated the subcategories, how many participants mentioned the categories positively and negatively, and how many participants per city mentioned a category.

For the purposes of reliability, we had an undergraduate research assistant independently code 10 group interviews (33% of the sample). Percentages of agreement on frequencies within and across communities were calculated. Where agreement with the facilitators was less than 80%, the individuals who coded the data (along with the qualitative postdoctoral research associate as a facilitator) engaged in discussion until there was at least 80% agreement on all categories.[9]

Frequencies generated were then used to examine how prevalent categories were in and across communities (see Table 14 in Appendix II).

Quantitative

As a first step, we analyzed the descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) of the interrupted-enrollment and comparison group survey data to gauge initial differences between the samples. Comparisons between these samples were made by conducting t-tests or Chi-square tests. Detailed findings from this set of analyses can be found in Appendix II. Overall, the groups were quite similar, with several important differences. In terms of demographic characteristics, the interrupted-enrollment participants (vs. continuously-enrolled) tended to be younger, were less likely to be employed or in school, earned lower wages, and had a slightly different racial/ethnic profile that reflected the differences found in the U.S. comparisons. Interrupted-enrollment participants also demonstrated somewhat less positive future expectations and persistence than graduates. Their parents and teachers were less supportive of their academic success and their self-reported grades were lower than graduates. Finally, their life history experiences, as reflected in the group interviews, were quite different with interrupted-enrollment participants being more likely to experience challenging life events (homelessness, serving as a caregiver) or engaging in risky

[8] Orbe, M. (2000). Centralizing diverse racial/ethnic voices in scholarly research: The value of phenomenological inquiry. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 24, 603–621.

[9] Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers.* Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

behaviors like drug use or being in a gang. Interrupted-enrollment participants were also more likely to have moved or changed schools than the graduates.

Next, the research team used data from the interrupted-enrollment and comparison (continuously-enrolled) surveys to examine how specific characteristics, contexts, and strengths were associated with the likelihood of dropping out of high school and re-engaging with school or other educational experiences. We conducted multiple, mult-variate logistic regression models, which predicted the likelihood of dropping out of high school from the factors and contexts examined in the survey. We developed separate logistic regression models for connectedness with family, teachers, and other adults in the community, life history experiences, school experiences, background of parents, neighborhood quality, and personal strengths. For all models, demographic characteristics including age, sex, race/ethnicity, and maternal/paternal education level were included as covariates because of differences found in descriptive analyses, meaning that all findings take into account the background of the youth.

We then created typologies or "classes" of characteristics of youth (using a statistical method called Latent Class Analysis, or LCA) using multiple questions from the survey. This method enables us to examine the confluence of factors (or responses to groups of survey items) that an individual might experience together instead of looking at each factor individually. So, for instance, when looking at the perceptions of the young people about the communities where they live, we find an example of a "caring community" characterized by a combination of having caring adults in their lives, adults who look out for their well-being, and adults in the community who expect that the young people will graduate high school. Practically, this means that participants tended to respond to the neighborhood questions in similar patterns, as reflected in the "caring community" cluster. Individuals are members of one class, based on their pattern of responses; i.e., a given young person could only be in the caring community class, not also in a non-caring community class.

APPENDIX II: Group Interview Cities and Community Partners

1.	Astoria, NY	Zone 126
2.	Baltimore, MD	Youth Opportunity Baltimore
3.	Boston, MA	Youth Build Boston and Madison Park Development Corporation
4.	Cincinnati, OH	Magic Johnson Bridgescape Centers
5.	Houston, TX	Harris County Precinct One
6.	Lowell, MA	United Teen Equality Center/UTEC
7.	Los Angeles, CA	Learning Works at Homeboy Industries, Inc.
8.	Minneapolis, MN	District 287/Gateway to College at Hennepin Technical College
9.	Nashville, TN	Alignment Nashville, Martha O'Bryan, Youth CAN & Y Build
10.	Pasadena, CA	Learning Works Charter School
11.	Philadelphia, PA	Philadelphia Youth Network
12.	Portland, OR	Gateway to College at Portland Community College
13.	Providence, RI	Youth Build Providence
14.	St. Paul, MN	Brotherhood Brew and UJAAMA
15.	Tucson, AZ	United Way and Our Family Services
16.	Riverside, CA	Gateway to College at Riverside Community College

APPENDIX III: Community Partner Descriptions

Program Name	City, State	Description
Zone 126	Astoria, NY	Zone 126 is driving community transformation for children and families in Astoria and Long Island City's Promise Neighborhood, which are areas of concentrated poverty. Zone 126 believes schools are pivotal as the nucleus to implementing an integration of academic, youth development, community and family empowerment, and health and social services to drive achievement from cradle to career. They partner with like-minded and results-oriented individuals and organizations to achieve a collaborative impact that builds upon short-term results leading to long-term impact. They mobilize and collaborate with a wide array of stakeholders to build awareness of the economic, educational, and social disparities, and synergistically deliver solutions to create sustainable change. **http://zone126.org/who-we-are/mission-and-vision**
Youth Opportunity (YO!) Baltimore	Baltimore, MD	YO! Baltimore serves out-of-school youth and young adults citywide at two youth-friendly centers. Caring adults provide wide-ranging support services and opportunities for participants to reach their academic and career goals. YO! Baltimore members build important life skills and participate in activities that support creative self-expression and a healthy life style. YO! Baltimore sponsors several dynamic programs for in-school, as well as out-of-school youth. With a proven track record of helping young people increase their wage earnings and educational attainment while reducing recidivism among juvenile justice connected youth, YO! Baltimore has received national recognition as a model youth-development program that works. **http://www.yobaltimore.org/about_yo.html**
YouthBuild	Boston, MA Providence, RI	YouthBuild's goal is to provide underserved young people with the support and credentials needed to successfully enter the trades. While YouthBuild promotes the core values of youth development and community service, it also offers a hands-on approach to training in the building trades. Students are put on a career path through construction training, sustainable landscape design, and other programs. Not only do these programs provide opportunities in vocational education, but they also provide academic instruction, counseling, and life skills training that strengthen and prepare students for the workforce upon graduation. **http://youthbuildboston.org/aboutus/**
The Center for Teen Empowerment (TE)	Boston, MA	The mission of the Center for Teen Empowerment is to empower youth and adults as agents of individual, institutional, and social change. Teen Empowerment (TE) inspires young people, and the adults who work with them, to think deeply about the most difficult social problems in their communities, and gives them the tools they need to work with others in creating significant positive change. At TE's youth organizing sites, youth and adult staff bring authentic youth voice into the dialogue about improving their communities, mobilize the energy of urban youth to create meaningful change, and facilitate mutually respectful relationships between youth and adults. **http://www.teenempowerment.org/about.htm**

Magic Johnson Accelerated Achievement Academy	**Cincinnati, OH**	The Magic Johnson Accelerated Achievement Academy, part of the national network of Magic Johnson Bridgescape Academies, provides an opportunity to earn a high school diploma at a pace suitable to the young person's schedule, lifestyle, and learning needs. Students experience an abbreviated, flexible school day and maximize online learning to focus on required courses and subjects that align with their specific areas of interest. A custom curriculum, individualized support, and counseling give students a complete roadmap for success. **http://magicjohnsonbridgescape.com/about-us**
Learning Works at Homeboy Industries, Inc.	**Los Angeles, CA**	Homeboy Industries serves high-risk, formerly gang-involved men and women with a continuum of free services and programs, and operates seven social enterprises that serve as job-training sites. Homeboy has learned that jobs are probably 80% of what these young people need to redirect their lives. The other 20% is a mixture of therapeutic and support services. Thus, in addition to paying young people to receive job training, they also require that the young people spend part of their working day working on themselves. In addition to job training, Homeboy offers education, therapy, tattoo removal, substance abuse treatment, legal assistance, and job placement services. **http://www.homeboyindustries.org/why-we-do-it/**
United Teen Equality Center (UTEC)	**Lowell, MA**	The United Teen Equality Center's (UTEC) mission and promise is to ignite and nurture the ambition of Lowell's most disconnected youth to trade violence and poverty for social and economic success. The model begins with intensive street outreach and gang peacemaking and then pairs youth with a transitional coach who works with them on a wide set of life goals. Youth develop skills in a workforce development program and resume their education through a GED or alternative diploma program. Values of social justice are embedded in all programming, with a special emphasis on local and statewide organizing and policy work. UTEC's unique model can provide a pathway from the street to the state house for older youth most often overlooked and considered disengaged. UTEC's theory of change is focused on four specific outcome areas for their young people: educational attainment, financial health, decreased criminal involvement, and increased civic engagement. **http://www.utec-lowell.org/programs/overview**
Gateway to College	**Hennepin Technical College, Minneapolis, MN** **Portland Community College, Portland, OR** **Riverside Community College, Riverside, CA**	The Gateway to College National Network builds the capacity of colleges, school districts, and states to revolutionize education for high school dropouts and underprepared college students so that all young people can achieve college credentials. Gateway's strategies include: 1) **Creating and replicating innovative programs** 2) **Building partnerships** that connect K-12 and higher education institutions and communities 3) **Influencing systems** by creating change agents who are transforming instruction and student support practices from the inside out 4) **Conducting research and sharing what we know** about successfully serving high school dropouts and academically underprepared college students 5) **Helping effect policy and regulatory changes** to ensure that Gateway to College and other alternative education models are available in every community that needs them 6) **Providing customized consulting services** to colleges and school districts **http://www.gatewaytocollege.org/about.asp**

Y-Build	**Nashville, TN**	Y-Build seeks to support urban young men between the ages of 18-24 to grow in spirit, mind, and body, while providing training in construction skills leading to viable career opportunities. Y-Build uses a holistic approach and empowers young men to take responsibility for building their own future. Students live and work together as they learn practical skills from the best construction professionals in the field. **http://ybuildnashville.tripod.com/id1.html**
Learning Works Charter School	**Pasadena, CA**	The mission of the Learning Works Charter School (LW) is to provide a personalized, rigorous academic program and relevant life skills to traditionally underserved, at-risk students in grades 9-12 who have withdrawn or are in danger of withdrawing from mainstream education without attaining a high school diploma. LW addresses the needs in the community by offering a program to give disengaged students an educational choice designed to meet their specific needs, distinct from the traditional programs that have not served them well. The LW model combines academic intervention and support, as well as acknowledging that this population requires wrap-around social support services. **http://www.publicworksinc.org/lw/aboutus/mission/**
Youth United for Change (YUC)	**Philadelphia, PA**	Youth United for Change (YUC) believes that every young person deserves a quality public education that prepares him or her for success at a 4-year university, for a living wage job, and for active participation in civic life. YUC is a youth-led, democratic organization made up of youth of color and working class communities, with the people and political power to hold school officials and government accountable to meeting the educational needs of Philadelphia public school students. This work is done through a process of school- and community-based organizing where a diverse group of youth come together, identify common concerns in their schools and community, and act collectively on their own behalf to create strategies for whole school reforms in the Philadelphia Public School System. These strategies are designed to better meet the needs of youth of color and working class communities. **http://youthunitedforchange.org/**
E3 Centers	**Philadelphia, PA**	E3 Centers are neighborhood-based centers that take a holistic approach to preparing out-of-school youth and youth returning from juvenile placement to achieve long-term educational, career, and personal goals. E3 Centers are designed to provide supports along three interrelated pathways: Education, Employment, and Empowerment, the three E's. **http://www.pyninc.org/programs/e3-power-centers.php**
Ujamaa Place	**St. Paul, MN**	The mission of Ujamaa Place is to assist young, African-American men primarily between the ages of 18 and 28, who are economically disadvantaged and have experienced repeated cycles of failure. This mission statement is rooted in the philosophy of African-American culture and empowerment — that everyone is important, valuable, worthy, and loveable. To graduate from the program, an Ujamaa Place participant must demonstrate job skills, empowerment skills, and life skills through the following: • Completion of his GED • Remained drug free • No recent criminal offenses • Held job for a minimum of three months • Demonstrated use of Empowerment Skills in his daily life • Secured stable housing **http://ujamaaplace.org/about-us/**

Brotherhood, Inc.	**St. Paul, MN**	Brotherhood, Inc. seeks to enable African-American youth and young men to envision and achieve successful futures. Brotherhood, Inc. aspires to create a pathway out of poverty, gangs, and incarceration by offering comprehensive and culturally-sensitive educational opportunities, social services, legal services and in-house employment, all under one roof. Their purpose it to: • Promote the reintegration of young men back into the community who have been, or are at risk of being, part of the criminal justice system. • Offer a wide range of educational programs so participants may strengthen and develop their education, life skills, financial management, business skills and entrepreneurial endeavors. • Develop small businesses (social enterprises) that hire Participants as transitional employees, where they can build a resume and gain work experience. • Provide Participants with case management, limited legal services, and general well-being support. **http://brotherhoodmn.org/about_us**
United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona	**Tucson, AZ**	The mission of United Way is to build "a Better Community by uniting people, ideas and resources.' United Way brings people together from all across Tucson and Southern Arizona — government, business, faith groups, nonprofits, labor and volunteers — to tackle the most pressing issues. They create large-scale social change by working with more than 100 partner agencies to address the underlying causes of critical needs to produce long-term results. United Way believes we all win when a child succeeds in school, a family becomes financially stable, and people enjoy good health. **http://www.unitedwaytucson.org/About-Us**
Houston Independent School District—Twilight High School	**Houston, TX**	The Houston Independent School District is committed to providing a high-quality education for every child, regardless of where they live or what school they choose to attend. Students are encouraged to challenge themselves in rigorous academic courses designed to prepare them for college and meaningful careers. **http://www.houstonisd.org/domain/7908**

APPENDIX IV: Tables

Note: Grad Status = Interrupted Enrollment (stopped going to school) and Continuous Enrollment (graduated without ever having stopped going to school).

Section 1: Demographics

Table 1. Age by Participant Status

Age of Participants	Grad Status		Focus Group Participants
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment	
18	16.0%	9.1%	18.9%
19	11.9%	9.9%	18.9%
20	10.3%	11.7%	16.2%
21	13.4%	11.4%	17.6%
22	12.6%	14.3%	5.4%
23	13.5%	15.1%	6.8%
24	12.9%	14.3%	10.8%
25	9.2%	14.3%	5.4%

Differences between groups are statistically significant[1]

Table 2. Immigrant Status by Graduation Status

Country of Origin	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
United States of America	96.5%	96.3%
Other	3.5%	3.7%

[1] Statistically significant using a p value < .01. For Interrupted enrollment, the number of respondents ranged from N=1,356-1,942. For continuous enrollment, the number of respondents ranged from N=728-1,023.

Table 3. Age to U.S. by Graduation Status

Age Moved to US	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
1	16.0%	10.5%
2	6.7%	13.2%
3	8.8%	2.6%
4	3.6%	13.2%
5	4.4%	2.6%
6	2.1%	5.3%
7	8.6%	7.9%
8	7.6%	2.6%
9	1.1%	2.6%
10	10.9%	13.2%
11	5.3%	5.3%
12	9.7%	5.3%
13	4.4%	5.3%
14	1.1%	5.3%
15	3.4%	5.3%
16	6.3%	5.3%

Table 4. Gender by Participant Status

Gender	Grad Status		Group Interview Participants
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment	
Male	50.0%	50.4%	55.2%
Female	50.0%	49.6%	44.8%

Only Asian and Native American were statistically different

Table 5. Race/Ethnicity by Participant Status

Race/Ethnicity	Grad Status		Group Interview Participants
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment	
White	66.6%	66.5%	12%
Black/African American	18.8%	16.4%	45%
Hispanic (Puerto Rican, Mexican, etc.)	15.1%	13.1%	24%
Asian	4.9%	9.8%	-
Native American	5.0%	2.2%	-
Multi-ethnic	-	-	6%
Other	1.8%	1.1%	7%

Only Asian and Native American were statistically different

Table 6. Mother's Education by Graduation Status

Maternal Education	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Less than High School	18.0%	8.7%
High School Diploma	29.9%	28.0%
GED	9.4%	3.4%
At least some college	40.3%	56.0%
Technical Training	2.3%	3.9%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 7. Father's Education by Graduation Status

Paternal Education	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Less than High School	19.5%	8.4%
High School Diploma	36.9%	31.5%
GED	9.7%	3.1%
At least some college	30.8%	52.8%
Technical Training	3.0%	4.3%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 8. Employment Status by Graduation Status

Current Employment	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes — Full Time	25.2%	28.2%
Yes — Part Time	23.0%	26.1%
Not employed at this time, not in school	28.6%	17.5%
Not employed at this time, currently in school	23.2%	28.2%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 9. Wage by Graduation Status

Current Wage if Employed	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
$7.25 an hour or less	14.0%	9.6%
$7.25 — $9.99 an hour	42.5%	36.7%
$10 — $14.99 an hour	30.2%	29.4%
$15 — $19.99 an hour	7.7%	13.3%
$20 or more an hour	5.6%	10.9%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 10. Education Level by Graduation Status

Last Year of Schooling Completed	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Less than High School	36.0%	0.0%
High School Diploma	16.0%	27.2%
GED	14.2%	0.0%
At least some college	31.7%	70.6%
Technical Training	1.9%	2.2%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 11. Age of Degree Completion by Graduation Status

Age Completed High School or GED	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
17	0.0%	31.3%
18	53.5%	62.6%
19	23.5%	6.1%
20	10.2%	0.0%
21	5.3%	0.0%
22	3.6%	0.0%
23	1.6%	0.0%
24	1.3%	0.0%
25	1.0%	0.0%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 12. Age Returned to School Among Graduates

Age Returned to School	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
18	42.3%	N/A
19	17.9%	N/A
20	13.4%	N/A
21	9.2%	N/A
22	5.0%	N/A
23	6.0%	N/A
24	3.5%	N/A
25	2.8%	N/A

Section 2:

Table 13. Thematic coding scheme and definitions

Themes	Sub Category	Definition
Connectedness/ Positive Relationships		
	Trust	Being able to rely upon people and feel safe and cared for
	Abandonment	Being left (typically) by one or both parents, seemingly willfully
	Absent Family	Physical absence of biological or foster family from the lives of the young people willfully or because the parent is always at work
	Parents Always at Work	
	Parents as Resources/ Parents Unable to Navigate System	Having a reliable, trustworthy adult who can help young person access resources/services to meet specific needs
Parenting Styles		
	Support/Guidance	Having a caring adult that offers discipline and structure; someone to empathize, sympathize and 'hold you together'
Model Behaviors		
	Self Regulation	Being able to cope with or lessen the physical and emotional effects of everyday life pressures
Stability		
	Mobility	Moving frequently, transferring to many different schools, or having one big move (out of state/country)
	Financial Uncertainty	Familial poverty
	Adopted	
	Homelessness	Temporary or long periods of time without having a stable place to live
	Foster Care	
Trauma/Crisis		
	Death in Family	Loss of biological family member

Themes	Sub Category	Definition
	Death/Loss of Close Friend	
	Sexual Abuse/ Assault/Rape	Assault, rape, harassment
	Emotional Abuse	Disregard or attempt to hurt someone's feelings
	Physical Abuse	Bringing harm to one's body or property
	Nonviolent Personal Trauma	Emotionally adverse situation that occurred in the life of the participant.
	Parents' Addiction	Parent's uncontrollable desire to use/abuse alcohols and substances that takes precedence over parental responsibilities
	Bullying	Long term physical/emotional abuse
	Exposure to Violence	Witnessing violent acts or seeing the consequences of a physical act of violence
	Victim of Violence	Weapon involved (shot, stabbed, etc.)
Strengths		
	Money	In this case money is defined as a matter of survival to take care of oneself and/or one's family
	Allure/Lifestyle	In this case the young people were seduced by street life
	Awareness	Having the consciousness to understand oppression in its various forms
	Perseverance	Demonstrating a drive to take charge and improve one's circumstances
	Assumed Role of Primary Caregiver	Assume the role of caring for unable family member or close friend
Peer Influences		
	Role Models	A person whose behavior, example, or success is or can be copied by others
	Gangs	Connectivity, role models, value, responsibility, support that was not found in other places
	Drugs	
	Peers as Motivators	Peers steering you in a positive or negative direction

Themes	Sub Category	Definition
Safety		Threat to home, friends at school and/or neighborhood
	Home	
	School	
	Neighborhoods	
Health		
	Personal Physical Health	Personal physical ailments
	Familial Physical Health	Report of a family member with a physical ailment
	Mental Health (Personal)	Condition of your mind (anxiety, depression, suicidal, etc.)
	Mental Health (Family)	Condition of family member's mind
	Pregnancy/Becoming a Parent	Child inhibiting your ability or desire to go to school
Troubles with the Law		
	Incarceration	Detained in a facility against will
	Juvenile Justice System	
	Incarceration Family Member	
School Culture/Climate		
	Environment	Way your school looks and whether or not it has deterring structures/ unwelcoming 'vibe' on school grounds
	School Not Meeting Needs	Traditional class structure, school day, or curriculum do not consider various learning styles or other needs of the student.
	Adultism	Discrimination toward youth based on their age
	Policy	School, city or state laws that block or require people from attending school

Themes	Sub Category	Definition
	Travel/Distance	Inadequate transportation to get to school
	Adults in School	
	School Closing	Interactions between youth and adults in school
	Kept Back*	Disregard or attempt to hurt someone's feelings
	Congruency of Life and School*	Values and practices of personal life and school lining up
Life Junctions		Series of incidents that lead people to change the direction of their life
	Personal Trauma	
	Baby	
	Condition of Law	

Section 3:

Table 14. The number of cities mentioning the most frequently occurring codes (out of 16)

16/16	15/16	14/16	13/16	12/16	11/16	10/16
Support and Guidance from Adults		Absent Family	Gangs	Homelessness	Financial Uncertainty	Abandonment
Incarceration (of self)		Self-Regulation	School Safety	School Policies	Foster Care	Familial Physical Health
		Mobility	Peer as Motivator		Money as a Motivator	Incarceration of Family Member
		Death in Family			Personal Mental Health	Parents as Resources/ Unable to Navigate System
		Perseverance				Victim of Violence
		Drugs				
		Pregnancy/ Becoming a Parent				
		School Not Meeting My Needs				
		Adults in School				

Section 4: Adverse Life History Experiences

Table 15. Gang Involvement by Graduation Status

I Was Involved in a Gang	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	11.0%	2.4%
No	89.0%	97.6%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 16. Drug Use by Graduation Status

Used Drugs	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	36.9%	15.9%
No	63.1%	84.1%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 17. Incarceration by Graduation Status

Been to Jail	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	18.0%	3.3%
No	82.0%	96.7%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 18. Death of a Loved One by Graduation Status

Lost Someone Close	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	53.1%	37.7%
No	46.9%	62.3%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 19. Regular Care Giver by Graduation Status

Was a Regular Caregiver	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	42.6%	25.2%
No	57.4%	74.8%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 20. Participation in Foster System by Graduation Status

In Foster Care	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	10.9%	2.4%
No	89.1%	97.6%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 21. Afterschool Activity Participation by Graduation Status

Participated in Afterschool Activities	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	43.9%	62.0%
No	56.1%	38.0%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 22. Suspended or Expelled by Graduation Status

Suspended/Expelled	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	37.6%	12.4%
No	62.4%	87.6%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 23. Lack of Preparation for High School by Graduation Status

Not Prepared for HS	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	31.1%	10.7%
No	68.9%	89.3%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 24. Endured Abuse by Graduation Status

Physically/Emotionally Abused	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	30.2%	12.3%
No	69.8%	87.8%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 25. Experienced Homelessness by Graduation Status

Homeless	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	21.9%	5.5%
No	78.1%	94.5%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 26. Changed Residential Location by Graduation Status

Moved	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	49.2%	30.7%
No	50.8%	69.3%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 27. Changed Schools by Graduation Status

Changing Schools	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	50.3%	25.6%
No	49.7%	74.4%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 28. Number of Times Moved by Graduation Status

# Times Moved	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
1	15.9%	44.1%
2	22.7%	22.0%
3	21.5%	14.1%
4 or More	39.8%	19.7%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 29. Number of Times Changed Schools by Graduation Status

# Times Changed Schools	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
1	21.9%	46.4%
2	26.0%	23.8%
3	21.2%	13.5%
4 or More	30.9%	16.3%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Section 5: School

Table 30. Relevance of School by Graduation Status

School was Relevant	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Strongly Disagree	13.2%	4.7%
Moderately Disagree	18.3%	6.4%
Moderately Agree	34.8%	30.4%
Strongly Agree	33.7%	58.5%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 31. Teachers Cared by Graduation Status

Teachers Cared	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Strongly Disagree	14.1%	4.2%
Moderately Disagree	17.7%	9.5%
Moderately Agree	34.8%	42.0%
Strongly Agree	33.4%	44.3%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 32. Half of Friends Graduated by Graduation Status

Half My Friends Graduated	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Strongly Disagree	7.6%	2.7%
Moderately Disagree	8.7%	2.5%
Moderately Agree	28.6%	13.8%
Strongly Agree	55%	81%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 33. School Staff Urged Interruption in Enrollment by Graduation Status

School Staff Pushed to Stop	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Strongly Disagree	49.0%	69.9%
Moderately Disagree	20.1%	11.6%
Moderately Agree	16.1%	8.9%
Strongly Agree	14.8%	9.5%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Section 6:

Table 34. Reasons For Dropping Enrollment

Reasons for Stopping School (Check all that apply)	Grad Status Interrupted-Enrollment
I was bored	25.9%
School wasn't relevant to my life	20.3%
No one cared if I attended	17.7%
I had to make money to support my family	19.0%
I was held back	14.2%
I was failing too many classes	27.6%
I got into drugs	11.6%
I was a member of a gang	3.5%
I got pregnant/gave birth	10.8%
I became a caregiver	0.6%
I was bullied	2.2%
Family issues or problems	0.8%
Lost a family member or friend	0.8%
Financial issues and work	1.2%
I was kicked out or expelled	0.6%
Mental health issues	2.1%
Physical or other medical problems	2.7%
Pushed or pulled out of school	0.6%
Residential or school instability	2.0%
School environment	1.4%
Teacher and school problems	1.2%

Section 7:

Table 35. Reasons for Return to School

Reasons for Returning to School (Select all that apply)	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Someone encouraged me to return	41.1%	N/A
I had the time to devote to school	32.3%	N/A
I needed more education to get a good job	51.6%	N/A
My family supported me	27.6%	N/A
Other (specify)	12.3%	N/A

Section 8: Parents

Table 36. Parental Expectations (HS) by Graduation Status

Parent Expected Me to Complete HS	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	85.2%	95.3%
No	14.8%	4.7%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 37. Parental Education (College) by Graduation Status

Parent Expected Me to Complete College	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	69.2%	82.9%
No	30.8%	17.1%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 38. Parent Expressed Pride by Graduation Status

Parent Regularly Expressed Pride	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	62.7%	77.1%
No	37.3%	22.9%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 39. Parent Incarcerated by Graduation Status

Parent in Jail	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	18.2%	6.1%
No	81.8%	93.9%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 40. Parental Physical Abuse by Graduation Status

Parent Physically Abusive	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	18.3%	9.0%
No	81.7%	91.0%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 41. Parental Insults by Graduation Status

Parents Called Me Names	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	37.7%	26.5%
No	62.3%	73.5%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 42. Parents Inquired about School by Graduation Status

Parents Asked about School	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	68.9%	83.2%
No	31.1%	16.8%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 43. Parents Used Drugs by Graduation Status

Parents Used Drugs	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	18.8%	6.4%
No	81.2%	93.6%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Table 44. Parents Knew Friends by Graduation Status

Parents Knew Friends	Grad Status	
	Interrupted-Enrollment	Continuous-Enrollment
Yes	74.4%	83.7%
No	25.6%	16.3%

Differences between groups are statistically significant

Section 9: Demographics, Life History, and Current Employment and Education Status by Socioeconomic Status (maternal education)

Table 45. Mother's Education by Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Mom < HS	Mom High School	Mom > HS	Statistical Significance
Demographic Characteristics				
Current age	21.5	21.4	21.4	*ns*
Male	**28.4%**	36.0%	37.0%	s
White	65.2%	68.3%	69.5%	*ns*
Black	**13.7%**	17.9%	20.3%	s
Hispanic	**19.3%**	**16.8%**	9.9%	s
Asian	**3.2%**	**3.5%**	7.0%	s
Native American	3.5%	5.2%	4.8%	*ns*
Other Race	1.8%	1.1%	2.4%	*ns*
Reasons for interrupting enrollment				
I was bored	22.8%	27.4%	24.8%	*ns*
School wasn't relevant	20.2%	19.6%	19.8%	*ns*
No one cared if I attended	**23.1%**	18.1%	16.5%	*ns*
Had to make money to support family	15.5%	19.6%	17.7%	*ns*

Held back	**16.4%**	**14.3%**	11.2%	s
Was failing too many classes	28.1%	**30.4%**	24.8%	s
Got into drugs	11.1%	10.6%	11.5%	*ns*
Member of a gang	2.9%	3.0%	3.3%	*ns*
Got pregnant/gave birth	**17.8%**	**13.80%**	10.0%	s
Other	17.8%	29.60%	26.4%	*ns*
Refused/don't know	**23.7%**	8.00%	10.3%	s
High school experiences				
Involved with a gang	10.1%	10.4%	10.2%	*ns*
Used marijuana/other drugs	37.3%	38.6%	34.6%	*ns*
Spent time in juvenile detention	**19.6%**	**18.1%**	14.8%	s
Lost close friend/relative	56.6%	49.0%	53.9%	*ns*
Regularly cared for a relative	**47.2%**	42.4%	39.9%	*ns*
Was in foster care	13.0%	10.9%	9.4%	*ns*
Was involved in after school activities	**35.8%**	**40.9%**	49.1%	s
Was suspended/expelled	36.0%	**39.1%**	33.4%	s
Did not feel academically prepared for high school	**37.1%**	30.8%	29.4%	s
Was physically/emotionally abused by someone other than parent	32.4%	33.3%	29.8%	*ns*
Was homeless	26.5%	22.5%	22.1%	*ns*
Moved	50.5%	50.7%	49.2%	*ns*
Changed schools	**55.2%**	51.2%	48.1%	*ns*
Current status				
Employed	**43.9%**	**43.2%**	51.8%	s
Less Than HS	**46.5%**	**36.7%**	25.0%	s
HS or GED	30.1%	**40.8%**	24.0%	s
More Than HS	**23.4%**	**22.3%**	50.9%	s
N	321-342	504-537	727-757	

Note: s = significant, ns = non-significant; bold signifies significantly different from Mom>HS

Table 46. Adverse HS Events by Mother's Education

	Mother < High School		Mother = High School		Mother > High School	
# Adverse HS Events	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
0	24	7.9%	53	8.40%	83	12.1%
1	37	10.2%	63	10.0%	95	13.8%
2	32	10.6%	77	12.2%	93	13.5%
3	36	11.9%	91	14.4%	92	13.4%
4	51	16.8%	85	13.5%	75	10.9%
5	45	14.8%	98	15.5%	95	13.8%
6-12	78	25.7%	164	26.0%	155	22.5%

"Don't Call Them Dropouts" is the latest in a series of reports and research briefs that are part of America's Promise Alliance GradNation Campaign.

America's Promise Alliance launched the GradNation campaign in 2010, building on more than 100 Dropout Prevention Summits we convened with our partners across the country. The campaign aims to improve American high school graduation rates to levels that are morally, socially and economically acceptable. It energizes, accelerates and optimizes community efforts improve upon their on-time public high school graduation rates.

- Achieving a **90 percent graduation rate nationwide by 2020**, with no high school graduating less than 80 percent of its students; and
- Dramatically increasing the rate of postsecondary completion among young Americans.

In 2011, America's Promise Alliance created the **Center for Promise** with Tufts University's School of Arts and Sciences and the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development. This new research center allows our team to focus more intensely on building a body of evidence to inform and advance our partners' intervention and advocacy efforts. The research that this report highlights is the largest such effort to date.