

Willful Ignorance? The Dropout Crisis and United States Public Education Policy

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Abstract: *This paper takes a critical conceptual look at education policy and practice from the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 to the present. The paper examines the roots of current United States educational policies, and shows that, in some cases, well-intentioned efforts have had a negative impact on vulnerable populations such as minorities, immigrants, and the economically disadvantaged. It begins with a review of the discourse and literature on the history of these policies and their effect on at-risk students, and concludes with a look at research and a brief look at current practices that could enhance education and improve student outcomes. The paper describes the role Texas has played in the crafting of recent education policies, and uses the state as an example of the effect of current education policies.*

Never before has educational attainment been such an important prerequisite for participation in our nation's economy, yet each year many of our nation's most needy students miss out on educational opportunities. These students are pushed out of their schools, or they simply give up fighting a system that seems stacked against them. This paper explores four decades of data regarding U.S. education policy. When looking at school completion going back to 1972, it becomes clear that poor minority students are disproportionately overrepresented in dropout statistics and negative school outcomes (Hauser, Simmons, & Pager, 2000). Over half of African American and Latino students fail to earn a high school diploma. In their research into Latino educational issues Gándara and Contreras (2009) argued that:

Never before have we been faced with a population group on the verge of becoming the majority in significant portions of the country that is also the lowest performing academically. And never before has the economic structure been less forgiving to the undereducated. (p. 18)

Former Texas Agricultural Commissioner Jim Hightower is known to have said, "when we all do better, we all do better" (Progressive Populist, 1997). Were politicians, education policymakers, and school personnel to take a pragmatic view of education's capacity to level the playing field, it is quite possible that they could see things through Jim Hightower's lens and envision how public education can help us all do better. One of the keys to us all doing better is to address the fact that far too many poor and minority children fail to graduate from high school due to frustration or

because they are pushed out of schools. If a truly equitable society is what we are seeking through our children's education, perhaps now is a good time to start looking at a well-rounded education for all children as a basic civil right.

Education as a Civil Right

In certain academic circles, there is talk of elevating education as a basic civil right. If education is a civil right, then how can we better guarantee the rights of all our nation's children? When you consider that a significant portion of poor and minority students fail to graduate, now might be good time to commit to creating equality through educational opportunity.

After being chosen to be the Secretary of Education in the Obama administration, Arne Duncan made several bold statements regarding his views on education and the role that the U.S. government plays in making education policies reality. At an event commemorating the 46th anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act, he began by stating that, "education is the most pressing issue facing America," (U.S. Education Secretary Duncan commemorates 46th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act, 2010, para. 1) and insisted, "preparing young people for success in life is not just a moral obligation of society" (para. 3). Secretary Duncan asserted, "education is also the civil rights issue of our generation" (para. 4). He concluded his comments by stating that education is "the only sure path out of poverty and the only way to achieve a more equal and just society" (para. 8).

In 2010, President Barack Obama echoed Secretary Duncan in a speech given to the Governors' Association, in which he outlined his position that education is a civil right. To make a case for this claim, the President argued that:

If you look at the history of public education in this country, it's supposed to be the great equalizer. The dividing line in our country, between the haves and have-nots, is often around educational opportunity. You can come from real poverty, but if you have a great early childhood program, a great K-12 education and you have access to go to college, you'll do great. Yet, in far too many places in this country, educational opportunity is tied to race, neighborhood, and zip code. There's something wrong with that picture. (Gordy, 2010, para. 3)

How then do we match our current educational policy goals, like those alluded to by President Obama and Secretary Duncan, with long-held progressive ideals such as 19th century education reformer Horace Mann's view of education as "the great equalizer"? To provide an answer to this and other questions, I chose to take a critical conceptual look at education policy and practice from the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 to the present. In examining the roots of current United States educational policies, I will show that, in some cases, well-intentioned efforts have had a negative impact on vulnerable populations such as minorities, immigrants, and the economically disadvantaged. The paper will also focus on how these policies have affected Texas and the role Texas has played in the crafting of recent education policies.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), at which time he declared: "No law I have signed, or will ever sign, means more to the future of America" (Johnson, 1965, para. 20). President Johnson, a former educator who taught disadvantaged, minority students, sought to provide equal educational opportunities and close persistent achievement and educational gaps between more affluent students and schools and economically disadvantaged students and the schools that serve them. Encouraged by successful passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Johnson Administration sought and passed ESEA by linking it to other progressive legislation collectively called the "Great Society" (Johnson, 1965, para 10). ESEA was, at that time, the single largest investment in education ever made by the United States government. This act and subsequent reauthorizations, discussed later in this paper, have continued to serve America's public school students for more than four decades (Standerfer, 2006). Said Kantor (1991) regarding Johnson-era education reform:

ESEA policy makers were informed by widely shared assumptions about the nature of poverty and about the relationship of the state to the economy. These assumptions made educational reform central to Great Society policies designed to eliminate poverty and equalize economic opportunity. Yet because the Great Society was reluctant to challenge existing institutional arrangements and was constrained by the makeup of the Democratic party coalition and the federal government's capacity to control local education practices, it was unable to make the education of disadvantaged students a top priority of local school districts, even

though it successfully institutionalized the federal commitment to improving education for economically disadvantaged children. (Kantor, 1991, p. 47)

Focusing our attention on the educational needs of economically disadvantaged students was, and still is, a good idea. ESEA encouraged a legion of reformers and social scientists to become engaged in education reform, but eventually diluted the educational process and practices. We lost focus of the simple goal of educational legislation, which is, or should be, to educate children in the best way possible. After 18 years of highly focused programs and reforms one thing became evident: what began with ESEA—an effort to provide better educational opportunities for minorities and the poor—was not working. As will be shown in this paper, subsequent administrations and policymakers would attempt to address what they viewed as deficiencies in our public education system and the inherent perils these shortcomings pose to our nation.

There were reasons to be optimistic about these new reforms, but the overall difficulties involved with public education were persistent enough to continue to warrant caution (Gamoran & Long, 2006). Nevertheless, it still seemed that too little effort was being consistently applied to a problem that was getting worse every year. The focus on increasing accountability by raising standards was about to take a new turn, which would create new systems of accountability based on high stakes test scores. The basis for this bold new move in education began in Texas during the *incredible* educational progress made there under Governor George W. Bush. As president, Governor Bush would attempt an overhaul of the nation's public school system similar in scope to President Johnson's ESEA initiatives.

The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

In 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001). This sweeping reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act set out to raise reading and mathematics scores dramatically, and close the stubborn achievement gaps that had long been a source of complaints and dissatisfaction with the American public school system. According to Cross (2004), "the fact that the president made this bill the first order of business in a new administration is especially striking" (p.126). The primary goal of the new law was for each child to be proficient in reading and mathematics by the year 2014 (United States Department of Education, 2013, para. 3).

NCLB, based on the Texas accountability movement's emphasis on publicly embarrassing schools and districts that do not meet mandated requirements, uses a metric known as "Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP) to grade schools, districts, cities, and even states. AYP, as defined by *Education Week*, is an accountability measure used to, "determine whether all students, as well as individual subgroups of students, are making progress toward meeting state academic content standards" (Adequate Yearly Progress, 2011, para. 2). Many states, eager to comply with NCLB and meet AYP targets, began to implement policies that would lead to a sizable part of each state's educational budget being allocated to materials, training, and personnel in support of testing (Azzam, Perkins-Gough, & Thiers, 2006).

The components of AYP are, on the surface at least, rather simple. They consist of test performance (in Texas' case the TAKS test) and test participation. The performance component is broken down by age, sex, socioeconomic status, cognitive ability (Special Education), and English language acquisition status (LEP, ELL, and similar). Scores are sorted as proficient (met AYP targets) or nonproficient (missed AYP targets). Both schools and districts can have the "met" or "missed" labels affixed to them. Scores are made public locally, statewide, and nationally. A school district or school that can consistently meet AYP standards can expect glowing reports and, in some cases, financial rewards. The consequences for not meeting AYP expectations can be devastating economically for both districts and schools.

NCLB mandated that each state meet AYP requirements in each demographic, or face increasingly punitive actions that can result in a school being reconstituted (removal of staff, programs, and/or administration), having its staff replaced, or being taken over and run by the state. The initial consequences of failing to meet AYP standards include students being allowed to choose a different campus, or if they chose to stay at their original school, to attend mandatory, no cost, before- or after-school tutoring. If a school continues to fail to meet AYP minimums, further punitive measures are the second step, and include the school having to provide and fund supplemental education services. The third and ultimate measure can be undertaken if a school fails to meet AYP requirements more than three times. It includes, but is not limited to, the school being taken over by the state and reconstituted or closed outright. Districts can appeal their AYP status and even seek the protection of safe harbor provisions for schools with populations that are comprised mainly of at-risk categories of students.

Initial Outcomes of the No Child Left Behind Act

In researching this extremely broad legislation (the law itself is more than 1,000 pages), two distinct observations can be made. First, NCLB has done much to shed light on school populations that have for many years, even decades, been overlooked or considered beyond help by the school districts they attend. The Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS), a product of NCLB, proves itself an unequalled data resource. The AEIS records state, region, district, and school data, including testing information, such as how students in each grade perform on each content area, and each school's and district's scores are broken down by grades and sub-populations. Other AEIS information available to the public includes student and teacher demographics, retention rates, dropout rates, and a host of other relevant data.

A second observation is that unless something more is done than using the data collected to shame failing schools, the problems of consistently underperforming schools and underserved populations is going to get much worse. Current legislation addressing the shortcomings and detrimental effects of NCLB is working its way through both houses of the United States Congress and has the support of President Obama and Secretary Duncan (United States Department of Education, 2012). This legislation will grant eligible states and districts flexibility in meeting NCLB requirements and AYP targets. In some cases it will grant these school districts and states waivers from

NCLB requirements. As these are relatively new measures, there is no data to support whether or not these changes will have any effect.

Honig (2006) insisted that the challenge facing broad policy execution, like NCLB, is "not simply what is implementable and works, but what is implementable and what works for whom, where, when and why" (p. 2). What has become painfully evident is that NCLB has a disproportionate and negative affect on districts and schools that serve economically disadvantaged minority students. As Honig (2006) argued, education policy researchers and practitioners interested in improving the implementation of education policies should help build knowledge about what works and how to replicate success (p. 14). In other words, what we should be looking at is what works, what doesn't work, and building upon that knowledge to improve policy and teaching which should ultimately create better outcomes for all students.

In reading through the research, it is easy to conclude that NCLB is not the educational panacea it was intended to be. Educational historian Dianne Ravitch put it this way:

Was the NCLB toolkit working? Were there sanctions prescribed by the law improving achievement? The reports coming out of the states indicated that state education departments were drowning in the new bureaucratic requirements, procedures, and routines, and that none of the prescribed remedies was making a difference. (Ravitch, 2010, p. 99)

After reviewing how NCLB has affected schools in Texas, I am not inclined to report that it has not had an overly positive effect in regards to school improvement for schools that serve large numbers of at-risk students, nor has it had a positive effect on educational outcomes for at-risk students. Demonstrating this is the expectation that 50% of Texas school districts and 66% of Texas school campuses will not meet AYP requirements for 2011 (Texas Association of School Boards, 2011, p. 2).

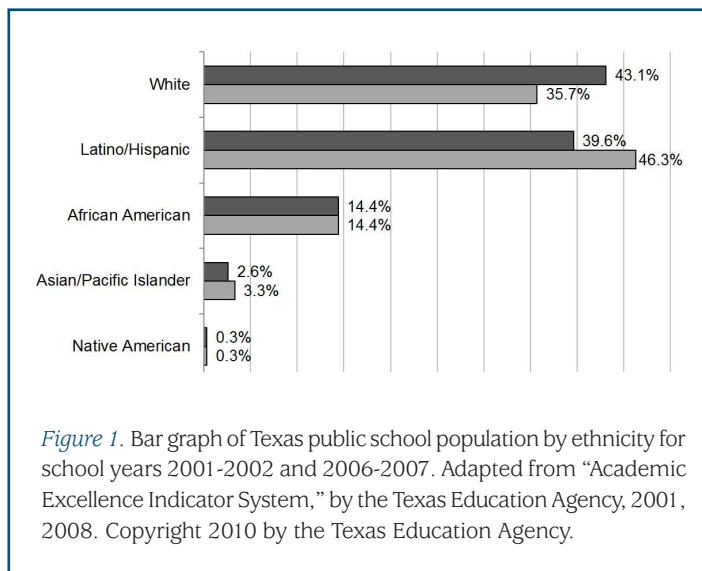
Unfortunately, NCLB and accompanying accountability systems (like those in Texas), ostensibly designed to provide programs and support that focus on needed improvements, seem to unfairly target and punish the school districts that have been identified as having the most problems. The reasoning seems to be that beating up and picking on poor urban schools (like those in Houston and other urban areas), and making spectacles of them, will result in positive changes. The idea that publicly humiliating schools, administrators, teachers, staff, and students would somehow motivate them to step up does not make much sense. Yet, that is exactly what has happened in far too many districts and schools, and the consequences have been that, in many cases, no improvements have been made or things have gotten worse.

At this point one may ask: If not this, then what? Therein lies the problem. With the persistence of poverty in our cities and rural areas, and shrinking educational and economic opportunities nationwide, a greater emphasis is being placed on the government and state educational agencies to do *something*. Economically disadvantaged kids are still overrepresented in poor academic performance in schools, and they continue to be the largest group of students dropping out. In order to get a better understanding of the effects that educational

legislation like ESEA and NCLB have had on schools and students we must look at Texas, a state where economically disadvantaged, at-risk students are overrepresented in student demographics reported by the state.

The Texas Public School System

Texas has grown dramatically since the turn of the century. In 2000, Texas was home to almost four million K-12 students (TEA, 2001, Section II, p. 1). Data from TEA for 2006-2007 showed that Texas served more than 4.5 million students, a rather significant increase, particularly when student demographics are taken into account (TEA, 2008, Section II, p. 1). As it grew, Texas' population also changed, as is illustrated in Figure 1. In just seven years, the total number of students increased by 585,150 (TEA, 2008). Most interesting about this growth is the changes seen in certain ethnic groups, specifically Latinos and Whites. The Latino population grew by 539,900 or 6.7% from 2000 to 2007, while the White population in Texas public schools shrank by 90,289 or 7.4% (TEA, 2008).



In the midst of these demographic changes, structural changes were happening that also impacted schools. As the state population grew, added pressure was being put on school districts, especially those that served high minority and economically disadvantaged student populations. The growing populations and increasing school accountability standards led to the adoption of what became known as "Robin Hood Laws." This name describes the state's practice of "recapture," or taking tax monies from wealthier districts and redistributing the funds to impoverished districts. As districts lower on the socioeconomic ladder relied more and more on these funds, the state legislature responded by doing all that they could to protect higher income districts and keep property taxes low (Smith, 2011).

High-Stakes Testing and Texas

Texas became a model for No Child Left Behind via the "Texas Miracle in Education" (Haney, 2001). This "miracle," which occurred from 1994 through 2000 during the administration of Texas Governor George W. Bush, was the result of a new system of accountability that was to serve as the framework for the reauthorization of ESEA known as "No Child Left Behind."

However, to really understand this miracle, one must first take a broad look at education in Texas and the state's use of mandated tests. These tests initially began as assessments of basic skills, and evolved into high-stakes tests. According to Nichols (2007), high-stakes testing is a method of assessment based on the Theory of Action. This theory assumes that teachers, when faced with large incentives and threats of punishment, will work harder and become more effective, and that this will then lead to increased student motivation and parental involvement (p. 3). These types of tests began to define what was taught in Texas, how it was to be taught, and what would happen to students and schools that failed to meet the state's minimum standards. These tests continue to have consequences for students that include grade retention and withholding of a diploma until satisfactory completion of the test.

Reactions to Testing

The gradually increasing emphasis on using test scores to *grade* schools, as well as their use as measures of learning, began to raise a few eyebrows among parents of school age children. They began to complain about how much class time and homework was expected in support of testing, and how test anxiety was adversely affecting their children. The problems with an emphasis on testing were not just being voiced in Texas: "When parents are dealing with children vomiting on the morning of the tests and seeing other signs of test stress, they're going to be motivated at the voting booth," said Gloria Pipkin, the president of a testing watchdog group, the Florida Coalition for Assessment Reform (Whoriskey, 2006, p. 2). She added that "Texas and Florida are the poster children for excessive testing, and we're seeing an enormous backlash" (p. 2).

Proponents of testing argued that the dire consequences of failure motivated students to succeed (Clegg, 2007, p. 1). On the other hand, in 1997, a group of minority students represented by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) filed suit against the State of Texas on the grounds that the TAAS test was illegally discriminatory (Clegg, 2007). During the trial, S.E. Phillips of Michigan State University argued in favor of the test, pointing out that the TAAS test was "increasing the level of skills and knowledge attained by high school graduates, providing better remediation for unprepared students, and closing the gap between the performance of different racial and ethnic groups" (p. 1). The judge, from the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, ruled in 2000 that "TAAS neither unfairly discriminates against Black and Mexican American students nor denies them their right to due process" (p. 3), and as a result of this ruling the case was dismissed.

From the beginning of the testing era there were increasing concerns being expressed by parents. Parents of school-aged children, and likely voters, began to show signs they believed that too much testing and its consequences were hurting kids, schools, and communities. Whoriskey observed that:

In Texas, a survey drafted by two polling firms, one Democratic and one Republican, and paid for by the Texas State Teachers Association, indicated that 56 percent of voters thought there was too much emphasis on state testing in their schools. A national poll by a pro-testing group, the Teaching Commission, showed that 52 percent of respondents thought that standardized tests do not accurately measure student achievement; 35 percent thought they do. (Whoriskey, 2006, p. 2)

Yet another negative effect that so much testing was having on students was that they were becoming frustrated with school and dropping out. As state-mandated standardized testing became an increasingly popular tool by which student-level, high-stakes decisions such as promotion or graduation from high school were made, it is critical to look at what the research literature tells us about how these tests may be exacerbating what some in the field have referred to as “the dropout crisis” (Orfield, 2006).

The Dropout Crisis

“There is a high school dropout crisis far beyond the imagination of most Americans, concentrated in urban schools and relegating many thousands of minority children to a life of failure” (Orfield, 2006, p. 1). This is a significant problem, which disproportionately affects the most vulnerable populations in our country. It is unacceptable that students dropping out of school should be allowed to continue as it is, without consistent and effective policies to guide students back into the system. Although schools and districts are undertaking efforts to address the dropout crisis, there is a noticeable lack of state and federal policies aimed at reducing the dropout rate by any meaningful proportion in the near or distant future.

In a 2007, Secretary of State and then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton asserted that we should “recommit ourselves to the idea that every young person in America has the right to a high-quality education, from pre-school all the way through college” (para. 1). She pointed to an alarming practice of “states in our country that actually plan how many prison beds they will need by looking at third grade reading scores. They look at the failure rates and they extrapolate how many prison spots they’re going to need in 10 to 15 years” (para. 1).

The Texas Education Agency’s 2011 report titled *Secondary School Completion and Dropouts in Texas Public Schools 2009-10* indicated that in the 7th - 12th grades, 34,907 students dropped out during that school year (p. 54). Twenty-two percent were African American, 59% were Hispanic, and 16% were White (p. 60). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics 2010 report, *Public School Graduates and Dropouts From the Common Core of Data: School Year 2007-08*, 613,379 students dropped out nationwide that school year (Stillwell, 2010, p. 3). Of those students, 7% were African American, 6% were Hispanic, 7% were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 3% were White (p.3). It is hard to ignore both state and national statistics that indicate far too many minority students drop out of school. Yet it happens, often with disastrous results for the students, young boys and girls for whom continuing their education no longer seems like an option.

The Costs of Dropping Out

To emphasize why this is an important issue, we must look at who drops out and what happens to the students schools fail. Bill Milliken, founder of Communities In Schools, pointed out:

America’s 3.5 million dropouts ages 16 to 25 are truly have nots: They do not have a high school diploma, and as a result they have little hope for a decent future. They are far more likely than their peers to be unemployed, live in poverty, experience chronic poor health, depend on social services, and go to jail. Four out of every ten young adult dropouts receive some type of government assistance. Someone who did not graduate is more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as a person with at least a high school diploma. Half of all prison inmates are dropouts. (Milliken, 2007, p. xxii)

The Annie E. Casey Foundation reported in 2006, “because family economic distress is associated with negative social, economic, educational, and health outcomes for children, these negative outcomes tend to be concentrated in poor and low income families” (Mather & Adams, 2006, p. 1). The same report further stated that “the concentration of negative outcomes like dropping out of school, homelessness, etc. is especially pronounced for African American and Hispanic children, who were four times more likely than non-Hispanic White children to reside in families with incomes of less than \$10,000” (p. 3).

The economic costs of dropping out are staggering, not just to individuals, but also to communities and the nation. A 2006 report compiled by Nancy Martin and Samuel Halperin for the American Youth Policy Forum indicated that:

- Students who drop out cost our nation more than \$260 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity in their lifetimes (p. viii).
- The United States would save \$41.8 billion dollars in health care costs if the 600,000 young people who dropped out in 2004 were to complete just one additional year of education (p. viii).
- If only one third of high school dropouts were to earn a high school diploma, federal savings in reduced costs of food stamps, housing assistance, and Temporary Assistance For Needy Families would amount to \$10.8 billion annually (p. viii).

What is perhaps most troubling is the role of and the mechanisms by which schools participate in exacerbating the dropout crisis, purging their schools of students who may bring down test scores and hurt a school’s efforts to meet state and federal standards. In their research on high-stakes testing and accountability, Darling-Hammond and Heilig (2008) found that “high-stakes testing policies that rewarded and punished schools based on average student scores created incentives for schools to ‘game the system’ by excluding students from testing and, ultimately, school” (p. 75). They posited that, “gaming strategies reduced educational opportunity for African American and Latino high school students. Further, sharp increases in 9th-grade student retention and disappearance were associated with increases in 10th-grade test scores and related accountability ratings” (p. 80).

Additionally, McNeil and Valenzuela (2001) found that gaming the system to artificially inflate test scores did not improve learning; “rather, teachers and principals are motivated to meet standards by teaching to the test. Instead of creating an improved learning environment, these crude forms of assessment may reduce opportunities to learn higher-order skills, particularly for low-income students” (p. 5). This is important because many of the students who drop out may do so because of the test-driven accountability system. As Azzam (2007) explained, “a majority of students who dropped out said that they were not motivated to work hard, but that they would have worked harder had their teachers demanded more. Seventy percent believed that they could have graduated if they had tried” (p. 91). It could be that the current obsession with test scores is causing dropouts by creating learning environments that are discouraging the very students we should be trying to keep in school.

A 2006 report for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation stated: “There is a high school dropout epidemic in America. Each year, almost one third of all public high school students—and nearly one half of all Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans—fail to graduate from public high school with their class” (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006, p. i). This publication was followed the same year by a *TIME* magazine cover story titled “Dropout Nation.” In it, using Shelbyville, Indiana, as an example of the dropout crisis, the author indicated:

In today’s data-happy era of accountability, testing and No Child Left Behind, here is the most astonishing statistic in the whole field of education: an increasing number of researchers are saying that nearly 1 out of 3 public high school students won’t graduate, not just in Shelbyville but around the nation. For Latinos and African Americans, the rate approaches an alarming 50%. Virtually no community, small or large, rural or urban, has escaped the problem. (Thornburgh, 2006, p. 1)

It is concerning that so many economically disadvantaged and minority students are dropping out of school. An equally disquieting issue is the effect that the loss of these future economic contributors and taxpayers will have on the economy in the long term. Orfield (2006) contended that, “the implications of these high dropout rates are far reaching and devastating for individuals, communities, and the economic vitality of this country” (p. 1). Intensifying this problem is the reality that dropout-reporting measures vary so widely that the states and the U.S. Department of Education have no solid grasp on just how many students are dropping out.

Conclusion

In his February 24, 2009, address to Congress, President Barack Obama laid out his vision for education. His speech focused on growing the economy and navigating our way out of the financial downturn. A key factor in this recovery effort, according to the President, was improving educational outcomes for all students and closing the persistent gaps in education between the affluent and the poor. The President stated that, “in a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity—it is a pre-requisite” (Remarks of President

Barack Obama, 2009, para. 45). He wasted no time in addressing one of his key concerns, dropouts:

Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma. Yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation. And half of the students who begin college never finish. (Remarks of President Barack Obama, 2009, para. 46)

Continued educational inequalities are an outgrowth of a much deeper ideology that disregards the reality that students of color are disproportionately dropping out or are pushed out of school, and are more likely to be underemployed or unemployed, or end up in prison. It has even been heard from some in the education sector and those involved in the politics of education that all of this continuous bad news has become like elevator music, something recognizable but easily ignored. The point needs to be made that these numbers or statistics represent real people and real communities and that there are dire consequences involved when disproportionate numbers of poor, minority students are not completing their basic education and are left farther and farther behind in an economy that requires higher and higher educational abilities.

Research in the areas of dropout prevention and serving the needs of at-risk students suggests we look at this issue as a long-term, national, P-16 project that will ultimately strengthen schools and communities. To make it happen will require both resources and political will from the U.S. Department of Education as well as individual states’ education agencies. Knowing that dropping out is a process, schools and districts should act to develop policies and practices that identify at-risk learners in elementary school and intervene with support.

The educational community is well informed of the problems, and the resulting present environment and future consequences. The policy goals in this area should be to reduce the dropout rate, increase our public schools’ ability to keep kids engaged in learning, and enable students to use each stage of their education as a stepping stone to increased educational and professional opportunities. Holding graduation rates steady cannot be the policy goal. Given the information we have to make positive impacts in so many areas, this is unacceptable.

All too often in our public schools, at-risk students are seen as numbers that count toward meeting or failing to meet mandated Adequate Yearly Progress targets. Year after year, many of these students become negative statistics, which schools and states unfairly point to as the source of problems for the system as a whole. What we need to recognize is that this negative attention perpetuates the problem by stigmatizing the very students we should be doing everything in our power to help. What sets good programs and schools apart from the mediocre is their commitment to serving the needs of the individual. The exceptional programs are those that put people first, pay attention to the human element that is often lacking, and take the time needed to produce meaningful long-term results.

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