



NATIONAL CONFERENCE  
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# A Path to Graduation for Every Child

State Legislative Roles and Responsibilities





# A PATH TO GRADUATION FOR EVERY CHILD

## STATE LEGISLATIVE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

### A REPORT OF THE NCSL TASK FORCE ON SCHOOL DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY

By Sunny Deyé



NATIONAL CONFERENCE  
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- To promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures.
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## Summary of Task Force Recommendations

- Create and sustain urgency to improve high school graduation rates.
- Insist on high expectations and a rigorous curriculum for all students.
- Provide options and pathways to engage all students.
- Put excellent teachers, principals, and other caring adults in schools.
- Identify and support struggling students.
- Develop dropout recovery programs to reengage out-of-school youth.
- Build capacity to transform or replace low graduation-rate high schools.
- Conduct policy audits, eliminate counterproductive policies and provide incentives for collaboration.
- Hold schools and districts accountable for improving high school graduation rates.

## INTRODUCTION

The United States has a dropout crisis. While estimates of graduation rates vary substantially among the federal government and non-government organizations, the severity of the problem is clear.

- More than 25 percent of our students fail to complete high school in four years;<sup>1</sup> some estimates are as high as 34 percent.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2008, the status dropout rate (young people who are not enrolled in high school and who do not have a high school credential) was 4.4 percent for Asians, 4.8 percent for whites, 9.9 percent for blacks, 14.6 percent for American Indians, and 18.3 percent for Hispanics.<sup>3</sup>
- In 2008, high school students from low-income families (the lowest 20 percent) were seven times more likely to drop out than students from high-income families.<sup>4</sup>

The nation needs today's school-age children to fill the jobs of tomorrow—jobs that require more skills and education than ever before. Our states and communities bear the brunt of students' dropping out through costs to society, diminished quality of life, and—most important—the loss of productive, engaged citizens. State legislators cannot solve this problem alone, but it cannot be solved without state legislative action. We must take responsibility for improving the education experience of all children so they graduate ready for success in college, work and life.

This is not a problem that can be ignored until state economies improve. In fact, high school success is the key to improvement. The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that, if the students who dropped out of the class of 2009 had graduated, the nation's economy would have benefited from nearly \$335 billion in additional income during



the course of their lifetimes. And that's only for one year! In fact, if the current pattern is allowed to continue, more than 12 million students will drop out of school during the next decade at a cost to the nation of more than \$3 trillion.<sup>5</sup> Improving high school graduation rates—and helping all kids navigate a path to success in college, careers and beyond—is urgent. The status quo is affecting our ability to serve our students, grow our economies, and succeed as a nation.

This problem will not be resolved unless state legislators take a leadership role. Because education is a state problem, it requires state solutions. This is not to say that we should just add new programs or allocate more money to dropout prevention and recovery; rather, we can coordinate, support and build programs and policies that provide effective solutions.

The good news is that we know what works; the task force heard about best practices throughout our deliberations. We must shift the paradigm of low expectations for high schools, in which some students are college-bound, some barely meet graduation requirements, and the rest leave without graduating. Today's expectation is that ALL students graduate from high school ready for success in college and careers. Graduating every child means graduating EVERY child. We must put into place the policies and practices that ensure every child has a fair opportunity to succeed in school and life.

### NCSL Task Force on School Dropout Prevention and Recovery

This report, written by state legislators for state legislators, is a call to action. During the past 18

months, the National Conference of State Legislatures Task Force on School Dropout Prevention and Recovery has studied and debated the issues of high school dropout prevention and recovery, the education challenges facing our states and nation, and the role of state legislatures in helping all students navigate a path to success. Appointed in 2009, the bipartisan task force is comprised of 14 legislators—seven Republicans and seven Democrats—all veteran members and leaders of education and youth policy in their state legislatures.

The NCSL Task Force on School Dropout Prevention and Recovery met five times and heard from the nation's premiere experts on dropout prevention. As a group, we feel it is critical that state legislators be leaders on the issue of dropout prevention and recovery. This report discusses what we learned about why kids drop out. It includes key policy recommendations we believe state legislatures can use to further state strategies around these issues, and to ensure that they are used effectively.



# 1. EFFECTS OF THE DROPOUT CRISIS ON STATES

Throughout their deliberations, task force members were particularly struck by the following findings.

**It is predicted that the next generation of young people in this country will be less educated than the current generation, yet workforce demands are higher than ever.**

As America's current generation of highly educated workers retire, it is expected that the educational level of the younger generation of Americans will not approach their parents' level of education.<sup>6</sup> While America's high school graduation rates have remained steady for 40 years (Figure 1),<sup>7</sup> the education required for success in life has increased significantly. A high school diploma no longer is sufficient; in fact, 63 percent of the jobs in the next decade will require postsecondary education and beyond (Figure 2).<sup>8</sup>

**We are finally "getting real" about our high school graduation rates, and we have some very real challenges.**

In the last decade, we have learned that state and federal estimates of high school graduation rates were inflated; where we thought approximately 85 percent of students were graduating from public high schools in four years, we now know that the figure is closer to 74 percent (Figure 3).<sup>9</sup> Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students drop out of school at disproportionately higher rates than white and Asian students (Figure 4).<sup>10</sup> Beginning with the 2010-2011 school year, all states will be required to report to the federal government exactly how many students graduate on time with a regular diploma using the same criteria. State legislatures can use this opportunity to increase the dialogue and establish urgency for improving high school graduation rates.

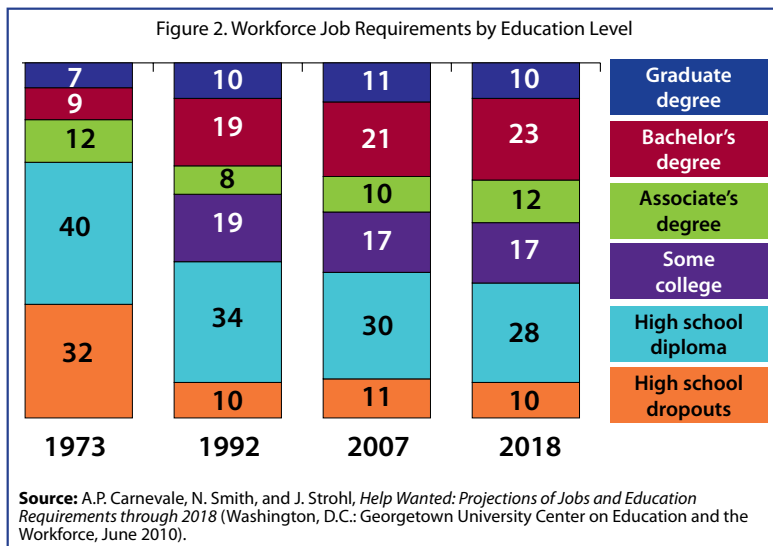
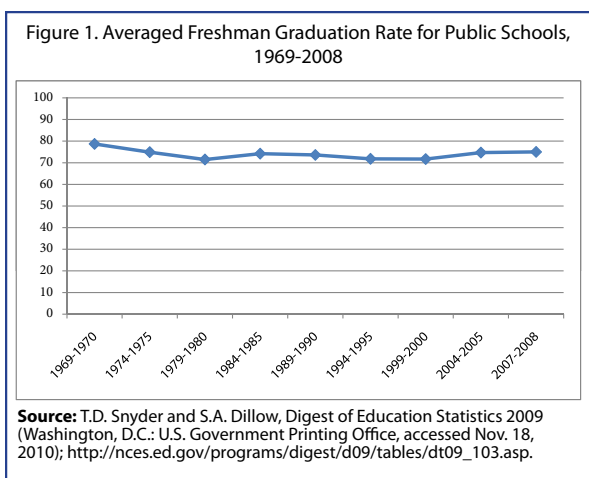
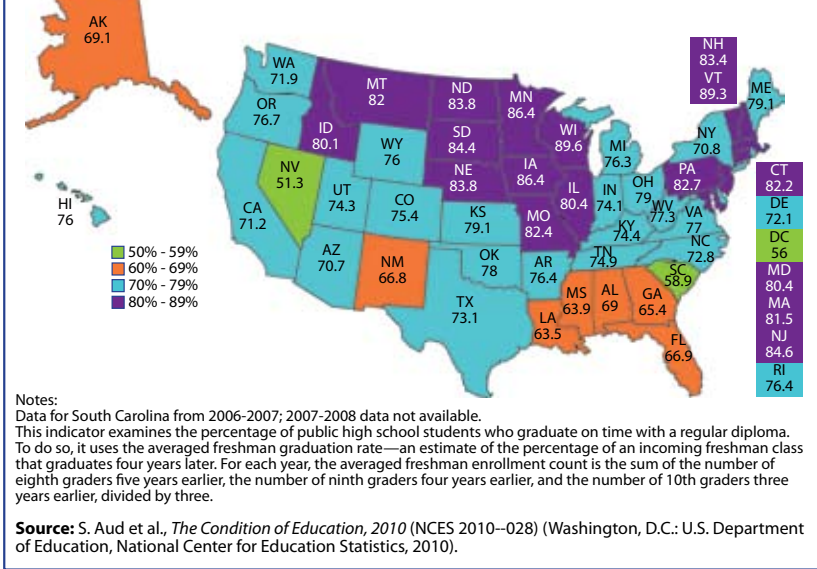


Figure 3. Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate of Public High School Students by State, School Year 2007-2008



**We must dramatically increase high school graduation rates to improve state economies.**

The costs of dropping out are high—to the student, to the community and to the nation. Between 1973 and 2008, the share of jobs in the U.S. economy that required postsecondary education increased from 28 percent to 59 percent. During the next decade, that number will increase to 63 percent.<sup>11</sup> The future is grim for students who do not earn a high school diploma. In the current economic climate, students without diplomas are unemployed at three times the rate of students with college degrees (Figure 5).<sup>12</sup> Allowing students to drop out of school is a drain on state economies. A state is less attractive to new business investments when its workforce is poorly educated. State budgets are challenged by increased public health costs, higher crime rates, and increased welfare costs for each high school dropout. Most significantly, states face lost tax revenues because dropouts earn significantly less than high school graduates (Figure 6).

Figure 4. Status Dropout Rates of 16- through 24-year-olds in Civilian, Noninstitutionalized Population by Race/Ethnicity, 2008

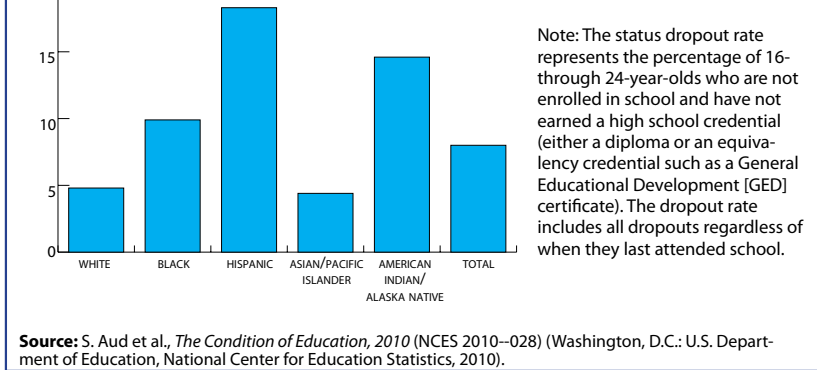


Figure 5. Unemployment Rates by Education Level

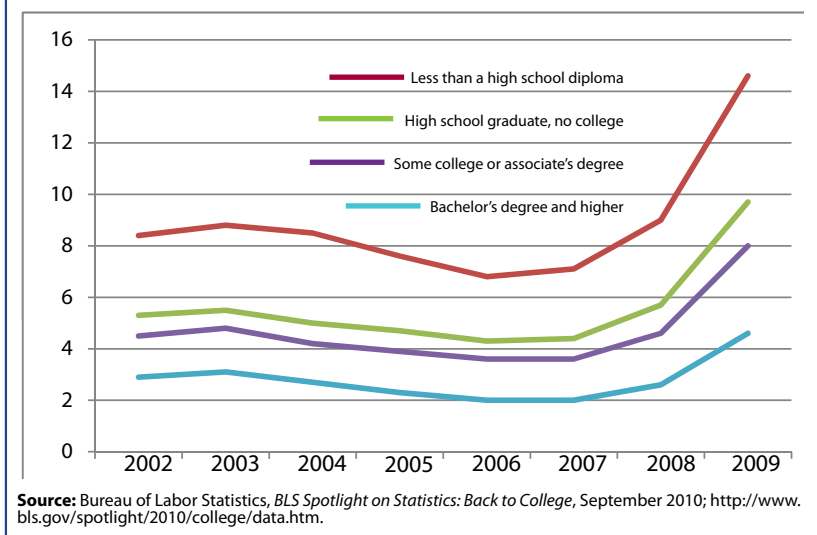
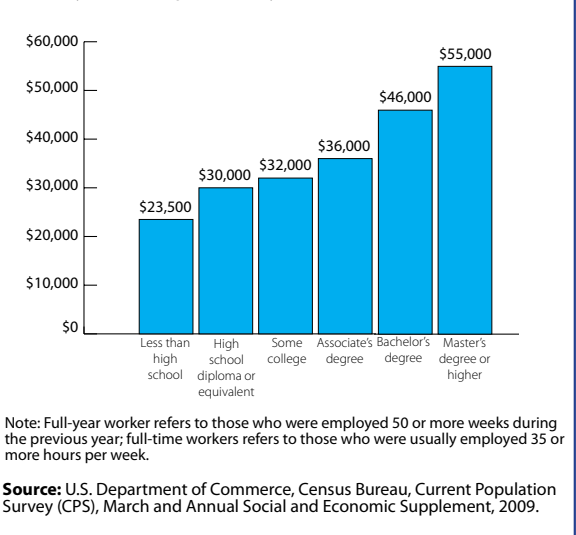


Figure 6. Median Annual Earnings of Full-Time, Full-Year Wage and Salary Workers Ages 25-34 by Educational Attainment, 2008



## 2. UNDERSTANDING WHY KIDS DROP OUT

The reasons kids drop out of school are as diverse as the kids themselves. Understanding when and why students drop out is critical to developing the state policy options that will best serve our students.

For most students, dropping out is not a singular act but, rather, a long process of disengagement that can begin as early as elementary school.<sup>13</sup> Researchers at the Everyone Graduates Center and Civic Enterprises have identified four main reasons why students drop out.<sup>14</sup>

- Life Events:** Students drop out because of an event or a need outside of school. The most frequent reasons are pregnancy, incarceration or out-of-home placement in the juvenile justice system, health problems, aging out of foster care, caring for an ill family member, or needing to work to support themselves or family members.
- Fade Outs:** Students drop out because they no longer see the point of staying in school. These students often have decent grades and attendance records but at some point become bored, frustrated or disillusioned with school and believe they can make it in life on their own without a high school diploma.
- Push Outs:** Some students may be viewed as behavioral problems or low achievers, and/or they seldom attend school. Once they reach the legal dropout age, their schools sometimes apply administrative rules—related to suspensions, inadequate credits earned by a certain age, or chronic absenteeism—to remove them from school or transfer them to another school.
- Failure to Succeed in School:** Students drop out of school because they do not pass enough

### Perspectives of High School Dropouts

A national poll of 16- to 25-year-olds asking why they dropped out of high school uncovered some surprises.

#### Why do students drop out?

Classes aren't interesting or relevant to future	47%
Missed too many days of school and couldn't catch up	43%
Too much freedom and not enough rules	38%
Was failing in school	35%
Wanted a job to make money	32%

#### What was the high school experience like for dropouts?

Had passing grades	88%
Could have graduated if they had put forth the necessary effort	70%
Not motivated or inspired to work hard	69%
Would have worked harder if their high school had demanded more	66%

#### What do high school dropouts believe would keep kids in school?

Opportunities for real-world learning (internships, service learning, etc.)	81%
Teachers who keep classes interesting:	81%
Smaller classes with more individual instruction	75%
Better communication between parents and school	71%
Increased supervision at school to ensure students attend classes	70%

#### How do high school dropouts feel about their choice today?

Believe graduating from high school is important to success in life	81%
Would have stayed in school	74%
Hard to find a job without a diploma	47%

Source: John M. Bridgeland, John J. Dilulio Jr., and Karen Burke Morison, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts* (Washington, D.C.: Civic Enterprises, March 2006).



courses or earn enough credits to be promoted to the next grade. Many of these dropouts begin to fall off the path to graduation in the middle grades, where they begin to fail courses, frequently are absent, or misbehave. The key point for promotion or failure is from ninth to 10th grade. These students often have to repeat the entire ninth grade and, without any supports, do no better the second time. At some point after repeated attempts to succeed (although often with decreasing effort), they

believe they will never succeed in school, so they drop out.

Yet, kids do not plan to drop out from high school; in fact, the July 2010 Gallup / America's Promise Student Poll, a survey of youth ages 10 to 18 in households from the nationally representative Gallup Panel, indicates that 92 percent of students believe they will graduate from high school.<sup>15</sup> This represents an 18 percent gap between the number of students who believe they will graduate and those who actually do.

### 3. TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

The state legislature plays a critical role in raising public awareness about the dropout problem; setting expectations for schools and districts and holding them accountable; and providing the data infrastructure to help schools and districts identify and support struggling students. The following recommendations identify how legislators can be most effective in dropout prevention and recovery efforts.

#### Create and sustain urgency to improve high school graduation rates

Legislatures can make it a state priority to improve high school graduation rates. Legislatures cannot do this alone, however. We must help organize and participate in powerful partnerships among key stakeholders, including legislators, governors, superintendents, state boards of education, educators, community-based organizations, parents, and business leaders. These stakeholders each play a critical role in developing the many options and solutions necessary to help all kids navigate a path to graduation and beyond.

Creating or participating in a statewide task force, advisory board, commission, office or other entity that can take a long-term view of the state dropout problem indicates bipartisan support, brings statewide visibility to the dropout problem, and raises awareness among the media and constituents. When legislators establish or participate in such a process, we send the message that improving dropout rates is a state legislative priority and that stakeholders have allies in the legislature who can codify their efforts in statute.

States need to set ambitious goals for improving high school graduation rates, and legislatures are well-positioned to ensure that state goals are understood by the public; that progress is accounted for and recognized; and that incentives and resources are available to help schools and districts meet state goals. Publicizing the goal and state progress will help inform citizens, parents and students about the costs and consequences of dropping out, and the many options available to keep kids on the path to graduation.

#### Task Force Recommendations

- Create and sustain urgency to improve high school graduation rates.
- Insist on high expectations and a rigorous curriculum for all students.
- Provide options and pathways to engage all students.
- Put excellent teachers, principals, and other caring adults in schools.
- Identify and support struggling students.
- Develop dropout recovery programs to reengage out-of-school youth.
- Build capacity to transform or replace low graduation-rate high schools.
- Conduct policy audits, eliminate counterproductive policies and provide incentives for collaboration.
- Hold schools and districts accountable for improving high school graduation rates.

## Key messages

- \* Raise awareness with powerful partnerships that include legislators, governors, superintendents, state boards of education, educators, community-based organizations, parents and business leaders.
- \* Create or participate in a statewide task force, advisory board, commission, office or other entity that can take a long-term view of the state dropout problem.
- \* Ensure that the state goals are understood by the public; that progress is accounted for and recognized; and that incentives and resources are available to help schools and districts meet state goals.

## State Examples



**Arkansas HB 1956 (2009)** creates the Arkansas Project Graduation Commission to investigate high school dropout prevention strategies; analyze the relationship between high school graduation rates and the state's economy; and recommend strategies that will increase the overall high school graduation rate by helping parents, schools and students identify academic warning signs of dropout.

**California SB 651 (2009)** requires the superintendent of public instruction to submit an annual report on dropouts in the state. Requires, among other things, that the report contain specific information on dropout rates, graduation rates, pupil promotion rates, course enrollment patterns and behavioral data and to make the contents available on a website.

**Colorado HB 1243 (2009)** creates the Office of Dropout Prevention and Student Reengagement in the State Department of Education to analyze student data pertaining to dropout, graduation and completion rates; truancy, suspension and expulsion rates; and safety and discipline incidences. The office coordinates activities and initiatives across the Department of Education, state agencies and community organizations; identifies and assists high-priority and priority local education agencies; identifies and recommends best practices, effective strategies and policies; and secures resources to develop and manage a dropout prevention and student reengagement grant program.

**Mississippi SB 2602 (2006)** creates the Office of Dropout Prevention within the State Department of Education to administer a statewide dropout prevention program and the Office of Compulsory School Attendance Enforcement. Requires each school district to implement a dropout prevention program approved by the Office of Dropout Prevention by the 2008-2009 school year. States the intent of the Legislature that, through the statewide dropout prevention program and the dropout prevention programs implemented by each school district, the graduation rate for cohort classes will be increased to not less than 85 percent by the 2018-2019 school year.

## Insist on high expectations and a rigorous curriculum for all students

The task force believes holding high expectations for all students is one of the most important messages we, as state policymakers, can send.

Many states recently have attempted to increase the rigor of the high school curriculum by increasing course requirements for graduation. Twenty states now require all students to complete a college- and career-ready curriculum, with the goal of preparing graduates for success in college and the workplace. Of these, 14 require students to automatically enroll in the “default” college- and career-ready curriculum but allow them to opt out of the requirements if their parents sign a waiver. The remaining six states with mandatory course requirements have no opt-out provision.<sup>16</sup>

Much remains to be learned about how increasing graduation requirements affects dropout rates. In the San Jose (Calif.) Unified School District, implementation of a required rigorous curriculum—in conjunction with an intensive network of support for struggling students—had positive results. More students earned advanced placement and International Baccalaureate credits; the achievement gap narrowed between white and Latino students; and grades and graduation rates remained steady.<sup>17</sup> In Chicago, a rigorous college prepara-



tory coursework requirement reduced inequities in coursework by entering skill level, race and ethnicity, but also produced a decline in graduation and college-going rates.<sup>18</sup> These studies suggest that raising high school graduation requirements is not enough. States must establish a variety of options—including relevant, rigorous career and technical education programs and online courses—that challenge students to meet high expectations while providing strong networks of support for struggling students.

In their efforts to improve high school students’ readiness for college and careers, several states have recently begun the challenging task of incorporating college and career readiness standards into their entire K-12 system by developing goals, objectives, strategies, indicators and benchmarks for prekindergarten through grade 12 and beyond.

### *Key messages*

- \* We get what we expect.
- \* Hold high expectations for all students.
- \* High expectations need to start early and be consistent.
- \* Raise expectations while providing intensive support for struggling students.

## State Examples



**Colorado SB 212 (2008)**, the Preschool to Postsecondary Education Alignment Act, ensures that a student who enters school ready to succeed and achieves the required level of proficiency on standards as he or she progresses through elementary and secondary education will have achieved postsecondary and workforce readiness upon graduation from high school. It requires collaboration among various state education agencies to create a seamless system of public education standards, expectations and assessments.

**West Virginia SB 595 (2008)** creates the statewide Vision 2020: An Education Blueprint for Two Thousand Twenty. Vision 2020 sets forth the premise that an educational system in the 21st century should be viewed as a continuum from prekindergarten through postsecondary education. It includes goals, objectives, strategies, indicators and benchmarks for prekindergarten through grade 12, postsecondary education and workforce investment initiatives. Vision 2020 prioritizes a rigorous 21st century curriculum and engaging instruction for all students.

**Texas HB 1 (2006)** (Third Called Session of the 79th Legislature) directs the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and its K-12 counterpart, the Texas Education Agency, to collaboratively:

- Recommend college readiness standards and expectations that address what students must know and be competent in to succeed in entry-level courses offered at institutions of higher education;
- Evaluate whether the state high school curriculum requirements prepare students to successfully perform college-level course work;
- Recommend how public school curriculum requirements can be aligned with college readiness standards and expectations;
- Develop instructional strategies for teaching courses to prepare students to successfully perform college-level course work; and
- Establish minimum standards for curricula, professional development materials and online support materials in English language arts, mathematics, science and social studies that are designed for students who need additional help to prepare to successfully perform college-level course work.

## Provide options and pathways to engage all students

Student motivation and engagement are key to reducing dropouts. States should offer a variety of options and pathways to high school graduation that are designed to engage students in relevant, interesting learning opportunities that make connections to life after high school.

Various relevant options for high school graduation allow students to achieve academic proficiency within programs designed to spark their interest and keep them engaged. These include quality career and technical education programs, college-level learning opportunities, and online courses that can provide specialized instruction and catch up courses. There are many examples of promising programs<sup>19</sup> but not one that works for all. States must determine where options are lacking and continue to build on current programs.

A limited body of research indicates, for example, that students who participate in high-quality career and technical education programs are less likely to drop out of high school, more likely to improve their test scores, have increased earning power in the workforce, and are more likely to pursue postsecondary education.<sup>20</sup> Career and technical education can engage students who have various learning styles in hands-on, practical ways. Among the skills students gain are problem solving, teamwork and management. The most successful career and technical education programs

are integrated with rigorous academic instruction and aligned with industry certification.<sup>21</sup>

Offering high-quality, college-level learning opportunities in high school can increase the academic quality and rigor of high school classes, lower the need for postsecondary remediation, reduce the high school dropout rate, reduce student costs of attending postsecondary institutions, and prepare young people to succeed in college.<sup>22</sup> Dual enrollment often is used by states to provide college-level opportunities for high school students. Courses can be offered on the high school or college campus or both. In comprehensive programs, students pay little or no tuition or fees, receive both high school and college credit, and can enroll in a wide selection of courses. Research indicates that students who start dual enrollment programs are less likely to drop out of high school, even if they are considered to be at risk, and are more likely to continue their college education at a postsecondary institution and graduate with a degree.<sup>23</sup>

Online learning options can ensure access to quality required and specialized courses—including advanced placement and foreign language courses—that schools cannot or do not provide. This is particularly useful in small or rural schools, where it may be difficult to retain teachers or where it may not be cost effective to offer a course to only a few students. Online options are increasingly available to provide low-cost alternatives that can help struggling students catch up on coursework.

### *Key messages*

- \* States must provide options and pathways to engage and motivate all students.
- \* Alternative structures should be made available, including career and technical education opportunities, dual enrollment, internships and online learning options.
- \* Options must be rigorous, high-quality and designed to help students achieve academic proficiency.

## State Examples



**Arizona HB 2731 (2010)** creates the Grand Canyon Diploma, offered to any student demonstrating readiness for college level mathematics and English and who has passing grades in required approved board exams in core academic courses. Students pursuing a Grand Canyon Diploma may enroll the following semester in an Arizona community college in courses offered on a community college campus, high school campus or both; remain in high school and enroll in additional advanced preparation board examination programs designed to prepare for admission to high quality postsecondary institutions; enroll in a full-time career and technical education program offered on a community college campus, a high school campus, a joint technological education district campus or any combination; or return to a traditional academic program without completing the next level of Board Examination System curriculum. Permits a Grand Canyon Diploma to be awarded to students by the end of grade 10, 11 or 12.

**Georgia HB 149 (2009)**, the Move on When Ready Act, provides a program for students in grades 11 and 12 to attend postsecondary colleges and schools for high school credit, notifies parents and students of the program, and sets requirements for course credit and testing.

**Montana HB 459 (2009)** creates the State Virtual Academy as a unit of the Montana university system to make distance learning opportunities available to all school-age children through public school districts in the state; offer high-quality licensed instructors and courses that emphasize core subject matters; offer advanced courses for dual credit in collaboration with the state university system; and offer enrichment courses.

**New Mexico SB 46 (2009)** allows qualified high school juniors and seniors who are at least age 16 to participate in industry-taught or -guided pre-apprenticeship programs in high school. Pre-apprenticeship programs established by local school districts will focus on student completion of courses that are counted toward high school graduation and acceptance into a paid apprenticeship program upon graduation, thereby increasing opportunities for well-paying careers in needed industries.

**New Mexico SB 31 (2008)** provides for dual credit courses to be offered in the summer term and expands dual credit opportunities through distance learning and other methods. The law also requires schools to inform students and parents about opportunities to participate in dual credit programs.

**Pennsylvania HB 1067 (2008)** establishes a Virtual High School Study Commission within the Pennsylvania Department of Education to examine the feasibility of and costs associated with creating a state-operated, internet-based high school. The Pennsylvania Virtual High School would provide secondary students statewide with:

- Expanded curriculum offerings such as higher level math and science, foreign language and advanced placement courses;
- SAT preparation programs;
- Summer enrichment and tutoring courses;
- Increased instructional options for at-risk, home-bound and alternative education students;

- Expanded offerings for gifted and talented students;
- Links with prospective employers, including those that offer high school internships and apprenticeships; and
- Opportunities for students who have dropped out or are at-risk of dropping out to earn a high school diploma.

**Washington SB 6377 (2008)** directs the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to produce a public awareness campaign to highlight high-quality career and technical education programs as a positive education pathway. The office must approve preparatory career and technical education programs that lead to industry certification or that allow students to earn dual high school and college credit and also must collaborate with the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, the Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Council of Presidents to develop career and technical education models in high-demand fields.

**Florida SB 1232 (2007)**, the Florida Career and Professional Education Act, requires school boards, local workforce boards and postsecondary institutions to develop a rigorous, relevant curriculum that leads to industry-recognized certification in high-demand careers, a high school diploma, and opportunities for high school students to simultaneously earn college credit.

**Indiana HB 1794 (2005)** creates the School Flex Program, where students in grades 11 and 12 can enroll in college or career and technical education programs or be employed and be counted as full-day students.





### Put excellent teachers, principals and other caring adults in schools

Students perform better when they are in schools where they have a personal relationship with a caring adult. States must find ways to connect students with excellent teachers, principals and other caring adults who can help them meet academic expectations, plan for their future, and feel connected to their schools. In addition to staff and community volunteers, teacher advisory programs or graduation coaches could be placed at each middle school and high school.

Teachers and principals have daily interactions with students and can greatly influence student success. In fact, teachers and principals are the two most important school-related factors influencing

student achievement, yet research indicates that high-quality teachers and principals are not equitably distributed throughout the nation's schools. Many states and local districts have attempted to use higher pay and other incentives to lure teachers and principals into hard-to-staff schools and subjects.<sup>24</sup> We encourage states to study and evaluate current policies on recruitment, selection, preparation, mentoring, professional development, evaluation, compensation, incentives, retention and working conditions to better refine policies to support effective teachers and principals.

A strong body of research indicates that personalized learning—where students have an opportunity to plan and prepare for life after high school and to understand how their school work is related to postsecondary and career goals—can help students stay in school and graduate. This planning process should begin before high school and include a clear review, monitoring and technical assistance process. According to the Education Commission of the States, at least 23 states and the District of Columbia require students to develop a long-term education plan through an individual graduation plan, career major, or other activity.<sup>25</sup> We encourage states to design programs and experiences that help students effectively plan for the future, including quality counseling and career and academic planning.

### *Key messages*

- \* Excellent teachers, principals and other caring adults can help students meet academic expectations, plan for their future, and feel connected to their schools.
- \* Students perform better when they are in schools where they have a personal relationship with a caring adult.
- \* Students need opportunities to plan and prepare for life after high school and to understand how their school work is related to postsecondary and career goals.

## State Examples



**Arkansas HB 1808 (2009)** requires that, beginning with the 2010-2011 school year, public middle schools administer EXPLORE to eighth-grade students, and public high schools administer PLAN or the PSAT to 10th-grade students so they can explore a broad range of options for their future and focus not only on high school coursework but also on post-high school choices.

**Colorado HB 1370 (2008)** creates the School Counselor Corps Grant Program to increase availability of effective school-based counseling; raise the graduation rate; and increase the number of students prepared for and applying to postsecondary education. The law requires annual reporting to the state legislature on effects of the program.

**New Mexico SB 561 (2007)** provides that, at the end of grades eight through 11, each student must prepare an interim next-step plan that sets forth the coursework for the grades remaining until high school graduation. Each year's plan must explain any differences from previous interim next-step plans and be signed by the student, the student's parent and the student's guidance counselor. Directs school boards to ensure that next-step plans are based on reports of college and workplace readiness assessments, as available, and to ensure that high school students are reasonably informed about curricular and course options, including honors or advanced placement courses; dual-credit courses; distance learning courses; career clusters; or remediation programs that the college and workplace readiness assessments indicate to be appropriate.

**Georgia HB 1027 (2006)** appropriates funds for a graduation coach in each of the state's public high schools whose primary responsibility is to identify at-risk students and help keep them on track academically before they consider dropping out. In 2007, the legislature expanded the program to include middle schools.

**South Carolina HB 3155 (2005)** requires career awareness counseling for students in sixth, seventh and eighth grades, allowing them to identify career interests and abilities. Eighth grade students select a preferred cluster of study and develop an individual graduation plan in preparation for high school. During high school, students receive guidance and curricula to help them successfully complete their individual graduation plans and focus on preparation for a seamless transition to relevant employment, further training or postsecondary study.

## Identify and support struggling students

The task force urges states to develop valid, robust data systems that can identify students who have histories of poor attendance, behavior problems, academic problems and grade retention and that allow for useful, timely data to be disseminated at the school level to principals, teachers and parents. States must ensure that interventions for struggling students are widely available, rigorously evaluated and rewarded for success.

Dropping out is not a singular act, but a long process that can begin as early as elementary school. Although many factors contribute to a student's decision to drop out, several school-based indicators should be included in state data systems and used to guide and support state, district and school dropout prevention and recovery efforts, as follows.

- Chronic absence—missing 10 percent or more of the school year—is a serious problem that states should be tracking beginning in kindergarten. Every year, one in 10 kindergarten and first grade students misses a month of school with excused and unexcused absences.<sup>26</sup> For lower-income children, who typically start kindergarten with fewer literacy skills than their more affluent peers, the early grades are a chance to catch up, particularly in reading, since much of the focus in the early grades is on literacy skills.<sup>27</sup> Since failure to read proficiently by the end of third grade is linked to higher dropout rates,<sup>28</sup> the early grades provide a critical opportunity to intervene. In most states, chronic absence of individual students is not tracked; instead, schools report an aggregate absence rate that masks high levels of individual student absence. We urge states to start dropout prevention early by focusing on tracking, analyzing and improving chronic absence of individual students in the early grades, before more serious problems develop.
- Absenteeism, behavior problems and student academic struggles in the middle grades are the next signals schools can track and act upon.<sup>29</sup> Known as the “ABCs of early intervention,” these include attendance (less than 80 percent to 90 percent school attendance); behavior (“unsatisfactory” behavior grade in a core course); and course performance (failing math or English/reading). Sixth-grade students with one or more of the indicators have only a 10 percent to 20 percent chance of graduating from high school on time. We urge states to ensure that useful, timely data on absences, behavior and course performance be provided at the school level starting in the middle grades, so incoming students can be quickly identified and provided with additional supports and interventions to get back on track.
- Schools and districts have an additional opportunity to identify struggling students in the first year of high school, where two crucial indicators—school absences and grades—can be used to identify students who may need additional supports to graduate. Nearly 90 percent of freshmen in Chicago public schools who missed less than a week of school per semester graduated within four years; missing five to nine days a semester dropped the graduation rate to 63 percent. Also in Chicago public schools, 85 percent of students with no Fs in their freshman year graduated four years later, but only 70 percent of students with one F and only 55 percent of students with two Fs graduated in four years. Students with three or more Fs were not likely to graduate high school.<sup>30</sup>

Although early warning systems are critical, they must be complemented with an intense system of support for students who are identified as struggling. Interventions can include comprehensive coaching and academic supports for students who are below grade level in reading and math or who have insufficient credits to be promoted; supports that are designed to provide opportunities to build positive connections with peers and teach-

ers; and assistance with course selection, school performance and completion of graduation requirements. We encourage states to study how community-specific strategies and responses to populations such as teen parents, migrant students and English language learners can begin to mitigate the disproportionately high number of these students who are dropping out. State legislators can ensure that useful data are collected and that interventions are rigorously evaluated and rewarded for success.

## Key messages

- \* States must help schools and districts by developing systems that support the use of data to identify students with histories of poor attendance, behavior problems, academic problems and grade retention.
- \* States should start dropout prevention early by focusing on tracking, analyzing and improving chronic absence of individual students in the early grades.
- \* State legislators can ensure that interventions for struggling students are widely available, rigorously evaluated and rewarded for success.

## State Examples



**California SB 1357 (2010)** requires the Department of Education to include data on student absences in the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System; supports development of an early warning system to identify and support individual students who are at risk of academic failure or of dropping out of school; ensures that districts that report attendance data could obtain an early warning report, up to four times each school year, that identifies individual students who are likely to face difficulty on the path toward a diploma; and revises the Annual Report on Dropouts in California to include chronic absence rates.

**Alabama SB 334 (2009)** directs the State Department of Education to develop specific methods of targeted intervention for local public school systems that have a four-year graduation rate less than the percentage as determined by the State Board of Education. These interventions may include:

- Early intervention for students who fail Algebra I or any ninth grade reading or math class and have insufficient credits to be promoted;
- Alternative education programs designed to reengage dropouts, including dual enrollment courses at the community college level;
- Increased availability of advanced placement courses;
- Full course fee waivers for students enrolled in dual credit courses who are eligible for free or reduced lunches;
- Flexible programs for older students who currently are not enrolled;
- Comprehensive coaching for middle and high school students who are below grade level in reading and math or who are at risk due to poor attendance, behavior or safety issues, including, but not limited to, harassment and bullying;

- Teacher advisories and other supports that are designed to specifically address the needs of those students who are most at risk of dropping out of school by providing opportunities to build positive connections with peers and teachers and providing assistance with course selection, school performance and completion of graduation requirements; and
- Strategies that are specifically designed to improve high school graduation rates for those teenagers who are at the highest risk of dropping out, including, but not limited to, students in the foster care system, pregnant students, student parents, English as second language students, and students with special educational needs.

**Louisiana HB 1091 (2008)** provides for comprehensive coaching for middle school students who are below grade level in reading and math.

**Washington SB 6673 (2008)** creates the extended learning opportunities program for students in 11th and 12th grades who are not on track to meet local or state graduation requirements and for eighth grade students who may not be on track to meet the standard on the Washington assessment of student learning or who need additional assistance to successfully enter high school. Provisions include extended learning opportunities before or after the regular school day, on Saturday and beyond the regular school year.

**Texas HB 2237 (2007)** dedicates \$120 million to dropout prevention. Provisions of the legislation include:

- **Best Practice Studies.** Requires the commissioner of education to contract with one or more centers for education research to study the best practices of campuses and school districts in Texas and other states regarding dropout prevention programs and to provide a report that identifies high-performing and highly efficient dropout prevention programs; identifies the dropout prevention programs that have the most potential for success in Texas; and recommends legislation or other actions necessary to implement a dropout prevention program.
- **Grants for Schools and Districts.** Creates a pilot program to provide grants to school districts to fund student club activities for students at risk of dropping out of school. Creates a pilot program under which a school district or open enrollment charter school may receive a grant to implement a local collaborative dropout reduction program. Applying districts must collaborate with local businesses, other local governments or law enforcement agencies, nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, or institutions of higher education to deliver intervention services. For a program to be eligible, 50 percent of its participants must be students who are at risk of dropping out of school.
- **Funding for Innovative Programs.** Provides funds for intensive technology-based supplementary instruction in English, math, science or social studies for students in ninth through 12<sup>th</sup> grades who are identified as at risk of dropping out of school. Provides for creation of intensive summer programs to provide rigorous academic instruction for at least four weeks.

## Develop dropout recovery programs to reengage out-of-school youth

States must find ways to help students who have already dropped out of school earn a traditional high school diploma or an alternative credential. These policies offer a safety net, providing dropouts another chance to successfully graduate.

Research indicates that high school dropouts eventually want to earn a diploma and that they will work hard to do so. As adults, high school dropouts recognize the importance of a high school diploma. In a 2006 national poll of 16- to 25-year-old dropouts, the overwhelming majority of poll participants (81 percent) say as adults that graduating from high school is important to success in life. Three-fourths (74 percent) say that if they were able to relive the experience, they would have stayed in school, and 76 percent say they would definitely or probably re-enroll in a high school for people their age, if they could. Forty-seven percent say that not having a diploma makes it difficult to find a good job.<sup>31</sup> The most successful dropout recovery programs are flexible, link to postsecondary education and employment, and provide strong systems of student support.<sup>32</sup> Options include allowing flexibility in the numbers of hours per day or the number of days per week a student



attends classes; raising the maximum age at which a student is eligible for state funding to complete a high school diploma; and allowing credit for performance rather than seat time.

Innovative and flexible programs—including fast-track credit recovery programs; after school and summer learning programs; and online or virtual school programs—allow students to earn or recover credits in a different venue than the traditional classroom model. Students can demonstrate proficiency by taking end-of-course exams or other state assessments that are tied to state standards, allowing more flexibility in instruction, class format, and the time required to earn credits.

### *Key messages*

- \* High school dropouts eventually want to earn a diploma, and they will work hard to get it.
- \* Most students don't want to return to the same environment or situation they left.
- \* The most successful dropout recovery programs are flexible, link to postsecondary education and employment, and provide strong systems of student support.

## State Examples



**Washington HB 1418 (2010)** provides a statutory framework for a state-wide dropout reengagement system to provide education and services to older youth who have dropped out of school or are not expected to graduate from high school by age 21. Under the system, school districts are authorized to enter into model inter-local agreements with an educational service district, community or technical college, or other public entity to provide a dropout reengagement program for eligible students, or enter into a model contract with a community-based organization. Qualified dropout reengagement programs offer at least the following: academic instruction, including GED preparation, academic skills, and college and work readiness preparation, that generates high school credit for a diploma and has the goal of academic and work readiness; instruction by certified teachers or college instructors whose credentials are established by the college; case management, counseling, and resource and referral services; and opportunity for qualified students to enroll in college courses tuition-free if the program provider is a college.

**Illinois SB 1796 (2009)** establishes the Illinois Hope and Opportunity Pathways through Education Program to develop a comprehensive system to re-enroll more high school dropouts in programs that will enable them to earn their high school diploma, including year-round classes, summer school, evening courses and community college courses.

**Ohio SB 311 (2007)** requires the State Board of Education to adopt a plan that enables students to earn units of high school credit based on a demonstration of subject area competency, instead of or in combination with completing hours of classroom instruction.

**Texas HB 1137 (2007)** authorizes school districts to admit anyone who is at least age 21 and younger than age 26 who wants to complete the requirements for a high school diploma. State funding is available to cover costs of student attendance.

**Texas HB 1 (2006)** enacts the Optional Flexible School Day Program, providing an optional school day program for students in grades nine through 12 who are dropouts or at risk of dropping out. The law allows school districts flexibility in the numbers of hours per day or the number of days per week a student attends classes.

**Indiana HB 1347 (2006)** creates the Fast Track Program, in which community colleges and four-year institutions can offer a high school completion program to students age 19 or older and to students who have their high school's permission.

## Build capacity to transform or replace low graduation-rate high schools

States can aggressively target the relatively small number of high schools that graduate 60 percent or less of their incoming freshmen. We know which high schools produce many, if not most, of the dropouts in each state and we must build capacity and target resources so that they can be transformed or replaced.

A subset of high schools exists in the United States that graduates 60 percent or less—often much less—of the freshman class that entered four years earlier. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University have identified the almost 2,000 high schools—often referred to as “dropout factories”—concluding that they turn out approximately 51 percent of the nation’s dropouts. These high schools, located throughout the nation, are concentrated in about 50 large cities and 15 primarily southern and southwestern states. The schools serve many minority and low-income students and have fewer resources and less-qualified teachers than schools in more affluent neighborhoods with more white students. In fact, approximately 46 percent of the nation’s African American and 39 percent of its Latino students attend high schools in which graduation is not the norm, compared to only 11 percent of white students.<sup>33</sup>



In May 2010, Mass Insight Education and Research Institute (Mass Insight) released its report, *Enabling School Turnaround through State Policy*. It identified promising state practices for turning around low-performing schools in four areas: authority and autonomy, accountability, capacity and strategy. The report highlights groups of states that have passed comprehensive state legislation for turning around low-performing schools.<sup>34</sup> We encourage legislatures to identify low graduation-rate high schools and develop comprehensive state strategies to classify schools and districts based on performance, align and coordinate improvement efforts, and implement intensive interventions where needed. States should consider using proven comprehensive school reform models, such as those identified by the Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, the What Works Clearinghouse, and the American Youth Policy Forum.

### Key messages

- \* Transform or replace the schools that graduate 60 percent or less of incoming freshmen.
- \* Identify and target low graduation-rate high schools with comprehensive state strategies that classify schools and districts based on performance, align and coordinate improvement efforts, and implement intensive interventions where needed.
- \* Consider using proven comprehensive school reform models, such as those identified by the Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, the What Works Clearinghouse and the American Youth Policy Forum.

## State Examples



**Tennessee SB 7005a (2010)** creates the Achievement School District within the Department of Education. Authorizes the commissioner of education to contract with one or more individuals, governmental entities or nonprofit entities to manage the day-to-day operation of any or all schools or Local Education Agencies (LEAs) placed in the Achievement School District. Managers of schools in the Achievement School District are authorized to determine whether any teacher who was previously assigned to such school shall have the option of continuing to teach at that school as an employee of the managing entity; and can apply for a waiver of any state board rule that inhibits or hinders the school's or LEA's ability to achieve the required adequate yearly progress benchmarks. After a school or LEA that has been placed in the Achievement School District achieves the required adequate yearly progress benchmarks for two consecutive years, the commissioner must develop a transition plan for returning the school or LEA to the jurisdiction of the local board of education.

**Colorado SB 163 (2009)** assigns the state board of education the following duties with regard to accountability:

- Setting, reaffirming or revising statewide targets for measuring the performance of each school and district in the areas of student longitudinal academic growth, student achievement levels on the statewide assessments, postsecondary and workforce readiness, and progress made in closing the achievement and growth gaps;
- Removing a school district's accreditation if it remains at or below a certain accreditation category for five consecutive school years and directing the school district or the institute to take certain restructuring actions;
- Annually directing each public school in the state to adopt a performance, improvement, priority improvement or turnaround plan, based on the public school's performance; and
- Directing a school district to restructure one of its public schools if the school remains at a specified plan type or below for five consecutive school years.

Assigns to the commissioner of education and the department specified tasks with regard to accountability, including:

- Creating a state review panel to critically evaluate and provide recommendations concerning improvement, priority improvement or turnaround plans and making recommendations concerning removing accreditation and restructuring;
- Providing technical assistance and support; and
- Creating and maintaining an internet-based data delivery system for publishing performance reports; the accreditation category for each school district; the performance, improvement, priority improvement or turnaround plan for each public school and district; and supporting data.

**Michigan HB 4787 (2009)** provides for identification of the lowest achieving 5 percent of public schools and places them under the supervision of a state school reform/redesign officer:

- Requires the governing body of low-achieving schools to submit a redesign plan to the reform/redesign officer, implementing one of four school intervention models: the turnaround model, the restart model, the school closure model or the transformation model.

- Requires the plan to be drafted in consultation with the local teacher bargaining unit and the local superintendent. Once a plan is implemented, the school board must send regular monitoring reports to the state reform officer.
- Creates a single State School Reform/Redesign School District made up of all public schools whose redesign plans were disapproved, as well as all of those schools whose redesign plans were not achieving satisfactory results.
- Requires the state reform officer to report at least annually to the education standing committees of the Senate and House of Representatives on the progress being made in improving student proficiency due to these new measures.

**Mississippi SB 2628 (2009)** establishes a Mississippi Recovery School District within the State Department of Education. The Mississippi Recovery School District will provide leadership, management and oversight of all school districts that are subject to state conservatorship.

- Defines a failing district as a district that for two consecutive years fails to meet both the absolute student achievement standards and the rate of annual growth expectation standards as set by the State Board of Education. In setting the benchmarks for school districts, the State Board of Education may also take into account such factors as graduation rates, dropout rates, completion rates, and the extent to which the school or district employs qualified teachers in every classroom.
- A school district that has been designated as failing also must establish a community-based prekindergarten through higher education council comprised of a broad spectrum of community members, including economic developers, elected officials, civic leaders, business leaders, faith-based leaders, social services representatives, nonprofit organization representatives, school attendance officers, law enforcement officials, health department officials, day care providers, librarians, parents and others who have knowledge and resources that can be leveraged to build strong communities. The council will serve as a community-led group that is inclusive, accountable and required to publicly report progress to the entire community.

**Colorado SB 130 (2008)** enacts the Innovation Schools Act of 2008:

- Allows a public school or group of public schools to submit to its school district board of education an innovation plan to allow the school or group of schools to implement innovations, including, but not limited to, innovations in delivery of educational services, personnel administration and decision making, and budgeting. Allows a local board to create a plan in collaboration with one or more schools in the school district.
- Requires the local board of a district of innovation to review the performance of each innovation school or school within an innovation school zone every three years following approval of the plan to determine whether the school is achieving or making adequate progress toward achieving the academic performance results specified in the plan. Allows the local board to revise the plan in collaboration with the affected school, subject to the consent of specified personnel at the affected school.
- Allows a local board to revoke a plan and a school's innovation status or the designation of an innovation school zone if the affected school or schools do not improve at a sufficient rate.
- Requires the commissioner and the state board to report annually to the governor and the education committees of the General Assembly concerning implementation of the act and to post the report on the Department of Education's website.

## Conduct policy audits, eliminate counterproductive policies and provide incentives for collaboration

State legislators should conduct or request thorough reviews of policies currently in state statute to bring to light areas where disincentives and counterproductive policies may exist, and develop incentives and systems for several providers to share data and joint accountability for increasing high school graduation rates.

In many cases, schools and districts have policies that exacerbate the dropout problem by “pushing out” kids who are low-performing, who have behavior problems, or who are otherwise considered to be problem students. State legislatures should evaluate and closely monitor the effects of attendance, grade retention, grade promotion, discipline and suspension policies; over-promoting GEDs; and promoting alternative schools to all struggling students to determine whether they are used equitably and reasonably. Schools and districts should track, report and be held accountable for the number of students who are affected by each of these policies and whether they ultimately graduate.

State legislatures can request a review of student enrollment count mechanisms for use in school funding. Thirteen states use a single count date; districts receive all their funds based on that count, usually on or around October 1. This can create a disincentive for schools to retain all students after

that date, and also creates a lack of financial incentive to enroll out-of-school youth who try to reenroll after the count date. Several other approaches are being used in states, including multiple count dates, average daily attendance, average daily membership, a single count period, and multiple count periods.<sup>35</sup> We encourage states to review the advantages and disadvantages of each approach when considering changes to student enrollment count mechanisms.

Evidence suggests that raising the maximum compulsory school age above 16 curtails dropout rates and produces other positive results.<sup>36</sup> Until recently, most states permitted students to drop out of high school at age 16; now, 32 states have set their compulsory school age to 17 or 18.<sup>37</sup> States can make maximum compulsory school attendance requirements more meaningful by revoking work permits and driving privileges of students who drop out before the state-set minimum school-leaving age. States also can require that students who withdraw from school before graduation receive information not only about the economic consequences of dropping out, but also how they can complete their high school diploma after they do so.

With responsibility for education, health, social services, and juvenile justice policies and budgets, state legislators can develop incentives and systems for several providers to share data and joint accountability for increasing high school graduation rates. State accountability measures—including cooperative agreements, formal data sharing, and flexible funding formulas—can encourage these often separately functioning state agencies to work together to help all children served by more than a single agency graduate from high school. Community-based organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys & Girls Clubs, City Year and Communities in Schools also play critical roles in addressing the academic, social, emotional and physical factors that influence student success in school. States can support their efforts to tackle the dropout crisis by supporting collaboration among providers, allowing greater flexibility in funding, reducing barriers to coordination, and supporting the role of intermediaries that help match students with programs and providers.<sup>38</sup>

### Key messages

- \* In many cases, existing school and district policies exacerbate the dropout problem by pushing out kids who are low-performing; who have behavior problems; or who are otherwise considered to be problem students.
- \* States should review district and state policies to ensure that they create incentives for retaining students and reenrolling out-of-school youth.
- \* Legislators can develop incentives and systems for various providers to work together and share data and joint accountability for increasing high school graduation rates.

## State Examples



**Colorado SB 8 (2010)** requires the Department of Education to conduct a study to evaluate the feasibility, local education provider impact, and design of a system to allow calculation of a district's pupil enrollment based on the average number of days a pupil is enrolled in the district during the school year rather than based on a single count date.

**Maine LD 1703 (2010)** directs the Department of Corrections, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education to together develop a plan that identifies an ongoing mechanism for providing flexible funding for youth who are served by several state agencies.

**Alabama SB 334 (2009)** raises the compulsory school attendance age from 16 to 17. A child over age 17 may withdraw from public school prior to graduation only if written consent is granted by the child's parent or legal guardian and an exit interview is conducted where the student and the student's parent or legal guardian have been advised that withdrawal from school shall likely reduce the student's future earning potential and increase the likelihood that he or she will be unemployed in the future.

**Florida SB 1540 (2009)** discourages schools from arresting students for minor offenses such as classroom disruption and fighting; requires that schools take the particular circumstances of the student's misconduct into account before issuing punishment; and encourages schools to use alternatives to expulsion or referral to law enforcement unless the use of such alternatives poses a threat to school safety.

**Indiana HB 1419 (2009)** requires the governing body of a school corporation to develop a plan for improving student behavior and discipline that incorporates a graduated system of discipline; it is to include actions that may be taken in lieu of suspension or expulsion. Requires working with parents to develop a plan to improve student behavior.

**Louisiana HB 1091 (2008)** limits the circumstances under which students can withdraw from school, provides for collecting and reporting related data, requires an exit interview, provides that information about training and employment opportunity programs be available, and relates to parental consent for withdrawal from school before graduation.

**New Hampshire SB 18 (2007)** raises from 16 to 18 the age of required attendance of children in school.

**Indiana HB 1794 (2005) and HB 1347 (2006)** include consequences for dropouts and incentives for schools to keep them. Students younger than age 18 can drop out of high school only for financial or health reasons or with permission of a judge; potential dropouts must participate in an exit interview with their parents and the principal to discuss the economic consequences of dropping out and how they can finish their high school diploma after they do so.

## Hold schools and districts accountable for improving high school graduation rates

Legislatures should force a debate on state data and accountability systems by setting aggressive goals and annual growth rate targets for graduation rate improvements; examining and refining definitions related to graduation rate accountability; and including a process for reporting to state legislatures on progress.

In 2008, the federal government released regulations requiring that the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate be used for both reporting and accountability. States are required to set long-term goals for graduation rates and annual growth targets that demonstrate “continuous and substantial improvement” from the previous year. For a school or district to make Adequate Yearly Progress, it must meet the states’ goals for proficiency on state tests and graduation rates. Because decisions about specific long-term goals and annual growth targets are left to the states, it is our responsibility to set aggressive goals for improving high school graduation rates and count them heavily in our state accountability systems.

States must examine and refine definitions related to graduation rate accountability so that schools

and districts are rewarded for improving overall graduation rates; improving graduation rates for subgroups of students; and keeping kids in school through graduation. This includes examining who is included in a four-year cohort and who may be excluded, including how cohorts are defined and verified; examining how exit codes are used in schools and districts so that dropouts cannot be counted as transfers; examining the effectiveness of the GED versus a high school diploma; and examining the use of five- and six-year graduation rates to encourage schools to keep kids through graduation. State legislatures should request regular updates on progress and legislative action needed to improve graduation rate accountability.

In addition to a four-year rate, federal regulations also allow states to use an additional “extended-year” graduation rate that measures how many students graduate in more than four years. States should consider adding five- and six-year graduation rates for use in school accountability systems and funding formulas. The additional rates provide flexibility and financial incentives that can encourage schools and districts to help more students graduate, even when they take longer than the traditional four years.

### *Key messages*

- \* States must set aggressive goals and annual growth rate targets for improving high school graduation rates.
- \* State accountability systems should reward schools and districts for improving overall graduation rates; improving graduation rates for subgroups of students; and keeping kids in school through graduation.
- \* States can add five- and six-year graduation rates to the four-year graduation rates for use in school accountability systems and funding formulas.

## State Examples



**North Carolina SB 1246 (2010)** directs the State Board of Education to develop a growth model establishing annual goals for continuous and substantial improvement in the four-year cohort graduation rate by local school administrative units. Establishes as a short-term goal that local school administrative units meet the annual growth model goals beginning with the graduating class of 2011 and continuing annually thereafter. Establishes as long-term minimum goals statewide four-year cohort graduation rates of 74 percent by 2014; 80 percent by 2016; and 90 percent by 2018. Establishes as a long-term goal with benchmarks and recommendations to reach a statewide four-year cohort graduation rate of 100 percent.

**California SB 1251 (2008)** adds five- and six-year graduation rates to the state Academic Performance Index of schools, allowing schools to receive half credit for pupils graduating in five years, and one-quarter credit for pupils graduating in six years, compared to full credit for pupils graduating in four years.

**Florida SB 1908 (2008)** expands Florida's school grading system so that, beginning with the 2009-2010 school year, 50 percent of a high school's grade is based on the following factors:

- The high school graduation rate of the school;
- The performance and participation of the school's students in College Board Advanced Placement courses, International Baccalaureate courses, dual enrollment courses, and Advanced International Certificate of Education courses; and the students' achievement of industry certification in a career and professional academy;
- Postsecondary readiness of the school's students as measured by the SAT, ACT or the common placement test;
- The high school graduation rate of at-risk students;
- The performance of the school's students on statewide standardized end-of-course assessments; and
- The growth or decline in the above components from year to year.

## 4. CALL TO ACTION

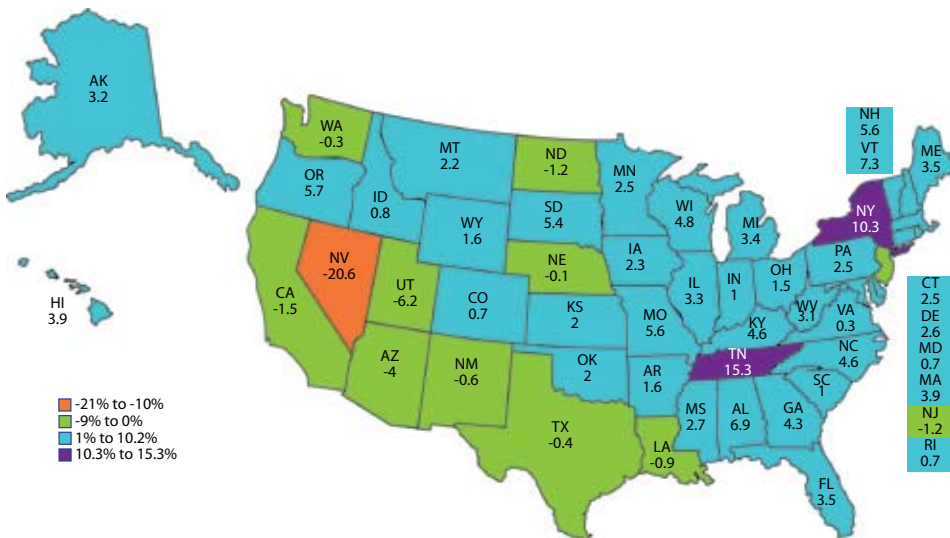
The costs of dropping out are high—to the student; to the states; and to the nation. For students who do not earn their high school diploma, the future is grim. We no longer live in a society where high school dropouts can earn a living wage. Not only do dropouts see a significant decrease in earning power and workforce opportunities, but they also are far more likely to spend their lives periodically unemployed, on government assistance, or cycling in and out of the prison system.<sup>39</sup> Each high school dropout is a loss to our states and communities through costs to society, diminished quality of life, and—most importantly—loss of productive, engaged citizens.

The current economic crisis offers an opportunity to act. The economic downturn has wreaked havoc on state budgets, forcing difficult choices and driving important conversations about state economic priorities, responsibilities and accountability. The current crisis in state budgets is expected to continue for several more years. It provides an opportunity to pare duplicate services; hold agencies accountable for improving results; and find new ways to collaborate, share information, and ensure that state policy environments provide incentives for improving high school graduation rates.

State legislators must be leaders in dropout prevention and recovery and set the expectation that all students will successfully graduate from high school ready for success in college, careers and life. The time is now—we cannot wait until the current economic crisis subsides. We must take advantage of this opportunity to reexamine our expectations, policies and processes to ensure that schools and districts have every incentive and opportunity to help kids navigate a path to graduation and beyond.

This is our responsibility and thus our call to action: We must ensure that graduating every child means graduating every child. The clock is ticking for our children, our states and our nation.

Figure 7. Percentage Change in Graduation Rates, 2001-2002 to 2007-2008, by State



Note: Data for South Carolina from 2006-2007; 2007-2008 data not available.

Source: U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, *Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 1972-2008 Compendium Report* (December 2010); Chris Chapman, National Center for Education Statistics; Jennifer Laird, MPR Associates Inc.; Angelina KewalRamani, Education Statistics Services Institute American Institutes for Research.



## States Making Great Gains

The education recommendations, policy guidelines and legislation that state lawmakers have put in place during the past decade are playing a vital role in decreasing the number of students who drop out of high school in Tennessee and Alabama.

A new report shows positive signs that states are making progress in reducing the number of students who drop out of high school. The report—released in November 2010 by the America’s Promise Alliance, Civic Enterprises and Johns Hopkins University’s Everyone Graduates Center—highlights successful case studies in Tennessee and Alabama. It acknowledges the role of state legislators in creating policy environments that have helped increase high school graduation rates, including strong leadership with clear graduation rate goals; collaboration among many sectors that is guided by data; commitment to innovation and continuous improvement; technical assistance for evidence-based solutions; and high expectations, better policies and more support for students.

**Tennessee:** From 2002 to 2008, Tennessee led the nation in increasing its high school graduation rate from just under 60 percent to 75 percent. Researchers credit a statewide approach that included collaboration and coordination among stakeholders; setting clear and high statewide expectations; effectively using data to improve teaching and learning; and improving technical assistance to struggling schools.

**Alabama:** Between 2002 and 2008, Alabama’s high school graduation rate increased from 62 percent to 69 percent. Researchers credit leadership from state policymakers that made dropout prevention and increased graduation rates a statewide priority; set clear and high statewide expectations and standards for students; built capacity for comprehensive school improvement, including state-sponsored professional development and training; and provided intensive supports to students to finish high school.

**Source:** Robert Balfanz, John M. Bridgeland, Laura A. Moore and Joanna Hornig Fox, *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic* (Washington, D.C.: Civic Enterprises, Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University and America’s Promise Alliance, November 2010); <http://www.every1graduates.org/gradnation.html>.

## WEB RESOURCES

Alliance for Excellent Education  
[www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org)

American Youth Policy Forum  
[www.aypf.org](http://www.aypf.org)

America's Promise Alliance  
[www.americaspromise.org](http://www.americaspromise.org)

Attendance Works  
[www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org)

California Dropout Research Project  
[www.cdrp.ucsb.edu](http://www.cdrp.ucsb.edu)

Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center  
[www.csrq.org](http://www.csrq.org)

Education Trust  
[www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org)

Everyone Graduates Center  
[www.every1graduates.org](http://www.every1graduates.org)

Forum for Youth Investment  
[www.forumforyouthinvestment.org](http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org)

International Association for K-12  
Online Learning  
[www.inacol.org](http://www.inacol.org)

National Conference of State Legislatures  
[www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org)

National Middle School Association  
[www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org)

Ready by 21  
[www.readyby21.org](http://www.readyby21.org)

What Works Clearinghouse  
[www.whatworks.ed.gov](http://www.whatworks.ed.gov)

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# A Path to Graduation for Every Child

## State Legislative Roles and Responsibilities

The costs of dropping out are high—to the student, to the states and to the nation. Each high school dropout represents a loss to our states and communities through costs to society, diminished quality of life; and, most important, loss of productive, engaged citizens.

This report represents 18 months of deliberation by the NCSL Task Force on School Dropout Prevention and Recovery. Appointed in 2009, the bipartisan task force is comprised of seven Democrat and seven Republican legislators, all of whom are veteran members and leaders of education and youth policy in their state legislatures.

Unanimous findings urge a call to action for state legislatures to be leaders on the issue of dropout prevention and recovery. The report offers key policy recommendations for dropout prevention and recovery efforts, so that all children have a path to high school graduation and are prepared for success in college, work and life.



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