



IMPROVING AMERICA'S SECONDARY SCHOOLS

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE U.S. SENATE
HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND PENSIONS
COMMITTEE**

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Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Senator Enzi, and the honorable members of the U.S. Senate HELP Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. I commend the committee for its hard work during the 111th Congress on behalf of the American people and now as you move forward on the reauthorization of a critical piece of American domestic policy, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

I speak to you from two perspectives:

First, I speak from a body of work: As director of education policy at Jobs for the Future, I work closely with the program staff in Boston and our partnerships in over 200 communities in 41 states to cultivate and promote innovative education and workforce strategies. Jobs for the Future identifies, develops, and promotes new approaches that are helping communities, states, and the nation compete more effectively in a global economy. Our work improves the pathways from high school to college to family-sustaining careers. The JFF mission is to double the number of youth and adults who attain the credentials and skills needed to be competitive in today's labor market.

Second, I speak from personal experience: Fourteen years ago, in 1996, I was a senior and student body president at Hamilton High School in rural northwest Alabama. My alma mater is one of the 2000 low-graduation rate high schools across the nation that together produce more than half of U.S. dropouts. Having returned to Alabama on several occasions in the past few months, I know from conversations from friends, families and community leaders that low academic preparedness and the large number of dropouts are creating formidable challenges as the region tries to attract new jobs and economic activity to an area plagued by unemployment and a rural drug problem. From my small hometown to the great urban centers of this country, continuation of current trends in high school performance and graduation will lead to an unacceptable bifurcation of opportunity—a widening gulf between individuals with the skills and credentials to access higher paying careers and the poor and low-skilled who have little prospect of advancement. Unaltered, these trends pose a severe threat not only to our nation's future economic growth, but to our social fabric.

In spite of the high stakes involved here, I sit before you today encouraged by the questions being asked in this hearing. My hope is that today's discussions send a clear message that it is truly time to put the *secondary* into the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This reauthorization of ESEA is the time to tackle the K-12 institution most resistant to reform: the low-performing high school.



THE IMPERATIVE

The continued failure of secondary school systems in the United States to dramatically improve the educational attainment of low-income young people, young people of color and those in rural America is perhaps the single most significant factor in our country's drop from first to tenth in the world in the completion rate of postsecondary degrees by age 35. Among the lowest-income students, just 21 percent graduate from high school prepared for college; an alarmingly low 11 percent earn a postsecondary credential, compared to a 51 percent credential completion rate for students from higher income brackets.

Reversing this course will require strong and coordinated action and a strengthened federal-state partnership to raise the high graduation rate and the college preparedness level of high school graduates, especially among those from low-income families.

The committee is to be commended in recognizing that focusing just on raising achievement in high school is not enough, that we must also raise graduation rates dramatically. With the high school graduation rate basically flat for several decades, our nation cannot make the gains we need in productivity without dramatic reductions in the dropout rate and significant and steady increases in district and state graduation rates.

SIGNS OF PROGRESS

From Jobs for the Future's experience working to improve college-ready high school graduation with school, district, and state partners we have learned that dramatically better outcomes—especially for low income students and students of color—are possible, but only when there is continued and significant investment in groundbreaking and innovative high school designs. Some of the best of these efforts are represented on this panel.

Around the country, innovative or redesigned high schools are beginning to amass evidence of their effectiveness in graduating more students with a college-ready diploma. One key example is the national network of early college

high schools launched in 2002 with generous resources from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, that has expanded to more than 200 schools in 24 states, serving 42,000 students. In fact, the largest number of these high schools—70—are in North Carolina where Tony Habit and his New Schools Project have partnered with the state and with JFF to implement these schools. In the eight years since the early college design was first developed, it has proved to be an exceptional approach for increasing the likelihood that high-need students are on-track for high school graduation and prepared for college.

With a student population primarily composed of students of color, low-income youth, and first-generation college-goers, early colleges have overcome historically low education attainment levels and propelled students on a pathway to postsecondary success. By graduation, early college students have 23 college credits on average, and enroll in higher education institutions at significantly higher rates than peers in comparison schools.

Moreover, a growing body of rigorous research that includes experimental and quasi-experimental studies has shown that early college students progress through key college preparatory courses at a significantly higher rate than control students and outperform peers in comparison schools. It is particularly striking these schools appear to be closing the performance gap for students of color.

Even as we sit here today early college high schools across the country are marking the success of these high schools by holding events to raise visibility in their communities as a part of the national Early College High School Week.

Another encouraging trend worth noting is the spread of what we call "Back on Track" designs that are getting promising results with the young people who are the most at risk of not graduating from high school on time, if at all, and most likely not to complete a postsecondary credential. We use the term "back on track" to differentiate such schools from traditional alternative schools, which too often have been holding tanks for troublesome students. In contrast, Back on Track schools combine accelerated academics with the supports and culture of effort these young people need to succeed in high school and college.



Six years ago, New York City began groundbreaking work to open such schools as part of a systemic reform initiative to replace failing high schools with new small schools for entering ninth graders. At the same time, they invested in even smaller schools or programs for their overaged and under-credited students, to help them get back on track to graduation.

The highest performing of these back on track schools are now graduating students at two to three times the rates of other high schools and students are earning almost twice as many credits in their first year as they had earned upon enrolling in the schools. In Philadelphia, a similar effort to start what they call Accelerated Schools has graduated 853 over-age and under-credited students over the last three years, raising the district's graduation rate by 2 percentage points each year.

This work continues to spread. We have worked in over a dozen cities, from Mobile, Alabama, to Portland, Oregon, that are undertaking similar efforts.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The progress of the innovative frontrunner cities and states in seeding and supporting better alternatives for struggling students is impressive. But while identifying exemplars is important, creating a policy environment that promotes and expands successful secondary school options while shrinking the number of low-performing high schools is another.

What suggestions does Jobs for the Future for accelerating the transition away from high schools that fail large number of students toward options that can reduce dropout rates and increase college-readiness and success? Our recommendations fall into four categories:

1. Accountability measures that incorporate graduation rates rigorously but fairly;
2. Turnaround policies that are appropriate for middle and high schools and that create openings for more quality options for off-track youth;
3. Support district systemic activities such as reporting of and visibility of off-track students and the implementation of appropriate schools, programs or strategies that put these student back on track to graduation; and
4. Incentives for innovation to create, test, and grow more effective high schools to help more low-income young people graduate—and graduate ready for college success.

Rigorous and Fair Graduation Rate Accountability. As with few other topics in education reform today, there is strong consensus about including graduation rates in high school accountability systems. Advocates and policymakers agree that graduation rates should be given equal weight with academic performance when holding schools, districts and states accountable for student achievement. Education reform is no longer just about getting student the right curriculum, teachers and supports. We must get more students across the line with a diploma in hand and ready for the next step to postsecondary education and training. JFF makes the following recommendations to Congress for building on current regulations and finishing the job on graduation rate accountability:

- Define the graduation rate as a four-year cohort graduation rate adjusted for transfers in and transfers out.
- Require states to set aggressive annual measurable objectives for increasing the number of students who graduate.
- Authorize the Secretary to approve state proposals to use an extended year graduation rate for select schools such as early college high schools and back-on-track schools.
- Allow back-on-track schools to show interim progress towards annual measurable objectives through predictive indicators of student achievement, such as the number and percentage of students earning credit in core courses.
- Ensure that any requirement by the Secretary that a percentage of students graduate under a four-year cohort



graduation rate allows for an exemption mechanism, such as a waiver, for select schools that by design will require more than four years for students to complete (i.e., early college high schools and back-on-track schools).

Turning Around Low-Performing Secondary Schools.

NCLB provisions to improve low-performing schools have had little impact on the 2,000 low graduation rate high schools that account for over half of the nation's dropouts. Many of these schools with graduation rates below 65 percent have not been identified as low performing, in part because graduation rate regulations have yet to go into effect. The "differentiated accountability pilot program" and the recent ARRA School Improvement Grant requirements for identifying persistently low-performing schools have established a framework for distinguishing among troubled schools and driving the most intensive set of reform strategies to those that are the lowest performing. These developments are essential to the goal of creating incentives that advance the development and scaling of quality pathways, especially for those students who are off-track to graduation. JFF has found that, in many of these high schools, up to 80 percent of students are behind in skills or credits.

Congress should adopt school turnaround provisions that provide incentives and resources for states, districts, and high schools to implement strategies and models that meet the challenges of large numbers of off-track students. Congress should:

- **Permit differentiated accountability.** Allow states to distinguish between schools and districts in need of intensive interventions and those that may be closer to meeting annual measurable objectives.
- **Prioritize low graduation rate high schools.** Require states and districts to prioritize for immediate action secondary schools with graduation rates below 65 percent for immediate action.
- **Require specific school turnaround activities.** Require schools identified for turnaround to analyze data to determine the number and percentage of students who are

significantly off track and identify strategies and models to put them back on track to graduation.

- **Require district-wide activities.** District level leadership is essential for systemic approaches to implementing strategies and models aimed at the large number of off-track students and dropouts in the schools and communities within a district. Congress can create incentives by:
 - » Requiring districts and schools to use early warning indicators to intervene and provide support for off-track students at risk of dropping out;
 - » Requiring district analysis and use of data on the district-wide off-track population in order to design interventions and put in place back-on-track alternative education options (e.g., transfer schools); and
 - » Requiring district-wide dropout recovery strategies in partnership with community-based organizations, such as reengagement centers and back-on-track alternative education options including GED-to-college programs.

Support district systemic activities. While over a million students drop out of school each year, the population of students who are *in school* but off-track to an on-time graduation is not a marginal group. An estimated 1.3 million students are off-track to graduation by the end of the ninth grade. In the lowest graduation rate high schools, up to 80 percent of entering students can be behind in skills or credits.

Most high schools are not equipped—in terms of structure, human resources, curriculum, or schedule—to deal with this challenge. Too often, the only option for off-track students is simply to repeat the same curriculum, taught in the same formats and by the same teachers who failed to engage them the first time.

Students who are significantly off-track to graduation need a very different model of schooling; they need well-staffed schools with experienced teachers and advocates, targeted instructional strategies, and accelerated learning options. Based on analyses of student data, these plans should include a range of strategies, from quick recovery systems for older students who are close to graduation to



small learning communities that support multiple back-on-track strategies in a single setting to address the needs of students much further from graduation.

Congress can create incentives for systemic approaches to implementing strategies and models aimed at the large number of off-track students and dropouts by:

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- **Requiring district analysis and use of data on the district-wide off-track population** in order to design interventions and put in place back-on-track alternative education options (e.g. transfer schools); and
- **Requiring district-wide dropout recovery strategies** in partnership with community-based organizations, such as reengagement centers and back-on-track alternative education options including GED-to-college programs.

Incentives, Innovation, and Invention. One of the most promising recent federal policy developments is the expansion of federal support for innovation at all levels to address the nation's most perplexing education reform challenges. The ARRA-funded Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation (i3) funds commit the federal government to foster innovation in practice and policy. In response, states and districts are already changing policies and advancing

ambitious plans to scale effective programs and practices. The i3 competitive grants have opened important space for innovators to experiment with and invent new strategies for improving education outcomes for the most at-risk.

JFF makes the following recommendations to Congress:

- **Invest in scaling what works.** Nationally, there are numerous strategies and school models, such as early college high schools, that have demonstrated effectiveness in increasing college and career-readiness for low-income students are ready for college and a career. Congress should continue Race to the Top, i3 and other funding streams that focus resources to ensure more widespread adoption of and implementation of innovation strategies and approaches at secondary schools.
- **Invest in invention.** The nation will not move the needle dramatically on graduation rates without combining the redesign of failing high schools with a sustained effort at the invention of new models designed to help young people get back on track to high school graduation and postsecondary attainment. In the big cities that are ground zero of the dropout crisis, educators, youth developers, and social entrepreneurs have begun to invent new solutions that are leading to "beat the odds" results. Along with scaling innovative strategies, Congress should support the research and development of new school models that show promise in serving off-track students, English learners, and students in rural areas.

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Mr. Johnson works on a wide range of federal policies, including those related to the Elementary and Secondary Education, Higher Education Opportunity, and the Workforce Investment acts. His work aims to improve education options and outcomes for the large and growing numbers of low-income youth and adults struggling in today's economy.

A native of Alabama, Mr. Johnson received an A.A. in liberal arts from Beville State Community College in Hamilton, AL, a B.A. in political science and honors studies from Texas Tech University in Lubbock, TX, and a Master's in Public Affairs from the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, where he was a Barbara Jordan Scholar.