



# The Dropout Crisis:

## *Promising Approaches in Prevention and Recovery*

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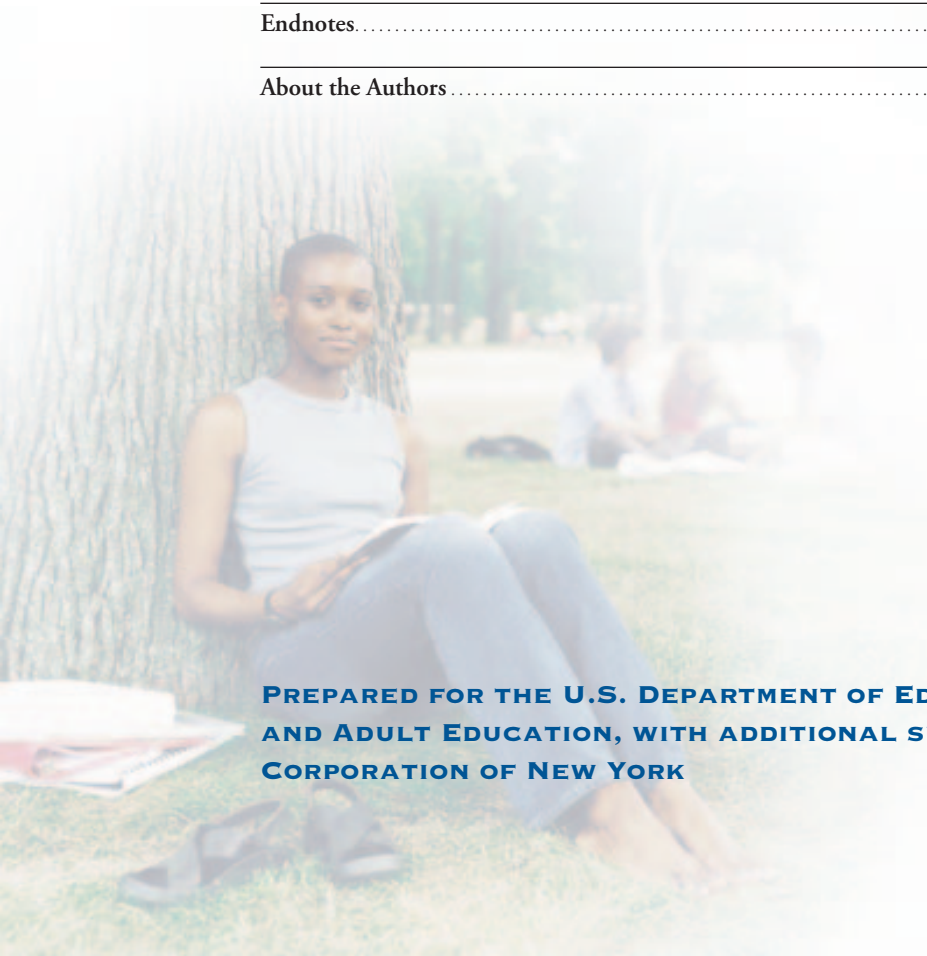
## *Promising Approaches in Prevention and Recovery*

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The number of high school age students who do not complete high school is receiving increased attention as a serious challenge facing our educational system. This is happening for several reasons. New research estimates that about 30 percent of high school students fail to earn a diploma in the standard number of years, a higher figure than state and local education officials typically cite. In many states, barely half of African-Americans and Latinos graduate from high school.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the magnitude of the challenge is becoming clear at the same time that a consensus is emerging that education beyond high school is critical to economic self-sufficiency and success in today's knowledge-intensive economy.

Since the 1970s, wages of high school dropouts have fallen further and further behind those of high school graduates and, particularly, those with college credentials. Young people who exit the educational pipeline in high school are much less likely than their peers to attain valuable postsecondary credentials, even if they eventually obtain a GED. While many more GED recipients (30 percent) than dropouts (8 percent) obtain some postsecondary credits, less than 2 percent of GED holders compared to 36 percent of high school graduates complete four or more years of postsecondary education.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that 60 percent of jobs created between now and 2010 will require at least some postsecondary education.<sup>3</sup> In the emerging economy, a high school dropout or a young person who earns a GED but no further postsecondary credential has extremely few opportunities for a family-supporting career.

While the dropout problem is a national challenge and endemic in many rural Southern communities, students who do not finish high school are disproportionately concentrated in large, nonselective comprehensive high schools in our largest cities.<sup>4</sup> Researchers at Johns Hopkins University have found that close to half of the large high schools in the nation's 35 largest cities evidenced "weak promotion power," losing as much as 50 percent of their students between the ninth and twelfth grades.<sup>5</sup> In schools of 900 or more students, promoting power grows substantially weaker as minority concentra-

tion increases. In schools that have 90 percent or more minority students, the most common outcome is for 60 to 70 percent of freshman to drop out before their senior year. In New York City, the 79 high schools that are 90 percent or more minority have a collective promotion power of 29 percent.<sup>6</sup>

### **A Worsening Crisis**

The dropout problem is likely to become more serious in the coming years. The changing composition of the youth population toward a higher proportion of low-income, immigrant, and minority students—or the same groups of students who tend to have lower graduation rates—means that our high schools will have to work harder just to maintain current graduation rates. Moreover, although research is still inconclusive, there is widespread concern that high-stakes state assessment tests may push out of high school additional students who are struggling academically.

The very scope of the problem—and the serious economic consequences for those who stop their education in high school or at graduation—calls attention to the need for fundamental reform in the institution of high school. Small adjustments or add-ons are unlikely to affect outcomes in schools that are losing 50 percent or more of their students. Incremental improvement will simply not be sufficient for states and communities that want to be competitive globally and attract and retain quality employers and jobs.

### **Dual Attention to Prevention and Recovery**

Addressing the dropout crisis will require responding to a dual challenge: state education systems must promote and support both dropout **prevention** strategies and dropout **recovery** efforts. This means pursuing proactive strategies to stem the dropout tide by strengthening the holding and promotion power of high schools while also encouraging the development of a more diverse delivery system capable of offering programs that reach out to dropouts and engage them in studies that put them onto pathways to skills and credentials they need.



This brief describes current practice in both prevention and recovery, highlighting promising approaches in each area that can help reduce stubbornly high dropout rates. It concludes with several suggestions for how state policymakers can help promote a more systemic approach to the dropout crisis.

### Stemming the Tide: Approaches to Dropout Prevention

For several decades, many urban districts have offered some form of dropout prevention. For the most part, this programming has been too marginal to the main work of schools to address the problem at its current scale. Most have attempted to bring new and different elements into the educational setting, for example, new support or tutorial services, different teaching styles, or changes in school organization. Noting that prevention programs were relatively small compared to their host schools, a recent evaluation concluded that, on the whole, federally funded dropout prevention programs studied were not effective at stemming the loss of young people from our schools. This finding was consistent with findings from two other large-scale, federally funded evaluations of dropout prevention programming.<sup>7</sup>



As the magnitude of the crisis has become clear, reformers have gravitated to two new, more systemic approaches to prevention. The first, a focus on adolescent literacy at the school and district levels, is directed at improving instruction and student outcomes in the critical foundational skills of reading and writing. The second approach is more structural, involving the creation of small learning environments both inside and outside the walls of current school buildings.

#### Promoting Adolescent Literacy

Strong literacy skills are equated with both secondary and postsecondary success. Not surprisingly, most dropouts have low literacy skills, often reading several years behind peers. Research indicates that a third of all entering ninth

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graders need extra help in reading<sup>8</sup> and that a fourth of all high school students are reading at “below basic” levels.<sup>9</sup> Students in high-poverty schools fare the worst: according to a

recent report from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, students in high-poverty middle and high schools continue to read two to three years behind grade level.<sup>10</sup> Few high schools are equipped to help such students gain needed literacy

skills, and they are particularly ill-equipped to deal with the educational needs of young people entering with anything below about a sixth-grade reading level.

As entering ninth graders, students encounter literary texts in their English classes and textbooks in science and social studies that require fairly sophisticated reading and comprehension skills. This mismatch of students’ skills with teacher and curricular expectations appears to be a key factor in the low promotion power and high dropout rates of many urban high schools.

This analysis has led to an increased focus at the high school level on developing reading comprehension strategies and writing skills. Some urban high schools are creating school and extended-day schedules that allow up to twice as much time for literacy instruction. A number of promising approaches have been identified, including modeling comprehension strategies through read-alouds/think-alouds; mini-lessons on reading strategies directly related to texts students are using; cooperative learning team and partner discussions; and self-selected reading of high-interest materials.<sup>11</sup>

The focus on adolescent literacy has also moved into the center of the high school reform agendas in a number of key urban school districts. For example, both Boston and San Diego have invested deeply in school-based forms of professional development, such as coaching to help teachers develop and reinforce their students’ reading, writing, and oral communication skills. This approach recognizes that pre-service programs do not generally prepare secondary teachers to teach literacy skills.

However, districts are encountering a number of challenges to implementing in-service literacy coaching and other forms of school-based professional development. The challenges include a lack of qualified coaches, the large number of students taught by an individual teacher in a typical high school, and the prevalent belief system that literacy instruction should be the exclusive province of English teachers and specialists.<sup>12</sup> Although the relationship between low literacy and dropping out is clear, there is not yet evidence of whether coaching and other school-based forms of professional development produces the desired results in teacher practice and whether such changes do, in fact, lower the dropout rate.

#### Making Schools Smaller and More Personalized

A number of recent studies indicate that intentionally small high schools generally have higher achievement levels, higher graduation rates, and lower dropout rates than larger high schools, and they are safer as well.<sup>13</sup> Key to motivating and engaging adolescents in the learning

process is a school environment where students are well-known, and where caring adults are concerned about students' intellectual growth, educational success, and general well-being.<sup>14</sup> Most encouraging to urban leaders has been the finding that small schools make the most difference for low-income and minority youth.<sup>15</sup> A recent study found that seven of the nine highest-performing, urban, non-selective high schools in Massachusetts had enrollments of 400 or less, while the two large schools also tried to organize themselves into smaller learning environments.<sup>16</sup>

Qualitative studies provide clues as to how small schools getting the best results take advantage of their size in several critical ways. First and foremost, small schools that are effective with low-income and minority youth organize themselves around a clear academic focus and mission: they hold an explicit and transparent school-wide focus on critical literacy and numeracy skills required for students to succeed in college and in careers with advancement potential. The faculty take collective responsibility for students, working together to develop instructional methods, curricular themes, and performances of understanding that help young people connect school standards to real world standards. They also take advantage of their small size to increase personalization for students, through such practices as daily advisories or student/family advocates and mentors. Students get help managing life demands that may hinder learning, while simultaneously feeling pushed to meet high standards. The standards themselves are transparent: students know from day to day what they are working on and why.

### ***Restructuring Large High Schools into Small Learning Communities***

While most of the literature on “getting smaller” has focused on the positive results achieved by the start-ups and freestanding small schools that implement practices such as those outlined above, until recently urban districts have emphasized the creation of small learning communities within the existing administrative structure and culture of large comprehensive high schools. The evidence is somewhat mixed as to whether such efforts are likely to affect dropout rates.

The evaluation of the U.S. Department of Education's school restructuring initiatives to prevent dropping out contains a cautionary tale. The federal investment was intended to promote organizational changes in schools so that fewer students would drop out. Most often, however, schools simply layered dropout prevention services onto already complex organizational structures, rather than

reorganize how they delivered services or change teaching and learning. Although the money schools received was significant (grants averaged \$1 million a year in the first four years), evaluators saw little evidence that schools went through a restructuring process (e.g., building consensus, developing a process or plan people buy into) and leadership was inconsistent. Not surprisingly, these efforts had little or no effect on dropout rates.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, some preliminary findings from the Talent Development High School model, which reconfigures large, under-performing high schools into small, self-contained “academies,” reveal the promise of this approach. Specifically designed to address school factors contributing to dropping out, the model is comprised of a Ninth Grade Success Academy, organized around groupings of 150 to 180 students and interdisciplinary teacher teams, and several grade 10–12 Career Academies, with a maximum size of 300 to 350 students each. The ninth-grade curriculum features double periods in mathematics and English for students who have weak prior preparation. The model also provides mechanisms for students to recover from previous poor attendance or earlier failures and offers extensive support services for students.

Teachers and administrators in participating schools get extensive supports to implement the model, which requires on-site facilitators through one year of planning and two implementation years. Periodic professional development sessions for the staff focus on organizational change and on changing teaching and learning.

Promising results have emerged from the first Talent Development High School. The year before Patterson High in Baltimore, Maryland became a Talent Development High School, it was cited by the state for “reconstitution” because of persistent low performance, including a graduation rate of less than 33 percent. In the first two years of implementation, the school significantly improved its attendance and ninth-grade-promotion rates, as well as the number of students passing state math and writing exams. The Talent Development High School model now operates in over 50 high schools in 11 states. With support from the U.S. Department of Education, MDRC is conducting a comprehensive evaluation of 20 of the schools representing six cities and five states, with a report due in June 2004.<sup>18</sup>



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### *Transforming Big Buildings into Small School “Multiplexes”*



In addition to using Talent Development and other models to restructure large high schools and overhaul their lowest-performing schools, a growing number of districts are experimenting with a new strategy: turning large schools into “multiplexes” of autonomous small schools, each headed by its own school principal. Specifically, in the Bronx and Brooklyn in New York City, Sacramento, Boston, and San Diego, districts are moving to transform large high schools into education complexes or campuses made up of multiple autonomous small schools under one roof.

It is too soon to tell whether this new, more dramatic form of school redesign will result in more effective dropout prevention than the types of restructuring reviewed above. The impact of this approach on the dropout rate will ultimately depend on whether these con-

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versions of large schools into small ones build on what is known about the characteristics of effective small schools; whether the districts themselves align their policies, capacity, roles, and structures with this reform direction; and whether state policies support conversion and small school development.

### **Reconnecting Dropouts: Approaches to Recovery**

While promoting adolescent literacy and transforming large schools into smaller units both hold promise for reducing the scope of the out-of-school youth problem, such approaches will not eliminate it. For the foreseeable future, a large number of young people who have disconnected from school will need a way to reconnect to educational options that meet their needs. Disconnected older adolescents are among the most neglected and at risk of our young people.

Three different and somewhat overlapping spheres of programming have long comprised a so-called “second chance” system:

- Offering youth a reconnection to the educational system through alternative high schools where they can earn a diploma;
- Providing youth with immediate help in entering the labor market through youth employment programs (e.g. Job Corps, Conservation Corps, YouthBuild),

as well as through programs designed for unemployed and low-wage adults; and

- Offering youth general literacy, English-language development, and GED certificates through community-based Adult Basic Education and community colleges programs.

While such programming provides some youth with critical pathways to a high school diploma and postsecondary and career opportunities, the “second chance system” has historically suffered from a number of problems, including fragmentation, long-term underinvestment, and marginalization from mainstream policy discussions and decisions. These problems have had predictable consequences for the quantity and quality of programming available to disconnected youth.

Underinvestment has also led to a dearth of the quality evaluations that would allow policymakers to make more strategic investments. Some evaluation data of the Job Corps, Conservation Corps, and YouthBuild do provide evidence of success in getting disconnected youth onto a trajectory to more positive outcomes. The Job Corps is the most rigorously evaluated of these programs and shows the most impressive results, based on a longitudinal study conducted with a national sample of eligible Job Corps applicants. Impacts were observed on educational progress (in most cases toward a GED) and earnings gains among most groups of youth.<sup>19</sup>

A recent publication found that programs in the employment sphere that successfully promote self-sufficiency among older youth are “comprehensive, sustained, grounded in the principles of youth development, and connected to further education or long-term career opportunities.”<sup>20</sup> Underinvestment has limited the number of programs that can offer such a comprehensive approach.

### **Some Promising Developments**

As major economic shifts have increased the premium associated with education, traditional youth employment and community colleges programs for dropouts have begun to shift their emphasis away from GEDs and job training and toward providing pathways to postsecondary credentials and career advancement for disconnected youth. Promising new models are beginning to take root, in some cases supported by K-12 education funds as well as state investments in community colleges. For example, YouthBuild and Service Corps sites are running charter high schools, Job Corps and YouthBuild programs now offer participants opportunities to earn technical certificates and advance to community college career pathways, and community colleges are offering GED and ABE pro-

grams that help dropouts transition directly to college coursework.

In Oregon, Portland Community College enrolls over 2,000 high school-age students, making it the largest high school in the city. With multiple entry points, the college's "PCC Prep" programs allow students with as low as third-grade-level reading and math skills to enroll in non-credit and developmental education courses that link directly to credit-based college courses. For example, former dropouts in PCC's Gateway to College program enroll in combined high school and college courses after one semester of intensive academics. Eighty-three percent of students reach reading proficiency required for college-level courses, and 70 percent complete college preparatory courses and enroll in mainstream college courses. As a dropout recovery and prevention program, PCC's alternative pathways receive average daily attendance money for their students. When students move into college coursework, they become eligible for Pell grants as well.

As second chance programs become more education-focused, the thirst for information on effective educational models for dropouts has burgeoned among state and local practitioners and policymakers. While little rigorous evaluation research documents the effectiveness of alternative schools and programs, recent reviews of the alternative education literature conducted by the Urban Institute and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education have begun to identify key attributes associated with effective programming including:<sup>21</sup>

- High academic standards transparently linked to future learning and work opportunities;
- Small, caring environment with low teacher/student ratios;
- Individualized flexible programs with high expectations and clear rules of behavior;
- Opportunities for youth to catch up and accelerate knowledge and skills;
- Innovative staff in multiple roles;
- Operational flexibility/autonomy;
- Opportunities for youth to participate and have voice in school matters;
- Shared sense of community and mutual trust;
- Parental involvement; and
- Links to community organizations.

This research provides a starting point for programming that is likely to improve outcomes for disconnected youth.

## A Systemic Approach: Building an Integrated System of Quality Options

Because the problem of youth disconnecting from mainstream schools is largely a systemic one, understanding how youth can reconnect to or remain connected with educational, employment, and other youth development programs also requires a broad community perspective. Providing the diversified, flexible programming that some young people need will require districts to look across the various education, workforce, and public care systems (e.g., foster care, mental health, social services, juvenile justice) that address aspects of the needs of young people who disconnect from school.

A small number of school districts are in the process of trying to invent a more systemic approach to sealing the leaks in the educational pipeline. Some, such as San Jose and Corpus Christi, are working with the National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, and Families to build on strong municipal leadership in and support for a cross-system focus on the educational needs of out-of-school youth. Others, such as Portland, Oregon, and Chicago, Illinois, have school district leadership that accepts responsibility for offering a rich set of alternative education options.

In Portland, the district has an Education Options department that coordinates and holds accountable all alternative learning options, including the district's own alternative schools, as well as schools operated under contract with the district by community organizations and Portland Community College.

In Chicago, the school district has begun to develop an infrastructure to reconnect dropouts and near-dropouts to quality learning options across the community. Under the direction of Arne Duncan, CEO of Chicago Public School, school leaders recently created a Dropout Prevention and Recovery Department housed in the Office of High School Programs. The new department is developing a streamlined system for students, including a Reenrollment Center that will serve as the door to a range of quality learning options for reconnecting out-of-school youth. The aim is to create a portfolio of diploma-granting schools that includes programming operated by or under contract to the district, as well as more community-based alternatives such as Youth Connections, an alternative charter school with 24 campuses or sites around the city.

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## Starting Points for States

The policy environment set at the state level can have a major effect on the extent to which cities take a systemic approach to their dropout crisis. Specifically, policy can play a key role in ensuring equitable opportunities and outcomes for all students and in providing the resources to achieve scale. We recommend three critical areas for state level policy:

- Count dropouts accurately in accountability measures.
- Provide adequate financing for programming that meets the needs of dropouts.
- Make connections to postsecondary education, particularly community colleges.

### Count dropouts accurately in accountability measures.



Four-year high school graduation rates were intended to be an integral part of NCLB's accountability provisions. But recent developments have allowed states to ignore the loss of thousands of youth by determining graduation rates based on the percentage of twelfth graders who graduate versus the percentage of entering ninth graders who graduate four years later. This confusion has resulted from NCLB's allowing states to offer alternative definitions of the graduation rate (contingent on approval by the U.S. Department of Education) as well as from recent departmental directions on data-gathering that have defined

graduation rates as the percentage of students, measured from the beginning of the school year, who graduate with a regular diploma. Not surprisingly, recently reported graduation rates for NCLB varied greatly by state. More problematic, closer examination has revealed that differences in definition and methodology resulted in wide variation in the reported data—

significantly understating the dropout problem in many states.<sup>22</sup>

States have a responsibility to ensure that the percentage of students who progress through high school to a high school diploma is adequately and accurately calculated and reported. They need to hold districts accountable for making dropouts “count” by basing graduation rates on the percentage of entering ninth graders who graduate four years later. Otherwise, districts under severe pressure to rise test scores and strapped financially will have no incentives to keep underperforming youth in school or recapture those who have already left.

### Provide adequate financing for programming that meets the needs of dropouts.

In an environment where education funding flows primarily to districts, many small alternatives that are serving some of the most vulnerable students find themselves short-changed. States should ensure that students who are most behind get access to small, intensive educational programs that offer challenging academic content, intensive supports, engaging pedagogies, and connections to outside partners—including the community, employers, and post-secondary institutions. The more disconnected out-of-school youth require very targeted outreach and programming as well as more comprehensive services. One key strategy for ensuring adequate funding for such programming is to permit per-pupil funding to follow a dropout who reconnects to an alternative pathway toward a post-secondary credential. Allowing dollars to follow the students would make it more economically attractive and feasible for alternative providers to serve struggling students from low-performing high schools.

Consistent with the principle of money following the student is the idea of weighted per-pupil funding. States and districts can calculate the real costs of educating youth with various risk factors and assign a higher “cost” to those who are more likely to require more intensive services. These policies would improve equity by making low-achieving, low-income youth more attractive to education providers and by providing more equitable funding to schools with greater need.<sup>23</sup>

In Wisconsin and Minnesota, “children at risk” statutes enacted in the mid-1980s allow state money to follow vulnerable youth. Public school districts can contract with private, nonprofit, nonsectarian agencies to educate children who meet prescribed criteria for being “at risk.” Districts with large numbers of dropouts and other youth who meet the criteria must let those students choose alternative education environments. Milwaukee considers contracted providers as Public School System “partnership schools,” and they receive per-pupil funding at 95 percent of the average per-pupil expenditure. In Minneapolis, about 30 community-based alternative schools operate with the public school system under similar legislation accounting for 20 percent of the city's high school graduates.

### Make connections to postsecondary education, particularly community colleges.

Given the realities of today's labor market and its skill requirements, it is no longer sufficient for dropout recovery programs to set the GED as a target for participating

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students. Rather, readiness to succeed in college courses and programs must become the standard for recovery programs. In this environment, the community college is emerging as a critical institution for addressing the dropout crisis effectively. State policy can support this trend and improve the ability of community colleges to serve those without high school diplomas more effectively.

The community college can be a key part of a strategy to re-engage youth and connect them to productive pathways to adulthood. The accessibility and relative affordability of community colleges make them a potentially powerful bridge into the education system or labor market for older adolescents and young adults who have dropped out of high school. However, there are significant barriers to expanding the role of many colleges in serving local dropouts and getting them reconnected to learning and to credentials with value in the labor market. While some obstacles are fundamentally a function of institutional practice, state policymakers can take important steps to help make it easier for community colleges to better serve students without a high school diploma, who typically have serious skill deficiencies.

States can assess the effectiveness of their GED delivery systems and the extent to which GED programs are linked to postsecondary institutions and credential programs. Community colleges that offer GED programming on campus are better positioned than stand alone programs to interest completers in additional courses or learn-

ing programs. They can also provide the kind of supports and advising that can help students identify appropriate college pathways, given an individual's skills, interests, and time availability. Co-location can also help students get over fears of college while still in the GED environment. States can create incentives for providing GED programs at and by community colleges and for the development of programs that combine developmental education with vocational or other credit courses, so that students without diplomas can accelerate their learning program and advance quickly.

For young, working adults without high school diplomas, state funding formulas and financial aid policies for higher education can be an obstacle to enrolling in programs that lead to college credentials. Funding formulas often support remedial education and non-credit courses at a lower FTE rate than credit programs, providing colleges with less funding to serve students with more risk factors and needs. Like the federal government, states designed student financial aid for "traditional" students who attend full-time. Aid is more difficult to secure for part-time students, particularly those who enroll at less than half time. This creates an obstacle to many dropouts, whose life situations make it difficult for them to pursue studies full-time. States should review their funding and student aid policies so that it is easier for working young adults to afford college tuition and other costs.



## Endnotes



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- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> For links to more statistics and related research, see Web Issue Site on EMPLOYMENT. <http://www.ecs.org/e-Connection-ep>.
- <sup>4</sup> Poor students of color, who are more likely to drop out than their more advantaged peers, are concentrated in the nation's 100 largest urban school districts. While these districts represent less than 0.1 percent of all the districts in the United States, they serve nearly one quarter (23 percent) of all public school students, including 40 percent of all nonwhite students and 30 percent of students from low-income families. See Education Commission of the States. December 2003. *Improving Academic Achievement in Urban Districts: What State Policymakers Can Do*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States. [www.ecs.org](http://www.ecs.org).
- <sup>5</sup> Balfanz, Robert and Nettie Legters. 2001. *How Many Central City High Schools Have a Severe Dropout Problem, Where are They Located, and Who Attends Them? Initial Estimates Using the Common Core of Data*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Education and Achieve, Inc. The authors define "promoting power" as the ratio of twelfth graders to ninth graders over a four-year period. That is, if a school has half as many 12<sup>th</sup> graders as 9<sup>th</sup> graders four years earlier than it has a promoting power of 50%.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
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## About the Authors

*Adria Steinberg* leads JFF's Multiple Pathways team and plays a central role in shaping JFF's strategies for addressing the needs of the large number of young people who are underserved in our high schools and are eventually left behind in our economy. In order to stay grounded in the day-to-day work of high school reform at a local level, she serves as a lead partner in Boston's High School Renewal/ Small Schools initiative; at the national level, she has oversight responsibilities in all JFF initiatives addressing high school reform and disconnected youth. She has authored many publications, including a five-year stint as primary writer/editor of *The Harvard Education Letter*. Recent publications include: *Real Learning, Real Work* (Routledge Press, 1997), *Schooling for the Real World* (with Kathleen Cushman and Rob Riordan, Jossey-Bass, 1999) and *CityWorks* (with David Stephen, The New Press, 1999).

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## About Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future seeks to accelerate the educational and economic advancement of youth and adults struggling in today's economy. JFF partners with leaders in education, business, government, and communities around the nation to: strengthen opportunities for youth to succeed in postsecondary learning and high-skill careers; increase opportunities for low-income individuals to move into family-supporting careers; and meet the growing economic demand for knowledgeable and skilled workers.

