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# ON THE FRONT LINES OF SCHOOLS

**Perspectives of Teachers and Principals on the High School Dropout Problem**

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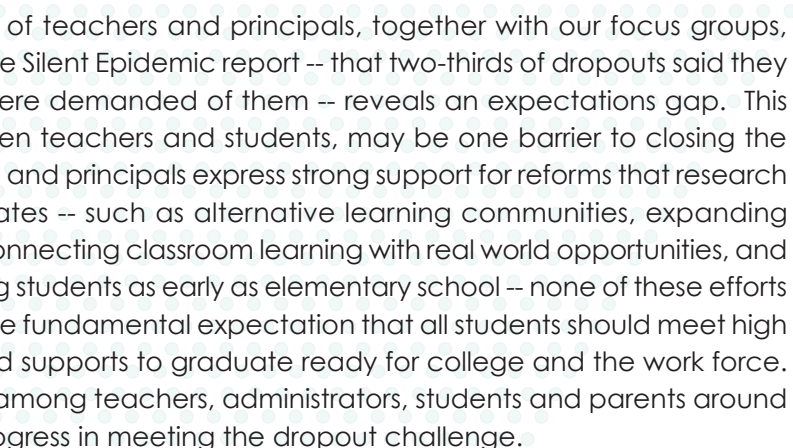




# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Teachers and administrators in public high schools recognize there is a dropout problem, know they are confronted with daunting challenges in classrooms and in schools, and express strong support for reforms to address high dropout rates.**

Yet, less than one-third of teachers believe that schools should expect all students to meet high academic standards, graduate with the skills to do college-level work, and provide extra support to struggling students to help them meet those standards. Although more than half of principals believe schools should hold these expectations for all students, significant majorities of both teachers and principals do not believe that students at risk for dropping out would respond to these high expectations and work harder. Our data, focus groups and colloquium indicate that the views of many teachers are shaped by what they see in the classroom, particularly among students who show low skill levels and weak motivation late into high school. Teachers, in large part, believe that they and their students are not receiving the necessary resources and supports. As a result, many teachers are skeptical about the possibility of educating every student for college.



The nationally representative surveys of teachers and principals, together with our focus groups, when juxtaposed to a key finding of the Silent Epidemic report -- that two-thirds of dropouts said they would have worked harder if more were demanded of them -- reveals an expectations gap. This expectations gap, particularly between teachers and students, may be one barrier to closing the achievement gap. Although teachers and principals express strong support for reforms that research tells us would help reduce dropout rates -- such as alternative learning communities, expanding college-level learning opportunities, connecting classroom learning with real world opportunities, and early warning systems to help struggling students as early as elementary school -- none of these efforts are likely to be as successful without the fundamental expectation that all students should meet high academic standards and be provided supports to graduate ready for college and the work force. We clearly need a national dialogue among teachers, administrators, students and parents around these findings to ensure continued progress in meeting the dropout challenge.

**Teachers and principals know students who were capable of graduating but failed to complete high school. Most teachers and principals recognize that dropout is a major problem, but our research shows there is confusion over graduation rates.**

## THE DROPOUT PROBLEM

Most principals (76 percent) and a majority of teachers (59 percent) saw dropout nationally as at least a “major problem.” Only 14 percent of principals and 11 percent of teachers viewed the dropout problem as a “crisis.” Thirty-five percent of teachers and 24 percent of principals viewed dropout as a minor problem or no problem at all.

Nearly half of teachers (48 percent) and more than half of principals (55 percent) reported their school's graduation rates were 90 percent or higher. Only 23 percent of teachers and 20 percent of principals reported their school graduated less than 80 percent of their incoming freshman class. Research showed the average on-time national graduation rate was in fact between 68 and 75 percent during the time of the survey.

Nearly half of teachers (46 percent) and the majority of principals (58 percent) viewed reported national graduation rates as only somewhat or not accurate and reliable. Among teachers who questioned the reliability of the statistics, the majority (54 percent) felt statistics understated the problem. Fifty-one percent of principals said statistics overstated the problem. It follows that principals were more optimistic (61 percent) than teachers (47 percent) that the dropout rate could be halved in a decade.

Eighty-one percent of teachers and 89 percent of principals felt their school was doing a good or excellent job. Less than 10 percent of teachers and principals rated the nation's schools as excellent, but 24 percent of teachers and 25 percent of principals felt their school was excellent. Even at schools where teachers reported graduation rates below 80 percent, 64 percent of teachers classified their schools as good or excellent.

**Teachers and principals identified many reasons why students drop out, reflecting an understanding of the complexity of the problem. Most cite a lack of parental involvement and support at home as the core problem.**

## WHY STUDENTS DROP OUT

Sixty-one percent of teachers and 45 percent of principals felt lack of support at home was a factor in most cases of students' dropping out, with 89 percent of teachers and 88 percent of principals saying it was a factor in at least some cases. Seventy-four percent of teachers and 69 percent of principals felt parents bore all or most of the responsibility for their children dropping out.

Only 20 percent of teachers and 21 percent of principals felt boredom was a factor in most cases of high school dropout. While 42 percent of teachers felt students who said they dropped out because school was boring were just making excuses, half of all teachers and nearly seven in ten principals (69 percent) felt these former students were speaking to an important cause. Previous research has shown that nearly half (47 percent) of dropouts said they left school because they found it boring and uninteresting and did not see the relevance of school to real life.

## WHAT MIGHT HELP STUDENTS STAY IN SCHOOL

Sixty-two percent of teachers and 60 percent of principals cited students being academically unprepared for high school as a factor in at least some dropout cases. Previous research has shown that more than one third of dropouts (35 percent) reported leaving school because they were failing and 45 percent of dropouts stated their previous schooling in middle and elementary school had not prepared them for high school.

Forty-five percent of teachers and 42 percent of principals cited absenteeism, one of the early warning signs, as a key factor in most cases of high school dropout.

They also understood other causes in at least some dropout cases, such as the negative influence of peers not interested in school (78 percent of teachers and principals), needing to get a job and make money (48 percent of teachers, 44 percent of principals), becoming a parent (45 percent of teachers, 39 percent of principals), and caring for a family member (35 percent of teachers, 26 percent of principals).

**Our surveys showed strong support among educators for reforms to increase high school graduation rates. Yet, there were disturbing signs that America's commitment to providing every child the opportunity to an excellent education is falling short in our nation's classrooms.**

### Raising Low Academic Expectations

Less than one-third of teachers (32 percent) believed we should expect all students to meet high academic standards, graduate with the skills to do college-level work, and provide extra support to struggling students to help them meet those standards. Fifty-nine percent of teachers believed we should have a separate track to allow students who are not college-bound to get a diploma without achieving these same high standards. Majorities of both newer teachers (58 percent) and experienced teachers (59 percent) believed we should have a separate track.

In contrast, nearly six in ten principals (58 percent) believed we should expect all students to meet high academic standards, graduate with the skills to do college-level work, and provide extra support to struggling students to help them meet those standards, while only 41 percent wanted a separate track to allow students who are not college-bound to get a diploma without achieving those standards.

Seventy-five percent of teachers and 66 percent of principals did not believe students at-risk of dropping out would work harder if more were demanded of them -- higher academic standards, more studying, and homework -- to earn a diploma. Newer teachers (73 percent) and experienced teachers (77 percent) shared these views. These perspectives are in stark contrast to previous research showing that 66 percent of dropouts said they would have worked harder if more had been demanded of them in the classroom.

## More Responsibility From Educators and Schools

When principals and teachers were asked how much responsibility they have for students dropping out, 22 percent of principals held themselves and teachers as largely or solely responsible. Thirteen percent of teachers placed a similar responsibility on themselves. Teachers were more likely to place responsibility on the school system (19 percent), or broader society (18 percent) than on themselves and believed elected officials at the local, state, and federal levels were as responsible as they were (13 percent) for students leaving school.

## Educators Recognize Changes Are Needed

When teachers and principals assessed their own high schools, principals more readily acknowledged the need for improvement in a variety of areas, including engaging parents (79 percent of principals felt more work could be done, as did 59 percent of teachers), keeping students interested and engaged in course work (87 percent of principals, 59 percent of teachers), helping students with problems outside of school affecting school work (76 percent of principals, 54 percent of teachers), and providing support for struggling students (75 percent of principals, 47 percent of teachers).

## Support for Reform

While they differed in the degree to which they recognized room for their own schools to improve, majorities of both teachers (61 percent) and principals (72 percent) thought some significant improvements were needed in high schools to ensure all students graduate.

More than three-fourths of teachers (77 percent) and 71 percent of principals strongly favored alternative learning environments to reduce the dropout rate. Another 19 percent of teachers and 25 percent of principals somewhat favored this proposal, giving it strong support in both groups. In our focus groups, educators felt these environments would provide at-risk students more choices in finding a school that was more relevant to their lives and goals.

Seventy-five percent of teachers and 54 percent of principals felt reducing class sizes would be an effective way of decreasing the dropout rate. This was one of the reforms thought to have the most potential among teachers who felt that the dropout rate could be successfully cut in half in the next ten years.

Seventy percent of teachers and 71 percent of principals said early warning systems to identify and help struggling students would do a lot to reduce the number of dropouts. Some educators in our focus groups felt their schools were doing a poor job detecting and providing supports to students at-risk of dropping out.

## WAYS FORWARD

Seventy percent of teachers and 68 percent of principals felt connecting classroom learning to real-world experiences would help a lot in reducing the number of dropouts. In our focus groups, many believed service-learning and hand-on projects would help, but some felt the regimented calendar of daily lessons interfered.

The majority of teachers (63 percent) and principals (51 percent) felt increasing their schools' parental outreach programs would do a lot to reduce the number of high school dropouts. Many in our focus groups believed the parent-school relationship was the key to boosting student performance in school.

Teachers and principals supported other proposals to reduce the dropout rate, such as: expanding college-level learning opportunities (61 percent of teachers, 58 percent of principals) and mandating a national compulsory school age of 18 with support for struggling students (41 percent of teachers, 50 percent of principals).

Teachers and principals did not believe eliminating standardized test requirements to graduate from high school would reduce the number of dropouts. Only 27 percent of teachers and 22 percent of principals believed elimination of such standardized tests would help a lot.

**The perspectives of teachers and principals are central to improving high school graduation rates and preparing all students for successful entry into college and the workforce. To help students succeed, we recommend:**

### **Accurate Graduation Data and College Readiness Accountability**

All states need to follow a common calculation of graduation rates, as put forth by the National Governor's Association and adopted by the U.S. Department of Education. States also need to establish ambitious graduation rate goals and make districts and schools accountable for making substantial progress toward these goals. Finally, teachers and administrators need to be brought into the mission to graduate all students prepared for post-secondary education.

### **Standards-Based Rigorous Curriculum and High Expectations for Every Student**

Schools should have fewer, clearer and higher standards aligned with college requirements so that every student has the opportunity to graduate ready for post-secondary education. Principals and teachers



should have high expectations for every student, and be brought into the mission of ensuring every student has the chance to go to college. Research has shown the clear link between teacher expectations, rigor in student coursework and student academic performance, across all student backgrounds and income levels.

### **Improved Communication, Understanding and Collaboration among Teachers, Parents, and Students**

Schools and communities should engage teachers, parents and students in a dialogue about the different perspectives these groups have on the high school dropout challenge to foster better understanding among these three vital partners on paths forward. Teachers and parents need to work together to provide struggling students with the necessary supports to stay on track to graduate. Students, in turn, need to become better self-advocates and seek help from their teachers and parents before it is too late. Schools need to create parent engagement strategies that focus on teacher feedback on a student's academic progress and provide parents better information and tools – such as information on graduation and college admission requirements and homework hotlines.

### **Secondary School Redesign to Enable Higher Graduation Rates**

Secondary schools need to be reorganized to keep all students on the graduation path. The traditional high school is outdated and needs to be revamped. To do this, teachers and administrators need to have the necessary supports and school structure so they are not overwhelmed with the number of struggling students in their classrooms. Excellent models of high school redesign exist, largely centered around a rigorous college and career-ready curriculum, and should be further examined and adapted for more schools.

### **More Research to Ensure a High Quality Teacher in Every Classroom**

Research tells us that good teachers matter, but we do not know enough about what qualifications, characteristics, and classroom practices of teachers are more likely to boost student achievement. More research should be conducted to show the relationships among teacher qualifications, characteristics, classroom practices and improvements in student performance. States and school districts should concentrate on establishing rigorous teacher preparation programs, as well as opening up more alternative licensing routes. They must work to recruit and retain strong teachers by providing professional development, mentoring programs, and competitive salaries.

### **Eliminate Out-of-Field Teaching**

States and school districts need to work together to ensure that every classroom has a teacher educated and certified in that subject area. School districts need to acquire an adequate supply of effective teachers with appropriate subject-matter knowledge, and assign only highly-qualified teachers to low-income and minority students in an effort to close the achievement gap.

### **Develop Induction Programs for All Beginning Teachers**

Schools also should have comprehensive induction programs for all beginning teachers. These comprehensive programs should incorporate: mentoring by highly-effective master teachers in the same subject area, ongoing professional development, common planning times to encourage collaboration, and a network of teachers at other schools.

## Authority for Principals to Drive Student Achievement To Scale

Research shows that principals are the second most important factor in student achievement, behind teacher quality. The most effective principals, meaning those who successfully motivate and encourage their staffs to improve student outcomes, are those who have more authority in hiring and firing decisions, and have more control over school budgets.

## Early Warning Systems

Schools need to develop district-wide (and eventually state-wide) early warning systems to help them identify students at risk of dropping out and to develop the mechanisms that trigger appropriate supports for these students. Research has shown that schools can predict who is at risk for dropping out with a high degree of accuracy in the later years of elementary school and can identify approximately half of eventual dropouts by middle school. By 9th grade, dropout can be predicted with 85 percent accuracy. The key indicators are poor attendance, behavioral problems, and course failure.

## Ongoing Literacy Programs in Middle and High Schools

Research shows that more than 8 million students in grades 4-12 read below grade level. This leads to many students struggling with their coursework, falling behind, and eventually dropping out. Students should be engaged in ongoing literacy programs in middle and high schools, and subject matter teachers should incorporate literacy strategies in their course material.

## Alternative Learning Environments

School districts should develop options for students, including a curriculum that connects classroom learning with real life experiences, smaller learning communities with individualized instruction, and alternative learning environments that offer rigorous and specialized programs to students at risk of dropping out. Connections should also be made between classroom learning and real jobs in the workforce, through job shadowing, internships and work study programs.





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