A Quality High School Education for All

Addressing the Dropout Challenge in Our Community
Introduction

In today's world, a high school diploma is not just a good idea, it's essential. It's essential for individuals and their futures. In fact, over their lifetimes, high school dropouts earn roughly $200,000 less than high school graduates and about $1.4 million less than college graduates. It's essential for our community as well. We need an educated workforce if we want to attract new employers and produce local entrepreneurs who can create homegrown businesses. And we need an educated citizenry if we want our local democracy to function as it should. Finally, it's essential for our country. America is no longer the leader it once was in educating its citizens, and we'll have a hard time keeping up economically if we don't do a better job. Unfortunately, we're graduating too few students and producing too many dropouts—more than most people think:

• The United States is currently the only industrialized country where students are less likely to graduate from high school than their parents.

• Nationally, the dropout rate is as high as 33%, while the dropout rate among minorities (blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans) is almost 50%.

• Students from low-income families are six times more likely to drop out than those students from high-income households.

Our goal today is to discuss and decide on ways we can work together as a community to significantly increase the number of students who graduate from high school.

We know that if we put our minds to it and work together, we can do a much better job of getting our young people through high school with the kind of education that will enable them to succeed in college or the workforce, whichever they choose. We also realize that as hard as we may try, there will probably always be a few young people who drop out and that it will be necessary to make sure they have good opportunities to get GEDs.

But we’re going to put that part of the issue aside for today and focus specifically on dropout prevention.

What do we know about why students drop out? While the reasons may vary somewhat in different communities and schools, research suggests that kids are more at risk for dropping out if:

• They are struggling academically and falling behind in their classes.

• They are having behavior problems and/or are frequently absent from school.

• They feel that school is irrelevant to their lives.

• They are disengaged from their teachers, peers, and extracurricular activities.

Our focus today is on what we can do, in our schools and community, to keep young people in school and on track for graduation. As we’ll see, there are many strategies we could pursue, so we’ll have to choose our priorities wisely—better to do a few things well than to do many things poorly.

To help you and your neighbors think together about how the schools and community can do more to help all students graduate, this guide will describe three different strategies or approaches. After reviewing these, we’ll ask which ideas to begin pursuing and which you think make the most sense for our schools and our community.
Therefore, if we want to help all students graduate we should do things like:

- Create more positive, healthy, and fun after-school activities to help keep kids out of trouble.
- Strengthen school-based and after-school programs aimed at decreasing drug and alcohol use so that kids can stay healthy and focused.
- Ask religious institutions, community-based organizations, and city agencies to do more to support families going through tough times, so they are better able to provide the home environment students need for success in school.
- Provide troubled students with counseling and peer-support groups to help them stay on track.

Those who like this approach say:
“Because social problems can lead kids to drop out we need to do more to keep kids out of trouble in the first place and, if that fails, help them get back on track.”

But others say:
“Just because we keep a kid out of trouble doesn’t mean he or she will do well in school and stick it out until graduation. Don’t we need to do more?”
Approach B:
Raise our expectations of young people and send the message that all students can and should graduate

Do we really believe that virtually all kids can and should graduate high school ready for college or a career? If we don’t believe it, neither will students. Research shows that the expectations of teachers, parents, and other important adults can have a major impact on how well students do in school.

Unfortunately, too many kids are stereotyped and receive little encouragement to view a high school diploma as the doorway to a better life. This is an injustice to these young people that must be addressed if we are going to lower the dropout rate in our community.

Therefore, if we want to help all students graduate we should do things like:

- Help parents understand the power they have to encourage and inspire their children through high expectations that reinforce the importance of staying in school.
- Work with local leaders to launch a community-wide communications campaign on the opportunities and benefits that a high school diploma creates for young people.
- Educate teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors about the impact of their expectations on student achievement and help them move beyond stereotyping kids: No student should ever be told or treated like he or she is “not college material.”
- Expose students with the highest dropout rates to teachers and successful role models from their own backgrounds to help these students relate to the benefits of getting a diploma.

Those who like this approach say:
“If you expect more, you get more.”

But others say:
“Will it work to raise our expectations of students if we don’t do much more to provide them with the tools and experiences they need to succeed in school?”
Approach C: Improve how we educate young people so they are more likely to stay in school

Research shows that when students have educational experiences and opportunities that are challenging and engaging, they are less likely to drop out. We need to do less old-fashioned lecturing of students and create more exciting ways of learning—both in school and after school—that grab kids’ attention and that help them see how the things they are learning are relevant to their lives and futures.

Therefore, if we want to help all students graduate we should do things like:

- Use more hands-on teaching methods, such as team projects that solve real-world problems and internships that combine learning with career experiences.
- Make sure that instruction and tests are culturally appropriate to all students so that no one is at a disadvantage simply because of his or her cultural background.
- Identify students who are struggling academically as early as possible and provide them with extra support and more one-on-one attention, so that different types of learners get the right kind of help.
- Create more after-school learning opportunities and stronger parent involvement to help ensure that learning continues when students are outside the school building.

Those who like this approach say:
“If we want our kids to graduate, we need the kind of curriculum, teachers, and out-of-school learning that will best help them succeed.”

But others say:
“Are these sound educational practices or just educational fads?”
The Choices in Brief

Approach A:
Do more to keep kids out of trouble and on a healthy path through after-school activities and programs that help students who are dealing with social problems get back on track

Therefore, we should do things like:

• Create more positive, healthy, and fun after-school activities to help keep kids out of trouble.

• Strengthen school-based and after-school programs aimed at decreasing drug and alcohol use so that kids can stay healthy and focused.

• Ask religious institutions, community-based organizations, and city agencies to do more to support families going through tough times, so they are better able to provide the home environment students need for success in school.

• Provide troubled students with counseling and peer-support groups to help them stay on track.

Approach B:
Raise our expectations of young people and send the message that all students can and should graduate

Therefore, we should do things like:

• Help parents understand the power they have to encourage and inspire their children through high expectations that reinforce the importance of staying in school.

• Work with local leaders to launch a community-wide communications campaign on the opportunities and benefits that a high school diploma creates for young people.

• Educate teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors about the impact of their expectations on student achievement and help them move beyond stereotyping kids: No student should ever be told or treated like he or she is “not college material.”

• Expose students with the highest dropout rates to teachers and successful role models from their own backgrounds to help these students relate to the benefits of getting a diploma.

Approach C:
Improve how we educate young people in school and after school to engage them more deeply and successfully in their education

Therefore, we should do things like:

• Use more hands-on teaching methods, such as team projects that solve real-world problems and internships that combine learning with career experiences.

• Make sure that instruction and tests are culturally appropriate to all students so that no one is at a disadvantage simply because of his or her cultural background.

• Identify students who are struggling academically as early as possible and provide them with extra support and more one-on-one attention, so that different types of learners get the right kind of help.

• Create more after-school learning opportunities and stronger parent involvement to help ensure that learning continues when students are outside the school building.
A Note on Public Agenda’s Choicework Discussion Guides

Public Agenda’s Choicework Discussion Guides support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of community conversations, discussion groups, and classrooms and by journalists, researchers, policy makers, community leaders, and individuals looking to better understand and discuss solutions to a variety of public and community issues.

Each guide is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons, and trade-offs. The different perspectives are drawn both from how the public thinks about an issue as well as what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates. Users of the guides should be encouraged to put additional ideas on the table or consider combining elements from different choices in unique ways. They are designed as a starting point for constructive dialogue and problem-solving.

Using this guide in a community conversation, discussion group, or classroom setting

After discussing the choices, it can be helpful to first summarize the conversation and then bridge to action-oriented deliberations, as follows:

Summarizing a Choicework Conversation
These questions are a good way to summarize a Choicework conversation, prior to considering more action-oriented questions.

1. In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?
2. What were our important areas of disagreement—the issues we may have to keep talking about in the future?
3. What are the questions and concerns that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?

Bridging from Dialogue to Action
These questions can help you move from dialogue about the issue at hand to actions that can help address the issue.

1. How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today? This is a brainstorming phase of the discussion.
2. Among the action ideas we’ve discussed, how should we prioritize them?
3. How should we follow up on today’s conversation? Are there individual steps we can make? Are there things we can do collectively?
About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and public engagement organization. We work to ensure that the public has the best possible conditions and opportunities to engage thoughtfully in public life and that decision-making by leaders is well-informed by people’s values, ideas, and aspirations. Our programs aim to inform public policy, strengthen communities, and empower citizens.

Want to Learn More?

Want to find out more about Public Agenda’s distinct approach to improving public life? Interested in connecting with other citizens to address critical issues? If so, you can check out our online community and sign up to find out about activities that bring people together to strengthen their communities. Email us at publicengagement@publicagenda.org. You can also keep in touch by becoming a fan on Facebook or by following us on Twitter @PublicAgenda.