

How Improving High School Graduation Rates Can Strengthen U.S. Competitiveness

Testimony Before the House Committee on Education and Labor

Marguerite Kondracke, President and CEO of America's Promise Alliance

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Executive Summary

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the most pressing issue facing our nation. I am Marguerite Kondracke, President and CEO of America's Promise Alliance. Founded by General Colin Powell, we and our 300 partners are committed to bringing an end to the dropout crisis.

Magnitude of the Problem

General Powell characterizes the dropout crisis as a national catastrophe. A new report commissioned by America's Promise Alliance found that only about half (53 percent) of all young people in the nation's 50 largest cities graduate on time.

If altruistic reasons do not compel you, economic ones should. McKinsey and Company found that the educational challenges we face impose "the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession."

I agree with the President and Secretary Duncan when they say that a long-term, sustainable economic recovery is only possible if we strengthen our education system.

Contributors to the Crisis

There are two influences in a student's life that impact achievement: what happens inside the school building, and what happens outside of it. Both must be addressed if we are to successfully raise graduation rates.

First, we need stronger, internationally benchmarked standards. Students deserve standards and curricula that will help them succeed in college and careers and compete in the global economy. We are making progress in this regard. I commend the Committee for holding a hearing on the topic of common national standards just a few weeks ago, and support the administration's efforts to make rigorous standards a priority.

Integrated supports are also crucial. "There are a set of foundational things we need to do to meet...students' social and emotional needs ... the more we work together...the more we create an environment where the students can maximize their academic potential."

These are not my words; they are the words of our Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan.

The Educational Testing Service (ETS) recently outlined 16 factors that correlate with student achievement--over half of these factors are present in a child's life beyond the classroom. Such factors include forced mobility, environmental hazards, hunger and nutrition, health care, and the

summer learning gap, which puts students so far behind by the ninth grade that the prospect of on-time graduation is dim.

If schools just had to deal with one, or maybe two of these issues, they could probably handle it. The problem is that these and many other factors accumulate and are concentrated in our schools with the least capacity to address them.

The Solution: A Comprehensive Approach

The dropout crisis calls for a comprehensive solution. Research demonstrates that young people need five core resources to be successful in life. We refer to them as the “five promises” – caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, effective education, and opportunities to serve. These promises provide a simple but powerful framework for a robust national strategy to end the dropout crisis, and are at the heart of the Dropout Prevention Campaign launched by the America’s Promise Alliance last year.

The campaign began with high-level summits, one in all 50 states and 55 cities with the largest dropout rates. Within 60 days of each summit, states and communities develop action plans that include a cross section of stakeholders – educators, the business community, nonprofit organizations, and students.

Locally, initiatives are spreading across the country that combine academic and community-based supports to strengthen student achievement. Rather than describe these efforts in detail, I will discuss the potential role of the federal government in bringing them to scale.

- The Graduation Promise Act is “must-pass” legislation. The federal government should not have a heavy hand in high school reform. Introduced by Representative Ruben Hinojosa in the 110th Congress, this legislation is comprehensive, data driven, and strikes the right balance between federal support and local control.
- Complementing this proposal are the Secondary School Innovation Fund Act (H.R. 2239) introduced by Representative Dave Loebsack, and the Every Student Counts Act introduced by Representative Bobby Scott (H.R. 1569). These proposals would support research and accountability so that we can use taxpayer dollars in the most effective ways.
- Additionally, I urge Congress to fund the High School Graduation Initiative proposed by the President as well as his proposed increase for School Improvement Grants in order to turn around the nation’s lowest performing high schools.

Broadly speaking, the administration has outlined five pillars for education reform: early childhood; world-class college- and career-ready standards and assessments, teacher effectiveness, innovation/excellence with a focus on low-performing schools, and higher education. To these five items, I suggest adding a sixth: Schools as Centers of Community. We must address both what happens inside the classroom and outside of it in order to strengthen graduation rates and prepare our students for college. As a potential first step, I encourage Congress to fund the President’s proposal for “Promise Neighborhoods” to address the effects of poverty and improve educational achievements and life outcomes for our children.

Conclusion

We do not have to live in a country where three out of 10 students do not graduate on time, and where on-time graduation for minority students is a 50-50 proposition. We have solutions on the ground, and legislative proposals that will bring them to scale. By passing these proposals, we will solve this problem, fortify our economy, and provide our students with the opportunity to experience the promise of America.

Full Testimony

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the most pressing issue facing our nation: the high school dropout crisis. My remarks will cover several key issues: First, I will discuss the compelling magnitude of the high school dropout crisis. I will then provide an overview of the factors in our schools and in the lives of our students that contribute to the crisis. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of ways this issue can be addressed and recommendations for the federal role in strengthening graduation rates.

The Dropout Crisis: America's New Silent Epidemic

America's low graduation rate is our most pressing issue as a nation and the culmination of years of failure. Everyone with a stake in the future of our children and the nation—schools, parents, businesses, community and faith based organizations—have a role to play in the resolution of this crisis. We all must work together in new and unprecedented ways in support of our children.

In addition to its significant social implications, the potential economic impact of the dropout crisis shows why this issue is our most critical national challenge. A recent report by McKinsey and Company, *The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools*, concluded that the persistent achievement gaps facing our country impose “the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession.”¹ When President Obama and Secretary Duncan say that a long-term, sustainable economic recovery is only possible if we strengthen our education system, they are precisely correct.

The dropout crisis may not be as visible or swift as other important issues problems facing this Congress and our new administration, but its implications are just as severe and lasting. The dropout crisis, persisting without acknowledgment or resolution, has emerged as America's “silent epidemic.” The current recession is in the headlines every day, and has demanded action both because of its severity and the public attention it has received. Whether or not you voted for the Housing and Economic Recovery Act, the Troubled Asset Relief Program, or the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, one cannot disagree with this simple point: action is being taken to address the economic crisis.

With the dropout crisis, we have a different story. Although we are working diligently to raise public awareness of this issue, it has yet to permeate the national agenda. This makes it easier for our actions to be slow, inadequate, or even worse, nonexistent. States and school districts are rising to the challenge, and they need the federal government to be a strong partner in their struggle to provide our nation with an educated population, a strong economy, and a stable society. Strengthening our graduation rate will take historic focus, unprecedented collaboration, and significant resources. The required investments in our young people are the most cost-effective investments we can make. We must understand that our future is at stake, and we must resolve that failure is not an option.

Magnitude of the Dropout Crisis

General Colin Powell, founding chairman of America's Promise Alliance, characterizes the dropout crisis as a “national catastrophe.” The issue is both broad and deep, creating new economic and national security problems as many potential skilled workers and military recruits are found to be ill prepared and unsuitable for those professions.

Between 25 to 30 percent of high school students do not graduate on time. For young people of color, on-time graduation is a 50-50 proposition, the flip of a coin. A new report commissioned by America's Promise Alliance and developed by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center finds that only about half (53 percent) of all young people in the nation's 50 largest cities graduate on time. Despite some progress made by several of these cities between 1995 and 2005, the average graduation rate of the 50 largest cities is well below the national average of 71%, and an 18 percentage point urban-suburban gap remains.²

Ten Year Trends: 1995 to 2005

While the nation's 50 largest school districts educate one out of eight high school students; they produce one quarter of the nation's students who do not graduate on time.³ Fortunately, 31 of the nation's 50 largest cities have increased their graduation rates between 1995 and 2005, ranging from a modest 0.7 percentage point gain in Jacksonville, Florida, to a 23 percentage point gain in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.⁴ On the other side of the coin, 19 cities have experienced a decrease in their graduation rate, ranging from a decline of 0.3 percentage points in Louisville, Kentucky to a 23 percentage point drop in Las Vegas, Nevada.⁵ On average, the nation's 50 largest cities had an increase of four percentage points over this ten-year window.⁶

Of course, many factors contribute to these figures, and the devil is truly in the details. For example, some of the largest gains come from cities with very low graduation rates to start with. Ten of the fifty principal school districts began with a graduation rate of less than 39 percent in 2005 making significant, mostly double-digit improvements over this ten year period.⁷

Further, although improvements extend across most of the 50 nation's largest cities, only three of the primary school districts within these 50 cities (Mesa, Arizona; Santa Fe, New Mexico; and Tucson, Arizona) meet or exceed the national average. In fact, three of the principal school districts within the 50 largest cities have graduation rates below 40 percent (Cleveland, Ohio; Detroit, Michigan; and Indianapolis, Indiana).

Urban-Suburban Gap

A significant graduation rate gap exists between urban and suburban school districts: 18 percentage points separate the metropolitan areas of the 50 largest cities from their suburban counterparts.⁸ Fifty-nine percent of high school students in urban school districts graduate on time from high school versus 77 percent of their suburban counterparts. The urban-suburban gap is most prominent in the Northeast and Midwest, with Baltimore, Cleveland, Columbus, and Milwaukee experiencing the largest differentials. In some cases, on-time graduation is half as likely for urban students as for suburban students.⁹

But there is good news: although the urban-suburban gap is large, it is on the decline. Between 1995 and 2005, 14 of the 41 metropolitan regions analyzed by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center saw decreases in the urban-suburban gap, though on average, the gap closed by less than a quarter percentage point per year. Many of the declines (for example, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Chicago, Columbus, El Paso, and New York) resulted from increases in graduation rates among urban school districts; however, some resulted from decreases in graduation rates on the part of suburban school districts.

Economic Impact

The economic significance of the nation's low graduation rate cannot be overstated, and the message of McKinsey and Company's recent study bears repeating: the persistent achievement gaps facing our country impose "the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession."¹⁰

On the macro level, McKinsey estimated the economic impact in 2008 if the United States had closed the achievement gap fifteen years after *A Nation at Risk's* 1983 release across four permutations: the difference between the U.S. and foreign countries, low income and upper income students, white and minority students, and America's high and low performing states. Their findings amount to nothing less than a multibillion dollar lost opportunity:

- Closing the international achievement gap would have produced a 9 to 16 percent gain in GDP (\$1.3 trillion to \$2.3 trillion);
- Closing the racial achievement gap would have produced a 2 to 4 percent gain in GDP (\$310 billion to \$525 billion);
- Closing the income achievement gap would have produced a 3 to 5 percent gain in GDP (\$400 billion to \$670 billion); and
- Closing the achievement gap between high and low performing states would have produced a 3 to 5 percent gain in GDP (\$425 billion to \$700 billion).¹¹

On the micro level, high school graduation is a determining factor of a student's future income. High school dropouts are less likely to be steadily employed and earn less income when they are employed compared with those who graduate from high school. Only one-third (37 percent) of high school dropouts nationwide are steadily employed and are more than twice as likely to live in poverty.¹²

Between 1975 and 2006, income for the workforce as a whole grew, with larger income gains accruing for those with additional education. High school graduates gained 6 percent, those with some college education gained 10 percent, those with a Bachelor's degree gained 23 percent, and those with a graduate degree gained 31 percent. Earnings only dropped over this time period for one group: those without a high school diploma had a 10 percent decline in earnings.

High school dropouts account for 13 percent of the adult population, but earn less than six percent of all dollars earned in the U.S. In the 50 largest cities, the median income for high school dropouts is \$14,000, lower than the median income of \$24,000 for high school graduates and \$48,000 for college graduates. The Editorial Projects in Education Research Center estimates that earning a high school diploma would increase one's annual income by an average of 71 percent, or \$10,000.¹³

Contributors to the Crisis

There are two major influences in students' lives that impact their scholastic achievement: what happens inside the school building and what happens outside of it. A number of factors contribute to the high school dropout crisis, ranging from the quality of standards and rigor in our high schools to the issues impacting students before they ever step foot into the classroom. I will highlight several of these issues, as they all must be addressed in order to strengthen student achievement.

Standards and Expectations for Graduation

In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* recommended that schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous, measurable standards for academic performance and higher expectations for student conduct. This call for increased rigor has been carried forth by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the Obama Administration. We need stronger, internationally-benchmarked standards, so that students, teachers, parents, and administrators understand the purpose and effectiveness of the educational system in which they are part. I was glad to see that Congress and the Administration made rigorous standards a priority in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and I commend the Committee for holding a hearing on the topic of common national standards just a few weeks ago. We should all be encouraged by the work of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers in their efforts with 41 states to begin developing voluntary common standards.

Today, few disagree with the need to raise expectations of student performance. We must offer our students challenging curricula and standards that are internationally benchmarked and aligned with the expectations of college and the workforce. The American Diploma Project (ADP) reports that 23 states have aligned their high school standards with the expectations of postsecondary education, and that 21 other states and the District of Columbia are in the process of moving towards such alignment. Additionally, 20 states and the District of Columbia require a college- and work-ready curriculum for graduation with eight others planning to do so. Ten states include college-readiness tests as part of their statewide assessment system, and 23 others are moving in this direction.¹⁴

Complex Challenges in the Lives of Students

We must address the quality of the educational experience for our students. Equally important, though not duly recognized, is the importance of a student's living and learning environment in affecting how he or she performs in the classroom. According to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, "There are a set of foundational things we need to do to meet students' social and emotional needs. The more we open our school buildings to the community the more we work together, not just with our children but the families, the more we create an environment where the students can maximize their academic potential."¹⁵

For our students to be successful, we must ensure that our schools are adequately funded, our students are taught by high quality teachers, students have the opportunity to achieve rigorous standards, and schools are held accountable for student success. However, schools cannot shoulder the responsibility of educating our children and youth on their own. Every year, our students spend about 1,150 waking hours in school, and nearly five times that number (4,700 waking hours) in their families and communities.¹⁶ Today's teachers have to act as mothers, fathers, social workers, and sometimes even police officers, in addition to the central task of educating our students.

In its recent report, *Parsing the Achievement Gap II*, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) outlined 16 factors that correlate with student achievement; over half of these factors are present in a child's life before or beyond the classroom, including forced mobility, hunger and nutrition, and summer achievement gain and loss.¹⁷ Another study from the School of Education at the University of Colorado and the Education Policy Research Unit at Arizona State University outlined six "out of school" factors that limit what schools, on their own, can achieve for our students, including inadequate medical, dental, and vision care, family relations and family stress, and neighborhood characteristics.¹⁸ For example:

- **Forced Mobility:** One out of six 3rd graders has changed schools three or more times since first grade. These students are one and-a-half times more likely to perform below grade level in reading, nearly twice as likely to perform below grade level in math, and two-and-a-half times more likely to repeat a grade than their more stable peers.¹⁹ With the recession and foreclosure crisis, the issue of student mobility is on the rise. Last year, a group of 330 school districts enrolled 31,000 homeless children throughout the entire school year. In just the first three months of this school year, that same group of school districts identified 41,000 homeless students, an increase of 10,000 homeless students by Thanksgiving.²⁰
- **Hunger and Nutrition:** One out of six children lives in a “food insecure” household, and minority households are 2.5 times as likely as white households to be food insecure.²¹ While a number of studies have linked improving student nutrition with measurable gains in test scores,²² Secretary Duncan states the simple fact clearly and to the point: “If children are hungry, they can’t learn.”²³
- **Health:** An analysis of health problems and their impact on education published by Princeton University and the Brookings Institution in *The Future of Children* estimates that differences in health problems and maternal health and behaviors may account for a quarter of the racial gap in school readiness.²⁴ A simple example of the gap in access to health services lies in the critical role played by adequate vision in the learning process. Seeing the chalkboard, being able to read the words in books, and other vision-related activities are prerequisites for learning. However, 50 percent or more poor minority and low-income children have vision problems that interfere with their academic work; and poor children have severe vision impairment at twice the normal rate.²⁵ Again, in the words of our Secretary of Education: “If a child can’t see the blackboard, they can’t learn.”²⁶
- **Summer Achievement Gap:** Research from Johns Hopkins University found that lack of summer learning opportunities explains about two-thirds of the 9th grade achievement gap between high and low income students. Therefore, low income youth are much less likely to graduate from high school or attend college.²⁷ Here’s how the summer learning gap works: The achievement gap is present once students enter school in the first grade. The gap narrows slightly during the school year, but then grows each successive summer. By the time a student reaches the 9th grade, they are often so far behind that the prospect of on-time graduation is dim.

If schools had to confront only one or two of these environmental factors, the challenge could be addressed with relative ease. However, educators must address the confluence of many of these factors at the same time, which are disproportionately concentrated in the nation’s poorest schools. Less than 4 percent of white students attend schools where 70-100 percent of the students are poor. However, 40 percent of black and Latino students attend such high poverty schools. The average white student attends schools with 0-30 percent poor students; the same can be said for only one out of six black students and one out of five Latino students.²⁸ We must “super-resource” these schools with the best teachers and comprehensive supports to address the academic and non-academic needs of these future leaders.

It is important that we have a thorough understanding of the prevalence and importance of the larger environmental factors in a student’s life that influence their academic success. Unless we address these foundational issues, not even the best teachers with the highest quality curriculum will be able to ensure that every student graduates ready for college.

This is a systemic challenge that can only be solved through innovative thinking and unprecedented partnerships. We must openly acknowledge and comprehensively address the role played by race, poverty and the host of related non-school factors in student achievement. Demographics are certainly not destiny, but we ignore them at the peril of our students and their achievement.

The Youth Voice

The youth voice is often overlooked and not included in the national dialogue on dropout prevention. In order to determine effective solutions to the crisis, their voices must be heard. America's Promise Alliance, along with Gallup and the American Association of School Administrators, recently launched the Gallup Student Poll, a groundbreaking survey of students in grades 5–12. Gallup will conduct the poll twice annually, in March and October, and the findings will be part of the largest-ever survey of American children. The poll will help school systems and communities benchmark progress and determine solutions to the dropout crisis.

In March 2009, the Gallup Student Poll surveyed more than 70,000 students located in 18 states and the District of Columbia, and more than 330 schools and 58 school districts participated. The results were verified by polling a nationally representative sample. The poll measured three key metrics—hope, engagement and well-being—that research has shown have a meaningful impact on educational outcomes and more importantly, can be improved through deliberate action by educators, school administrators, community leaders and others. Questions focused on:

- Hope: the ideas and energy students have for the future;
- Engagement: the level of student involvement in and enthusiasm for school; and
- Well-being: how students think about and experience their lives.

Findings from the poll include:

- Half of those surveyed (50 percent) reported answers indicating they are not hopeful, with one-third (33 percent) indicating that they are stuck, while 17 percent feel discouraged.
- Nearly two in three students in grades 5–12 surveyed (63 percent) are thriving; more than one-third are struggling or suffering. Struggling and suffering students evaluate life in negative terms, struggle to meet daily demands in life and lack some of the resources needed to succeed.
- Eight in 10 (80 percent) said they smiled or laughed at school yesterday, while seven in 10 (70 percent) said they learned or did something interesting at school. Just half (52 percent) said they were treated with respect all day.

The findings from this and future Gallup Student Polls will highlight causes of the dropout crisis from the perspective of students themselves. The youth voice is a critical part of the ongoing dialogue on dropout prevention and the results can help communities across the country develop initiatives that dramatically change outcomes for our young people.

The Solution: A Comprehensive Approach

The dropout crisis calls for a holistic solution, driven by national leadership and local action. Research demonstrates that young people need five core resources to be successful in life. We refer to them as the “five promises:” caring adults, safe places, a healthy state, effective education, and opportunities to serve. These promises provide a simple but powerful framework for a robust

national strategy to end the dropout crisis, and they are at the heart of the Dropout Prevention Campaign launched by America's Promise Alliance in April 2008.

America's Promise Alliance Dropout Prevention Campaign

The campaign begins with high-level summits in all 50 states and the 55 cities with the largest dropout rates in order to raise the visibility of America's "silent epidemic." Within 60 days of each summit, states and communities are required to develop action plans that include a cross section of stakeholders: educators, the business community, nonprofit organizations, and students. Communities receive technical assistance from the Alliance, utilizing Grad Nation, a comprehensive resource described in more detail below. A concentrated effort will take place in twelve communities leveraging the collective resources of the Alliance's strongest partners.

To date, 36 high-level summits have been held in cities nationwide – bringing together more than 14,000 mayors and governors, business owners, child advocates, school administrators, students, and parents to develop workable solutions and action plans. An additional 50 are planned before the end of the year and all 105 will be completed by April 2010. The presenting sponsor for the *Dropout Prevention Campaign* is the State Farm Insurance Company, and other major sponsors include AT&T, The Boeing Company, Ford Motor Company Fund, ING Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation, The Wal-Mart Foundation, Simon Foundation for Education, Chevron, Peter G. Peterson Foundation, Casey Family Programs, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Bank of America, The Annenberg Foundation and Capital One.

Already, cities and states that held summits last year have started implementing changes based on the discussions and early results are promising. One of the most significant success stories hails from Detroit, the first district to host a summit. The city set a ten-year goal to graduate 80% of its youth from the 35 high schools with significant dropout rates. To support this effort, the local United Way announced the creation of The Greater Detroit Venture Fund, a \$10-million fund to assist these schools and improve ACT scores so students are better prepared to apply for college. Since this summit, the city has shuttered, reconstituted, or clustered together eleven of those 35 schools as part of a comprehensive turnaround process. The effectiveness of the summits is also seen in Louisville, Kentucky, which set a 10-year goal to cut dropout rates in half, and Tulsa, Oklahoma, where as a result of their summit, an innovative career exploration program has been implemented.

Schools as Centers of Community

Across the country, schools and communities are partnering to meet the comprehensive needs facing students and increase their achievement in the classroom. I will highlight two such initiatives that demonstrate measurable results and should be brought to scale:

- While Chief Executive Officer of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), Secretary Duncan supported 150 "community schools" that offered a range of community-based services to students including health care and after school programs, creating the nation's largest district-led "community school" effort. An evaluation of this initiative found that nearly half of the students in "community schools" had increased math and reading grades, and that between 2001 and 2006, "community schools" had greater gains in math and reading than "regular" CPS schools.²⁹ Secretary Duncan recently said, "The money that I spent on this to open our schools longer in Chicago was arguably the best money I spent because it was so

highly leveraged.”³⁰ CPS invested in both instructional improvements and support services, leveraging resources from the community into schools, and producing measurable results. This strategy should be expanded throughout the country.

- *Communities In Schools* (CIS) is the nation’s largest dropout prevention organization, serving 1.2 million students in 27 states. CIS partners with schools and school districts to provide at-risk students with the five core resources: caring adults, safe places during non-school hours, access to health services, marketable skills, and opportunities to give back to peers and the community. A national evaluation found that CIS schools have lower dropout rates and higher graduation rates than comparison schools.³¹ Additionally, the graduation rate increase of CIS Performance Learning Centers, offering targeted academic and support services in small settings, was three-and-a-half times greater than that of comparison schools.³²

Grad Nation

Grad Nation is a first-of-its-kind research-based toolkit for communities seeking to reduce their dropout rate and better support young people through high school graduation and beyond. With more than one million students dropping out of high school each year, *Grad Nation* is specifically designed to offer solutions and tools for every size community and presents a compelling case for all sectors of society to get involved. The guidebook is part of the Alliance’s *Dropout Prevention Campaign*, which launched in April 2008, and is sponsoring 105 *Dropout Prevention* Summits in all 50 states through 2010.

Commissioned by the Alliance and authored by Robert Balfanz, Ph.D. and Joanna Honig Fox from the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University and John M. Bridgeland and Mary McNaught of Civic Enterprises, *Grad Nation* brings together—in one place—the nation’s best evidence-based practices for keeping young people in school. It includes information on everything from making the case to the community on the need to act to establishing “early warning” systems, implementing effective school transformation strategies, and building proven “multiple pathways” to graduation, as well as wrapping the most appropriate services around students so they can surmount the challenges they face.

Grad Nation gives communities a comprehensive set of tools necessary to rally collective support to end the dropout crisis, understand and communicate the dimensions of the dropout challenge in a particular, develop effective action strategies to improve graduation rates, prepare youth for advanced learning after high school, and build strong, lasting partnerships that involve all sectors of a community.

Federal Policy Recommendations

The federal government has the opportunity and the responsibility to be a strong partner with states and communities in addressing the dropout crisis. Federal education policy currently does little to support the nation’s high schools, and that must change. I recommend the following:

- Schools as Centers of Community: The administration has outlined five pillars for education reform: expanding access to early childhood; world-class college- and career-ready standards and assessments, teacher effectiveness, innovation/excellence with a focus on low-performing schools, and increasing the number of people pursuing higher education. To these five items, I suggest adding a sixth: Schools as Centers of Community. We must

address both what happens inside the classroom and outside of it in order to strengthen graduation rates and prepare our students for college. By making schools the centers of our communities, we can leverage the resources of a wide range of stakeholders in supporting the success of our students. This must be a priority for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). As a potential first step, I encourage Congress to fund the President's proposal for "Promise Neighborhoods" to address the effects of poverty and improve educational achievements and life outcomes for our children.

- Turnaround Low Performing High Schools: Important legislation was introduced in the previous Congress that would create an appropriate federal role in the improvement of the nation's high schools. The Graduation Promise Act (H.R. 2928/110th Congress), introduced by Representative Ruben Hinojosa, authorizes \$2.5 billion annually in order to target resources toward those high schools producing substantial numbers of high school dropouts. This legislation is comprehensive, data-driven, and strikes the right balance between federal support and local control.
- Promote Innovation: Every high school is different, and although they face similar challenges, there is no "one size fits all" solution to the dropout crisis. Congress should pass the Secondary School Innovation Fund Act (H.R. 2239), introduced by Representative David Loebsack, in order to support and evaluate innovative approaches to turning around the nation's lowest performing high schools. We must learn more about the most effective strategies, and bring them to scale.
- High School Accountability: As we provide additional resources to turnaround low performing high schools, we must hold them accountable for results. The Every Student Counts Act (H.R. 1569) codifies into law and strengthens much of the policy that the Department of Education has recently implemented through regulation regarding graduation rates, including a common definition of the graduation rate and reasonable requirements for growth in order for schools to make adequate yearly progress under No Child Left Behind.
- Comprehensive Student Supports: Several bills have been introduced that support the vision of "schools as centers of community." The WE CARE Act (H.R. 3762/110th Congress), introduced in the previous Congress by Representative David Loebsack, inserts the notion of schools as centers of community throughout Title I, Part A of ESEA. The centerpiece of the proposal is an incentive fund to support "community involvement policies" at the local level that would support partnerships among school districts and community organizations to leverage local resources in order to meet students' non-academic needs and prepare them for success in the classroom.

The Full Service Community Schools Act (H.R. 2323/110th Congress) was introduced by Majority Leader Steny Hoyer and would fund partnerships between schools and community organizations to provide student support services in schools. The Department of Education received a \$5 million appropriation for this purpose and last year received 400 applications but was only able to fund 10 proposals.

The Keeping Parents and Communities Engaged Act (S.1302/110th Congress) was introduced by Senator Edward Kennedy and would provide grants to school districts for

parent and community engagement coordinators, for community based organizations to leverage services into schools, and for partnerships among mayors, school districts, and community organizations to renovate schools so they can be more effectively used as centers of community.

- FY 2010 Appropriations: I urge Congress to fund the High School Graduation Initiative proposed by the President, as well as his proposed increase for School Improvement Grants, to turn around the nation's lowest performing high schools.

Conclusion

We do not have to live in a country where three out of 10 students do not graduate on time, and where on-time graduation for minority students is a 50-50 proposition. What I hope you take away from this testimony are four key points:

- You are right to focus on the high school dropout crisis; it is our most pressing national challenge and we don't have time for incremental progress.
- The crisis results from a combination of factors in schools and in the lives of our students; we must address both in order to increase graduation rates.
- We have solutions on the ground, and legislative proposals that will bring them to scale.
- By passing these proposals, we will solve this problem, fortify our economy, and provide our students with the opportunity to experience the promise of America.

Endnotes

- ¹ McKinsey and Company (2009). *The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools*. Retrieved May 6, 2009 from http://www.mckinsey.com/client/service/socialsector/achievement_gap_report.pdf.
- ² Christopher Swanson (2009). *Cities in Crisis 2009: Closing the Graduation Gap: Educational and Economic Conditions in America's Largest Cities*. Bethesda, Maryland: Editorial Projects in Education Research Center.
- ³ The principal school districts of America's 50 largest cities collectively educate 1.7 million public high school students and produce 279,000 of the 1.2 million high school students who do not graduate on time (Ibid., p. 13).
- ⁴ Swanson, 2009.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ McKinsey and Company (2009).
- ¹¹ Swanson, 2009.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ American Diploma Project Network, *Closing the Expectations Gap*. Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc., 2009. Retrieved May 6, 2009 from <http://www.achieve.org/closingtheexpectationsgap2009>.
- ¹⁵ Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, Interview with Charlie Rose, available at <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/10140>
- ¹⁶ David Berliner (2009). *Poverty and Potential: Out-of-School Factors and School Success*. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center and Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved May 6, 2009 from <http://epicpolicy.org/publication/poverty-and-potential>.
- ¹⁷ Paul Barton and Richard Coley (2009). *Parsing the Achievement Gap II*. Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Service. Note: This report uses the term "frequent school changes." I use the term "forced mobility" because it more accurately describes the living circumstances of our most at-risk students that, in turn, causes reductions in school performance. For additional information, see Duffield and Lovell (endnote 20).
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³² The Performance Learning Center: Communities In Schools Small Schools Model Promoting Graduation and College Readiness. Presentation for the Alliance for Excellent Education on April 22, 2009. In author's possession.