

**The Federal Role
In Transforming the Secondary Schools that
Undermine the Nation's Competitiveness and Drive its Dropout Crisis**

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I want to thank Chairman Miller, Vice Chairman Kildee, Representative McKeon and the Committee for holding this hearing. It comes not a moment too soon.

The nation faces a high school graduation challenge that if unmet will leave it unprepared to succeed in the 21st Century. Not only does the nation, in the words of President Obama, need to make dropping out of high school not an option, it needs to insure that a high school diploma means something and leaves all students prepared for college and/or post-secondary career training. Simply put, the world has changed and there is no work for high school dropouts. Nor are there many opportunities that will support a family for students who end their education after high school. To fully share in the nation's prosperity in 21st Century America, all students need to graduate from high school prepared for the further education and training required for adult success.

To meet its graduation challenge, the nation must find a solution for its dropout factories. These are the 12 percent of the nation's high schools, about 2,000 in number, that year after year, produce more than half of its dropouts and close to three-quarters of its minority dropouts. In these high schools graduation is not the norm and is often at best a 50/50 proposition.

These high schools are found in every state and 77 percent of congressional districts, but are concentrated within them in a sub-set of urban and rural low-wealth communities. In these locales, dropout factories are often the predominant or only public high school. This puts the entire community at risk of being cut off from a modern economy, which is driven by human capital or know-how. These high schools are the engine of the under-class and collectively place a significant drag on the nation's competitiveness. They usually exist, moreover, in communities that are already struggling, places where industry has left, like the automotive cities of Michigan and the textile towns of South Carolina, or the broken neighborhoods of Philadelphia and Los Angeles. This is why the dropout crisis has been called a silent epidemic. Yet, there is no way for these cities, towns, and neighborhoods to re-invent themselves without high schools that prepare all their students for post-secondary schooling or training.

The intense concentration of the nation's dropout factories, in a limited number of locales across the nation, however, is in fact what makes this problem solvable. It enables us to

focus our efforts in a relatively few schools, where they will have maximum effect on the nation's progress. It is much more likely that we can transform or replace 2,000 low-performing high schools, than 20,000. In most states, the number is between 10 and 70. In most congressional districts, outside of the nation's 10 largest cities, there are commonly one to three such schools.

Moreover, in the past decade we have learned much about what it will take to transform the nation's dropout factories, developed evidence-based tools and models, and generated ample proof points that it can be done. Ten years ago, if you asked people to name some of the nation's most intractable school districts, New York and Chicago, would come to the top of the list. Yet these are the very districts that have made notable progress in graduation rates in recent years and have pioneered innovations that are spreading across the nation. At the state level, it has been in what were once some of the nation's poorest states, such as North Carolina, Arkansas, Alabama, and Kentucky that the most improvement have been made. This tells us that progress occurs when will and know-how are combined with sufficient capacity and accountability systems that encourage effort and innovation.

Also in the past five years, notable advancements have been made in developing early warning and on-track indicator systems, enabling us to identify, while there is still time to intervene, the students within the nation's dropout factories and their feeder middle schools who will need the most support to graduate. This means we can target our efforts to both the most challenged schools and their students most in need. Early warning and on-track indicator systems also give us a powerful accountability tool to make sure schools are getting the right intervention to the right student at the right time.

One essential finding of this research is that it is often possible to identify as early as sixth grade up to half of the students who, absent effective interventions, will not graduate, and up to 80 percent by the ninth grade. This speaks to the need to reform both our nation's high schools with low graduation rates and the middle schools where their students come from.

Finally, both the national importance of the dropout crisis and the realization that it can be solved has led a growing number of prominent non-profit organizations that collectively have deep reach into the communities most at need to step up and make the graduation challenge one of their top priorities. These include United Way, Boys and Girls Clubs, Communities in Schools, City Year, and the Chamber of Commerce. The America's Promise Alliance, founded by Colin and Alma Powell, is organizing multi-sector efforts uniting business, faith-based efforts, mayors' and governors' offices, community organizations, and school systems behind evidence-based action plans. Dropout prevention summits are being held in all 50 states and 55 cities over two years. Meeting the nation's graduation challenge is no longer seen as just a school issue, but a community-wide campaign.

In short, meeting the nation's graduation challenge is a big enough issue to matter, but a manageable enough problem to solve.

The Challenge We Face in Transforming the Nation's Dropout Factories and Their Feeder Middle Grade Schools

Although we know that to meet the nation's graduation challenge we must transform the nation's dropout factories, and recognize that the know-how and tools exist to do this, we must also acknowledge that progress in transforming these high schools, beyond a few leading districts and states, has been slow.

A brief examination of why this is so demonstrates the need for a federal role in helping communities transform their dropout factories.

First, high schools with consistently low graduation rates often face extremely high degrees of educational challenge. In these high schools, it is typical for the majority of students to enter the ninth grade with math and reading skills two or more years below grade level, and/or already beginning to disengage from school as witnessed by worsening attendance rates and increased behavioral problems. In a high school of 1,200 to 2,000 students, this can translate into hundreds of students in need of extra support, beyond good everyday teaching.

Second, by and large, these schools do not have either the financial or human resources to meet this degree of educational challenge. The nation's dropout factories almost exclusively educate poor and minority children. Yet despite having among the highest concentration and largest number of needy students, close to half of these schools receive no federal Title 1 support. Moreover, the crucial ninth grade, because it is typically seen as an undesirable teaching assignment, is often staffed by the least experienced and skilled teachers. These teachers are not supported by strong professional development nor assisted by sufficient numbers of skilled and committed adults in support roles. The result is frustration, burn-out, and high levels of transiency, making it difficult for reforms to take hold and build their impact over time.

Third, local, state, and federal accountability systems have not been designed to require, guide, and support the transformation of these high schools. By and large, high schools have been the orphan of accountability systems. Their unique needs have not been fully considered. Because the majority of students who dropout fall off the path to graduation in the ninth grade, it will take four years for the full impact of school reform efforts to translate into increased graduation rates. Most accountability systems, however, demand results within one or at most two years.

This encourages schools to focus on the smaller number of dropouts who fall off-track in the later grades, rather than implementing the fundamental reforms needed to transform the entire school. At the federal level, moreover, No Child Left Behind heavily weights high school accountability to the results of achievement tests given in a single grade. This encourages schools to focus all their efforts on the sub-set of students who are close to proficient, rather than the larger number of students who entered ninth grade two or

more years below grade level. In some cases, schools even push these students out before they reach the tested grade.

Fourth, we have not paid enough attention to developing mechanisms to get the right reform and transformation strategies to the right school, with sufficient capacity building and technical assistance to enable effective implementation and to sustain it. Too often good reform strategies have been applied in the wrong places or without enough intensity and fidelity to succeed. This, in turn, has led to disappointment with the results, fed the erroneous belief that nothing works, and shifted reform attention elsewhere.

The Federal Role in Transforming the Nation's Dropout Factories, Their Feeder Middle Schools and Meeting the Graduation Challenge.

To meet the nation's graduation challenge and transform the secondary schools that drive the dropout crisis, we need to create a federal-state-local-community partnership dedicated to the task. The federal government needs to play four crucial roles.

First, accountability. Simply put, a high school's graduation rate and achievement levels need to have co-equal weight in federal accountability frameworks. Every student needs to graduate and all students need to earn diplomas signifying that they are prepared for post-secondary schooling or career training. It is only when high schools understand that both goals need to be achieved that they will not be tempted to trade off one for the other. The graduation rate regulations issued by the Department of Education in 2008 go a long way toward establishing both the accurate measurement of graduation rates and raising their importance in federal accountability systems. They need to be fine tuned and codified. The Everyone Graduates bill sponsored by Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA) achieves this and should be passed.

Second, resources. The federal government needs to insure that the most challenged secondary schools have the resources they need to succeed. Increased investment in pre-k education, as well as existing Title 1 funding, will see its impact muted if students in the most vulnerable communities continue to attend dysfunctional middle and high schools. Adolescence, in communities of concentrated poverty, carries its own set of risk factors that cannot be fully eliminated by more positive early education experiences. Up to one-quarter of the students who fall off the graduation path in ninth grade, for example, enter high school with grade level skills.

Ensuring that a secondary school's resources match its educational challenge will involve two steps. First, full and fair Title 1 funding for secondary schools. Second, as is envisioned in the Success in the Middle and Graduation Promise Acts, targeted funds based on a careful and peer-reviewed analysis of the needs and capacity of each dropout factory and its primary feeder middle schools. Some of these schools, because of variability in local and state funding and the intensity and size of their educational challenges, will need more resources than others. There needs to be a mechanism to enable this.

Third, capacity finding and building. Federal legislation needs to be sensitive to the fact, that across the nation the capacity to transform dropout factories and their feeder middle schools will rest in different places. In some locales, it will be the school district that has the wherewithal to transform these schools. In other locales, state departments of education can and will need to play a stronger role. In still other areas, external technical assistance from experienced non-profit providers with a track record in similar schools will be required. In addition, federal support will be required to increase the capacity of school districts, state departments of education, and external school reform organizations and support providers to transform low graduation rate high schools and their feeder middle schools at the scale required. This is what will enable us to move beyond pockets of success to systematic improvements.

These capacity building efforts could take several forms. These could be competitive grants to enable partnerships between states or districts and consortia of technical assistance providers, as envisioned in the Secondary School Innovation Fund Act or an expansion of the community investment boards found in the recently passed Serve America Act. For the most impacted communities, we may also have to look seriously at the idea of federal Graduation Bonds, which would provide the upfront capital needed to replace or re-configure large schools of 2,000 or more students that are relics of another era, and provide the intensive and large scale teacher training and support required to prepare all students for success in post-secondary schooling. States would then use the increased tax revenues and lower social service costs that would result from dramatically raising the graduation rate in communities where dropping out is the norm to re-pay the bonds. In addition, federal R and D efforts may be required to increase the range of solutions for two particularly challenging sub-sets of dropout factories: high schools with 2,000 or more students and high schools with low graduation rates that are the only high school in a district (25 percent of the nation's dropout factories are such).

Fourth, smart targeting and integrated efforts. Finally and perhaps most importantly, the federal government through both its funding and accountability mechanisms should enable and promote smarter choices in the strategies selected to transform the secondary schools that drive the nation's dropout crisis. The good news is that over the past decade we have learned that there are multiple ways to successfully transform dropout factories and their feeder middle schools. Evidence-based whole school reform models have worked, as has replacing failed large schools with several smaller new schools. Different governance models, from charters to pairing public schools with external operators from school reform organizations and universities, have shown promise in some locales, as have data-based multiple pathways to graduation within large and medium-sized school districts. But nothing has worked everywhere it has been tried, which tells us that context matters.

Before a secondary school receives additional funds to support the needed reforms, it should be required to work with its school district and, where appropriate and needed, external technical assistance providers to develop both needs and capacity assessments. These would detail its educational challenge, analyze why prior reform efforts have not

worked, and identify the capacity it will need. These assessments would also show how the school would implement and sustain reforms that are comprehensive, sufficiently robust and intense to meet its educational challenges and tailored to the specific needs, opportunities, and circumstances experience by the school. The schools' and districts' needs and capacity analyses, as well as their school improvement plans, should then be subject to real and rigorous peer review, with technical assistance being provided to the schools and districts that need more support to both select the right strategy for their circumstances and implement it well.

The good news is that good legislation is already or soon to be introduced into the 111th Congress. These bills collectively go a long way toward addressing the nation's graduation challenge and should form the cornerstone of federal efforts to transform the secondary schools that produce most of the nation's dropouts. The bills include the Every Student Counts Act- H.R. 1569-introduced by Representative Scott (D-VA), The Graduation Promise Act sponsored by Representative Hinojosa (D-TX), the Success in the Middle Act sponsored by Representative Grijalva (D-AZ), and the Secondary School Innovation Fund sponsored by Representative Loeb sack (D-IA).

In conclusion, sitting here today, we can identify most of the students in your districts and across the nation, who absent effective interventions, will not graduate in the next seven years. We know which schools they attend and, with a little attention and effort, we see the signals they are sending, signals that clearly say "help." We also know how to do something about it. This creates the obligation for us to act, to not only make dropping out not an option, but also to provide all these students with a pathway to adult success and full economic and social participation in 21st Century America. The federal government must play a key role in this effort.