

BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

Improving high school graduation rates is one of the hardest jobs in any state. In New York, policymakers have overhauled P-12 education in several important ways, with special emphasis on holding school districts accountable for improving graduation rates. Allowing one out of every eight high school students to drop out is unacceptable, they argue. And they're right.

Too many high school students never get to walk across the stage to receive their diplomas. In 2007, 25,500 students dropped out of high school in New York, one out of every eight students who started 9th grade in 2003.¹ And minorities fare worst: one out of five Hispanic youths dropped out in 2007, as did one out of six African-American youths. The results were even worse in previous years.

But we need to go beyond high school graduation as a marker of educational success. Today, New York pays inadequate attention to two other key educational outcomes. First is postsecondary education. A high school diploma no longer paves the road to a secure adulthood. We need to help youths obtain at least a year of education or skills training beyond high school to succeed in the working world.

Second is dropout recovery. Youths do not stop mattering just because they drop out of high school. We need to make sure that out-of-school youths have a chance to get their education back on track. In fact, they could even get a college degree.

The Graduation Imperative...and Beyond

As late as the 1970s, youths in New York with no more than a high school diploma (and often less) could find work at large manufacturers or their suppliers. Such jobs typically came with middle-class wages, health insurance and pensions, the perks of the postwar employment contract.

Those days are over. New York participates in an interdependent global economy where unskilled manufacturing jobs drift to the lowest-cost locations around the world. Today's New York employers use technology and innovative management strategies to keep their competitive edge. So the base of the New York economy is now in so-called "middle-skill" jobs, which require at least a year of education or training beyond high school. "The plain fact is that no one goes anywhere in the modern knowledge economy unless they get at least some kind of postsecondary education or training first," says Anthony Carnevale, an educational expert at Georgetown University.

¹ "Graduation Rates: Students who Started 9th Grade in 2001, 2002 and 2003, Powerpoint Presentation, New York State Education Department, undated.

How is New York doing at getting its youth into post-high school education and training? Better than some other states, but not well enough to ensure equality of educational opportunity or maintain New York's prosperity. The Regents exam is explicitly designed to test graduating high school seniors' college-readiness, and about two-thirds of high school graduates in New York continue on to college. This is one of the highest college-going rates in the nation. Even so, most low-income youths in New York never get to college.

New York needs to dramatically improve college opportunities for low-income youths and working adults. The problem is not only substandard learning, but high school curricula that often do align with minimum college standards. Thus the majority of high school graduates in New York City who attend CUNY community colleges require remedial classes to improve their skills to a college-ready level. Many more students in these schools never receive the encouragement and mentoring to apply to college. Other postsecondary options are worth exploring as well, such as apprenticeships and vocational training, and military service.

Dropping out – and Going to College

What does New York offer teens who drop out of high school? Too little. Some school districts operate alternative high schools, and federal workforce funding in some cases goes toward adult literacy classes for out-of-school youth. But for the most part dropouts are simply written off, left to stumble through their first years as adults with little outside assistance. The results are both tragic and expensive. Nationally, three out of every four state prison inmates are high school dropouts. Dropouts “cost our nation more than \$260 billion dollars,” states Margaret Spellings, Commissioner of the U.S. Department of Education. “That’s in lost wages, lost taxes, and lost productivity over their lifetimes.”²

Compassion aside, high school dropouts are a wasted resource. New York has over 300,000 high school dropouts in the prime work years of 25 to 34, adults who could be taking jobs that our society needs and for which the demand is growing. Many of them are motivated to learn. Each year, more than 50,000 people take the Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED) exam battery, approximately 30,000 pass it, and more than 3,000 GED-holders enroll full-time at CUNY and SUNY community colleges (data on private colleges is unavailable). Many more could seize the college opportunity if we created structures to encourage and support them.

Across the country, communities and institutions have identified the recovery of out-of-school youth as an urgent priority. The most comprehensive study of dropout recovery programs, conducted by the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF), noted that the “settings and modes of dropout recovery...encompass traditional public schools, specially-created recovery-focused schools alternative learning centers, community-based nonprofit schools and programs, for-profit schools,” and many others. These varied

² Margaret Spellings, Secretary, U.S. Department of Education, Speech to the American Enterprise Institute, March 13, 2007.

programs share “an unwavering commitment to putting students at the center.”³ The AYPF study identifies twelve programs around the nation that have proven the feasibility of reconnecting high school dropouts to education.

In New York, a key area for reform should be the GED. If the diploma is no longer adequate for high school graduates, why should the GED be adequate for out-of-school youth? Across the country, states and localities are repositioning the GED as a stepping-stone to further education rather than an endpoint in itself. New York’s GED system still maintains the structures appropriate to the industrial era of New York’s economy. Students are permitted to “drop in” and take the test without previous preparation. As a result, four out of ten applicants fail each year – the third highest failure rate in the nation after Alabama and Mississippi. This system needs to be reshaped to prepare GED applicants to obtain at least one year of additional post-GED education and skills training.

New York’s economy has changed dramatically since the postwar era. Yet the educational system we offer teenagers in many areas has hardly changed at all. If we are to maintain our state’s prosperity and revitalize upstate communities, New York’s education and training systems must retool and dramatically expand.

Recommendations:

- *Strengthen the high school-college connection, particularly in low-income communities.* New York already has some of the components of a high school-to-college pipeline: a single stage agency responsible for both secondary and postsecondary education, a mandated college prep curriculum, a set of exams that tests college readiness, and a growing dual-enrollment system. Yet New York can do more, notably by expanding dual enrollment and establishing college bridge programs in low-income communities.
- *Launch marketing campaigns to promote college in low-income communities.* Other states and localities have begun campaigns to educate low-income youth and their parents on the importance and accessibility of higher education. South Carolina’s Learn to Earn program and the Lumina-funded KnowHow2Go initiative offer instructive models.
- *Expand the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) to improve college affordability.* TAP is one of the best state financial aid programs in the country. Yet TAP is falling out of sync with the needs of today’s college students. TAP should provide solid financial aid for students attending part-time and working part-time, and it should stop penalizing adult students who happen to be unmarried and childless. Many low-income students fit that description, and they need financial aid as much as married students do, or even more. In fact, unmarried foster youth applying for college receive less financial aid than youth coming from two-parent families – and in some cases none at all.

³ “Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth,” American Youth Policy Forum.

- *Connect the GED system with the adult literacy, alternative high school and postsecondary systems.* Today, New York's GED system is built on a stand-alone model, cut off from the rest of the educational continuum. Among the steps that would build needed linkages would be mandating that GED applicants take practice tests, expanding the role of adult education providers in GED prep, and establishing pre-college bridge programs that help prepare GED-holding students for the college experience.
- *Set goals for educational achievement.* To energize action for the state's educational goals, policymakers should set targets, provide adequate funding and support, and then hold agencies and institutions accountable for meeting those targets. We propose that New York commit to increasing the number of dropouts who obtain a GED and continue their postsecondary education by 50% over the next five years.