



SUCCESS **in** School, Ready for Life:

How Can We Help More Students
Graduate from High School?



Welcome to the Forum!



This discussion guide was designed for people who want to see more students graduate from high school and lead happy, productive adult lives. It's based on the beliefs that (1) success in school hinges on many factors, both within and outside of the school day, and (2) we all have a stake in the issue and a role to play. If this strikes a chord with you, you've come to the right place.

During this forum, we'll work together to:

- Better understand the reasons for and consequences of dropping out of high school.
- Consider different approaches to helping more students succeed and graduate.
- Identify actions that are likely to make a positive difference and are doable in terms of time, resources and public will.
- Examine the roles of families, schools, businesses, and community and faith-based organizations in supporting student success.
- Explore potential actions and next steps.

This work is the result of a research exchange with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. Any interpretations and conclusions are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, its staff, directors or officers. Kettering research is done from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do about issues that concern them.

A national team of people from the following institutions and organizations participated in the research and framing of the issue and writing of the guide:

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Education/Early Childhood Education Department

Colorado State University, Center for Public Deliberation

Georgia College, American Democracy Project,
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Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement

Kansas State University, Institute for
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Manchester Community College

Maricopa Community Colleges,
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Miami University, Center for Civic Engagement

Morehouse College

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What's the value of a high school diploma?

About \$260,000 in extra lifetime earnings, to start with, and even more for those who continue their education after high school. Graduates are also more likely to have health insurance and less likely to become unemployed than those who don't finish high school.

The benefits of high school diplomas go well beyond the individual. (See Figure 1.) People with high school degrees pay more income taxes and are less likely to receive public assistance or be in prison. They fulfill current and future workforce demands, help keep the nation competitive in the global market, and fuel the country's economic growth.

In addition to the financial benefits, high school graduates also contribute more to America's civic health than do non-graduates. They are twice as likely to vote and three times as likely to volunteer than those who never completed high school.

By 2018, the vast majority of available jobs will demand high school degrees or more. (See Figure 2.) Almost two-thirds will require some type of education beyond high school. Job openings available to people without high school degrees will shrink to only 10 percent.

Who is dropping out, and why?

Despite the many benefits of a high school diploma, more than one in four students in the U.S. drop of high school. That's about 1.2 million students, or 6,400 students every school day. Students from low-income families and students of color have lower graduation rates than do white and more affluent students. (See Figure 3.)

A small percentage of high schools are responsible for a large part of the problem. Almost half of all students who drop out come from only 12 percent of the nation's high schools. These are consistently low-performing schools, where less than half of the freshmen class makes it to senior year. Students of color are overrepresented in these low-performing schools.

The reasons students drop out are many and varied. One study (Civic Enterprises, 2006) included interviews with



467 dropouts in 25 cities, suburbs and small towns in the Northeast. The researchers found that dropping out was rarely a sudden, impulsive act. Instead, it was a gradual process of disengagement that often involved boredom, lack of motivation to work hard, and failing courses. Many dropouts also cited personal reasons, such as the need to make money or care for children or other family members.

Most of the people interviewed for the study regretted their decision to drop out. A large majority (81 percent) felt that graduating from high school was important to success in life. About three-quarters said they would stay in school if they had it to do over.

How does the U.S. compare with other countries?

Today's students must be prepared to live and work in a global society. Yet the U.S. lags woefully behind on numerous measures of child and youth development, according to research by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (See Figure 4).

Compared to other large, industrialized democracies, we rank among the worst 15 percent on the measures of teenage births and child poverty. On educational attainment, we rank in the bottom third on high school graduation rates and in the bottom half on college graduation rates.

What can we do to help more students graduate?

Among these troubling statistics, there is also hope. Graduation rates for the Class of 2008 (the most recent

Overview

year for which data are available) rebounded after two years of decline. At 72 percent, the graduation rate is at its highest point since the mid-1980s. Rates increased for all racial and ethnic groups and in three-quarters of the states.

Efforts are underway on many fronts to boost high school graduation rates. Among them is a “Civic Marshall Plan” promoted by the America’s Promise Alliance. In the spirit of the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after World War II, the Civic Marshall Plan focuses on the strategic deployment of human resources to help school districts and states accelerate progress in student achievement, high school graduation rates, and college- and career-readiness for the nation’s youth.

While people bring different perspectives about the best ways to help students succeed in high school, one thing is certain: no one group can do it alone – not schools, not parents, not communities. The purpose of these forums is to invite all willing parties to the table to examine the issue and take action in their own communities and states.

To start the discussion, this guide poses three approaches:

- 1 Invest more in youth development, with a broad focus that includes physical, intellectual, social, civic and emotional growth.
- 2 Keep education rigorous and relevant to enable students to succeed in a global society and pursue their individual goals.
- 3 Build strong relationships between students and caring, capable adults to provide guidance and support.

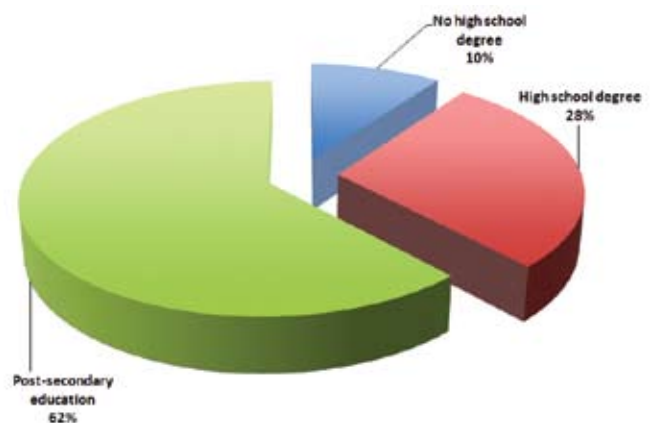
Many of us will see at least some value in each of the approaches. The challenge lies in coming to agreement on priorities and being willing to act on them. This forum is a beginning of that process. We hope it leads to further discussions, involving wider circles of people who care about the success of our young people in school, work and life.

FIGURE 1:
Four-Fold Benefits of High School Diplomas



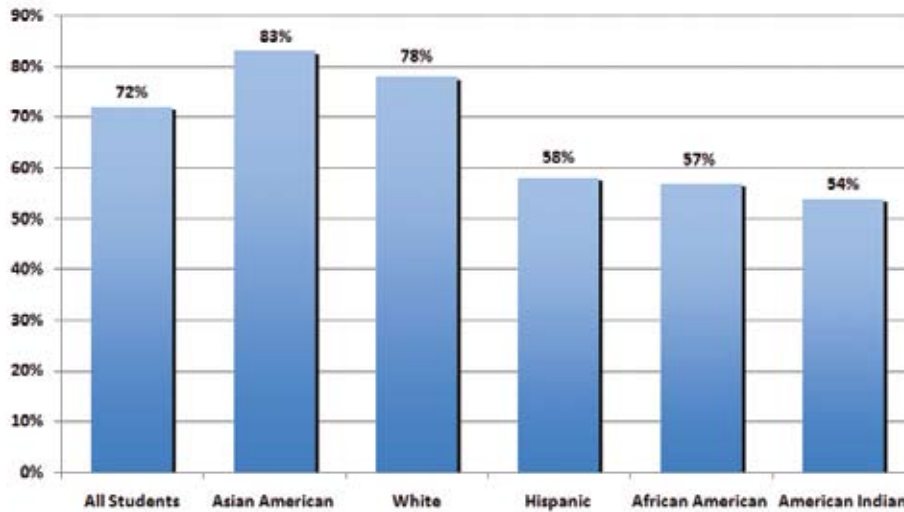
Sources: Alliance for Excellent Education, “Education and the Economy: Boosting State and Local Economies by Improving High School Graduation Rates,” June 2011; National Conference on Citizenship, “2010 Civic Health Assessment”

FIGURE 2:
Education Needed for U.S. Jobs in 2018



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, “Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2018,” June 2010

FIGURE 3: National High School Graduation Rates, Class of 2008



Source: Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, "Diplomas Count 2011"

Figure 4: Child and Youth Development Indicators in the U.S. and Other Industrialized Democracies

Indicator	US Rank and Countries Reporting (#1 = best)
Births to teenage mothers	#29 out of 30
Children in poor families	#27 out of 30
High school graduation rate	#18 out of 25
College graduation rate	#14 out of 22

Source: Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation, www.oecd.org

APPROACH 1

Invest in the development of all youth.

We live in one of the wealthiest nations in the world, yet we rank poorly on many measures of child well-being. We need to take a hard look at our priorities and invest more in what matters most: giving our young people a good start in life by supporting all aspects of their development – physical, intellectual, social, civic and emotional. We must also address the social, economic and educational inequalities that undermine the development of so many of our youth.



POSSIBLE ACTIONS

1. Strengthen the community infrastructure for youth development through recreation facilities, libraries, neighborhood safety and opportunities for civic involvement, especially in low-income communities.
2. Expand school, community and faith-based programs that reduce pregnancy, substance abuse and bullying.
3. Expand programs that meet the basic needs of students and their families (food, housing, health and mental health care, personal safety, etc.).
4. Allocate more funding to public education, especially for schools with high dropout rates.
5. Implement early warning systems for youth who exhibit risk factors for dropping out, and connect them to appropriate resources.
6. Launch dropout prevention initiatives that involve multiple schools, where richer and poorer communities can learn from each other.

POTENTIAL CONCERNS AND TRADE-OFFS

- In a tight economy, allocating more funding for youth development could mean fewer resources for other worthy groups.
- Money alone won't turn around low-performing schools, and giving them more money is unfair to schools that are working hard to succeed.
- Some activities, such as sex education and pregnancy prevention, are viewed as a family – versus school or community – responsibility.

What are the advantages and drawbacks of this approach?

What are some examples of this approach in our community and elsewhere?

What should we do to expand youth development opportunities, and who needs to be involved?

APPROACH 2

Make education more relevant and effective.

Success in school is enhanced by high-yet-achievable expectations and by connecting coursework to students' future goals. Students need encouragement and support to find their particular niche in the world, to identify and develop their talents and be the best that they can be. More than ever, they need to be prepared to live and work in a global society, where the abilities to think critically and adapt are essential.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

1. Diversify the approaches to high school education, including theme schools, flexible hours/calendars, early college high schools, smaller high schools and online courses, with high expectations for all students to graduate.
2. Maximize individual learning styles by embedding art, music, physical activity and community service within the curriculum.
3. Do more to attract, prepare, support and reward effective teachers, especially in low-performing schools.
4. Beginning in middle school, help students explore and focus on their vocational and career interests.
5. Foster collaboration between schools, families and communities to increase learning and academic enrichment across environments.
6. Engage the business community in education as career mentors, curriculum advisors, and internship and apprenticeship sponsors.

POTENTIAL CONCERNS AND TRADE-OFFS

- Providing more options means that education will become less standardized, and aggregate results will be more difficult to measure.
- Some students may be pressured to make decisions about their futures prematurely.
- Schools that focus too much on careers may short-change the kind of broad exploration that's critical for overall learning and a well-rounded education.



What are the advantages and drawbacks of this approach?

What are some examples of this approach in our community and elsewhere?

What should we do to improve educational rigor and relevance, and who needs to be involved?

APPROACH 3

Build strong relationships.

Most learning happens in the context of relationships – with parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, neighbors, youth group leaders, peers and others. Youth need connections with caring and capable adults they can count on, who are positive role models and care about their success. They also need support for developing effective social skills with people of all ages. Good relationships with peers and adults lay the foundation for educational achievement and successful lives.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

1. Offer parenting education and support beginning during pregnancy, recognizing that parents are children’s first and most influential teachers.
2. Provide flexible hours of work so that parents can be available when their children need them most.
3. Provide more time for quality teacher-student interactions and mentoring during the day.
4. Hire more guidance counselors, social workers and community police officers to help students who are struggling with academic or personal problems.
5. Expand community and faith-based youth groups, arts programs and sports teams to nurture positive relationships with adults and peers.
6. Expand opportunities for peer mentoring and for older students to tutor younger ones.

POTENTIAL CONCERNS AND TRADE-OFFS

- Schools are driven by the pressures of standardized testing and don’t have time for the longer-term investment in relationships.
- Parents, teachers and other adults would have to be find more time in their already busy schedules to spend with youth.
- Mentors and other adult volunteers need to be rigorously screened and trained and pose potential liability problems for the sponsoring schools and community organizations.



What are the advantages and drawbacks of this approach?

What are some examples of this approach in our community and elsewhere?

What should we do to enhance student relationships with adults and peers, and who needs to be involved?



Think, Talk, Reflect, Act...

In this forum, we've explored three approaches for helping more students graduate from high school. Though the approaches overlap in some respects, they suggest different priorities for action that would bring different benefits and trade-offs.

Let's take a few minutes to reflect on our experience at the forum:

- **Individually, what information and insights did you gain?**

- **As a group, where did we have the most agreement? The most differences?**

- **What else would we like to learn about the issue?**



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Grad Nation: <http://www.americaspromise.org/gradnation>

Alliance for Excellent Education: <http://www.all4ed.org>

Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce: <http://cew.georgetown.edu/jobs2018>

National Dropout Prevention Center: <http://dropoutprevention.org>



