

Back to School

By Karen Pittman, September 2005

September is back to school month. And for the first time in the nation's history, many communities are beginning to get an accurate sense of just how many high school-age youths will not be picking up their backpacks to return to school. In July, 39 governors and 11 national organizations — including the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers and the Council of Chief State School Officers — signed onto Graduation Counts: A Compact on State High School Graduation Data, which was released by the National Governors Association and provides a common definition of high school graduation rates.

This is not just a technical memo. The new definition quadruples the dropout rate most of us have in our heads from a tolerable eight percent to an appalling 32 percent. Non-graduation rates in urban areas are closer to 50 percent. I've been trying out the "new rate" in casual conversation on airplanes and in buffet lines. If my informal research is accurate, youth advocates have a major opportunity to engage a public that is tired of hearing about "youth problems." No one with whom I've spoken — parents, business leaders, even teachers — was prepared to hear that one-third of high schoolers fail to get their diplomas. All were angry when I explained the difference between the annual dropout rates they are used to hearing (eight percent) and the new calculation that looks over four years, comparing ninth grade enrollment to high school graduation numbers.

"Why would you ever have calculated it the other way?" asked one father who, in the course of the buffet line, explained that he has five children, four of whom had managed to get a good high school education. He is struggling with what to do with his bright, but unmotivated, ninth grader.

"Honors classes were the key for the first four," he noted. "It's pretty clear that if your kids are not in the honors classes, they're not getting much out of high school." He figured most of the kids in the regular classes weren't learning much, but was surprised to hear that so many were leaving without even a diploma to show for their time.

The good news is that high school reform is in. The bad news is that the scope and pace of proposed reforms do not square with the urgency of the new numbers. If one-third of school-aged youth are not in school and up to another one-third are in school but unprepared for post-secondary education, work or life in general, the solutions have to push beyond the boundaries of the school day, the school building and the four-year timeline.

Paul Hill, co-author of *It Takes A City*, writes, "The traditional boundaries between the public school system's responsibilities and those of other community agencies are themselves part of the educational problem." I agree. It is time to shift the goal from reforming high school to ensuring post-high school student success by formally engaging other institutions: Youth organizations, community colleges, businesses, employment training programs and the broader range of community actors from faith-based and arts organizations to museums and libraries. High school reform has to be a part of the solution, but in the short term, it may not account for as much of the equation as some might think.

The Youth Transition Funders Group, a collaborative of local, regional and national funders, has primed the community partnership planning pump with \$275,000 in grants to five cities. Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Portland, Oregon, and San Jose have committed to strengthen their strategies for reducing the numbers of young people who drop out and for reconnecting those who have left school.

These cities have also committed to addressing the race and class inequities related to this trend within their education systems. The grants will support the development of broad-based partnerships that include educational advocacy groups, public school districts, public care agencies, service providers, parents, youth and other stakeholders.

Bringing all the partners to the table is the first step towards what, ultimately, will need to happen in order to fully recreate the high school experience. Virtually every assumption (from how competencies are measured to how funding follows students) will have to be revisited and scrutinized through youth-centered rather than system-centered lenses.

Now is the time for youth organizations to advocate for or join these efforts. Why? Because we have experiences and strategies that speak to the one-third who are not in school, the one-third who are there but not engaged and the one-third who want alternatives to coasting until college.

Read more:

Graduation Counts: A Compact on State High School Graduation Data. National Governors Association. (2005). Washington, DC: National Governors Association. Retrieved August 31, 2005, from www.nga.org/Files/pdf/0507GRADCOMPACT.PDF.

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The Alternative Pathways Project: A Framework for Dropout Reduction and Recovery. Hoye, J.D., & Sturgis, C. (2005). Youth Transition Funders Group. Retrieved August 31, 2005, from www.ytfg.org/documents/AltPathv.7.7Julyfin_000.pdf.

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Education Pipeline. The Forum for Youth Investment. (2004, September). Forum Focus, 2 (4). Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment, Impact Strategies, Inc. Retrieved August 31, 2005, from www.forumfyi.org/Files//ForumFOCUS_Sep04.pdf.

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