



No Child Left to Drop Out: Instilling the “Intentionality” of Graduation

Dropout prevention should begin long before teens reach high school.

By S.C. Torrington

Each year in the United States, approximately 1.2 million students drop out of high school. Data from the Maryland State Department of Education reveals that in 2007-08, about 9,800 students dropped out of high school in Maryland, or 3.4 percent of the total student population. Embedded in that number is a 7.9 percent dropout rate in Baltimore City and a 4.3 percent rate in Baltimore County, according to 2008 data cited by Advocates for Children and Youth, a local nonprofit dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth in Maryland.

In an effort to devise solutions to lower the dropout rates in these areas and throughout the state, teams from all 24 Maryland public school systems met this past June with members of America's Promise Alliance at Randallstown High School, in Baltimore County, for the Brighter Futures: Maryland's Dropout Prevention Leadership Summit. Launched by former Secretary of State General Colin Powell and his wife, Alma, America's Promise Alliance is a nonprofit that has been co-sponsoring dropout summits in cities throughout the nation.

Among the speakers at the Maryland conference was Robert Balfanz, Ph.D., a research scientist with the Center for Social Organization of Schools (CSOS) at Johns Hopkins University and co-director of its Everyone Graduates Center. In his presentation “Building a Graduation Nation,” Balfanz outlines five steps that school administrators, educators, parents, and communities need to take together to help lower high school dropout rates.

1. Know who, when, where, and why students are dropping out. For the class of 2009, examine attendance, suspensions, and course failure patterns in grades 6-10. How many students who did not graduate on time had poor attendance, got into trouble, and/or failed multiple courses?

Balfanz says CSOS divides high school dropouts into four categories based on their reasons for dropping out:

- Life Events.** Forces outside of school (such as a job, pregnancy, death in the family, or other change in family dynamics) cause students to drop out. The youth need support to overcome these life events and stay in school.

- Fade Outs.** These students actually do satisfactory work in school, but see no reason to stay in school, sometimes leaving only a few credits shy of graduation. Helping teens make the connection between high school graduation and future success can prevent them from dropping out.

- Push Outs.** Students who are, or who are perceived to be, detrimental to others in the school setting often decide not to return to school after a suspension.

- Failing in School.** This is the largest section of dropouts—these students simply give up. Schools and parents must be vigilant to watch for early warning signs from students who are falling off track such as, for example, students in grades 6-10 who are chronically absent, show mild but sustained misbehavior, or fail courses and need intervention and attention.

2. Transform the secondary schools that most dropouts attend. Education systems need to

implement comprehensive, systematic, and sustained whole-school reforms that address the ABCs: Attendance, Behavior, and Course performance.

In a recent interview, James McPartland, Ph.D., executive director of CSOS, stresses that everyone should play a role in preventing students from dropping out.

“The Center for Social Organization of Schools’ focus is for whole-school improvement through improved school organization, classroom instruction, teacher support, and family involvement,” he says.

3. Develop comprehensive student support systems in and out of school. Balfanz suggests the use of national service organizations such as Americorps to provide mentoring, tutoring, homework support, and management of attendance and behavior programs at an affordable price.

4. Establish supportive policies and resource allocations. Conduct a policy audit at the school, school district, and state levels to determine how current attendance, grading, suspension, grade promotion, and credit policies either positively or negatively affect the number of students eligible to graduate.

5. Build community will and capacity. Since communities bear the costs of the dropout crisis, CSOS advises that they need to be part of the solution. This requires a five- to 10-year commitment—bringing together different sectors of the community to adopt strategies for dropout prevention and to submit to an ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of those strategies.

A Matter of Family

“A student’s future is the family’s future,” says Dr. Joyce Epstein, principal research scientist at CSOS and director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, a research group supporting increased family and community involvement, at Johns Hopkins.

Dropouts often require sustained family support, which can drain resources from parents and siblings. On the other hand, Epstein says, an educated, employed young adult can influence and assist others in his or her family and contribute to the community. Also, the first in a family to graduate high school or attend college influences younger siblings to do the same.

“Graduates become family standard-setters,” Epstein explains.

She adds that the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins guides districts, schools, families, and communities to work together as partners in students’ education.

These partnerships require schools to provide families with good, understandable, and timely information at every grade level about school policies on attendance and behavior, graduation requirements, credits earned and credits needed, and options for college attendance or career development.

“All of the important people in students’ lives—at home, at school, and in the community—can influence students to see themselves in the role of student, stay in school, and graduate from high school with their needed courses and credits,” says Epstein.

A Lesson from Harford County

It’s a lesson they already seem to have learned in Harford County, where the dropout rate is 2.9 percent.

Debora Gavin Merlock is founder and president of The Greater Edgewood Education Foundation (GEEF), an organization of community and business partnerships devoted to raising public awareness, pride, and support for the quality of education in the Greater Edgewood area schools—Abingdon, Deerfield, Edgewood, and William Paca/Old Post Road Elementary Schools, Edgewood Middle School, and Edgewood High School.

“As the mother of four children in the local school system, I was concerned to see that, by middle school, there was a lot of negativity toward what was happening in our schools. I wanted to focus on the positive,” explains Merlock when asked what convinced her that the Edgewood community needed a group such as GEEF.

Created in 2005, GEEF provides local families social support and motivation to help their kids to successfully advance through school and be academically prepared for college.

“We want students and parents to start thinking about college early, so students aren’t playing catch-up with missed learning skills,” say Merlock. “Taking rigorous courses in high school can be challenging if students didn’t prepare academically through their elementary and middle school years.”

Leann M. Schubert, coordinator of School Improvement for Harford County Public Schools, describes GEEF’s efforts as instilling “the intentionality of graduation” in all students, starting with 4- and 5-year-olds.

For instance, one GEEF program called College Pathways targets students in kindergarten through grade 12. It helps prepare elementary and middle school students for high school and motivates high school students to graduate. Offering academic and social support through peer mentors and networking, College Pathways encourages high expectations among the students while inspiring them to challenge themselves with more rigorous courses.

In addition, GEEF sponsors an annual education conference at the beginning of the school year, with free activities for students of all grades. Typically, there are fun academic programs for the younger students and workshops on creating long-term goals for the older students. Also, all attendees receive gifts such as books and homework tools as well as a free breakfast and lunch. Instilling “the intentionality of graduation” is evident within Harford County Public Schools as well.

The Edgewood Learning Community (ELC) is a network of the same Greater Edgewood area schools supported by GEEF. Engaging students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12, ELC addresses many education issues, including graduation and dropout rates.

Schubert notes that, for example, members of the ELC have developed a Profile of the Graduate, which describes the characteristics that every graduate from Edgewood High School should possess. The characteristics include being inquisitive, caring, balanced, and principled.

“Discussion begins as early as pre-kindergarten as to what skills and dispositions are needed to successfully graduate from high school and why staying in school and obtaining a high school diploma is critical,” she says.

On a similar note, Balfanz concludes his presentation at the Brighter Futures: Maryland’s Dropout Prevention Leadership Summit by saying, “What we face is a giant engineering challenge of getting the right interventions to the right students at the right time with the required intensity.”

The good news is that communities such as Edgewood have already begun to come together to give their kids the support they need to plan long-term goals and stay in school. **BC**

Joanne Giza, James Giza, and Dianne McCann contributed to this article as well.