A low-angle shot of a graduation ceremony. Numerous dark blue mortarboards are captured mid-air, scattered across a clear blue sky. At the bottom of the frame, the hands and forearms of graduates are visible, reaching up as if they have just tossed their caps. The scene is bright and celebratory.

ACHIEVING GRADUATION FOR ALL

*A Governor's Guide to
Dropout Prevention and Recovery*



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ACHIEVING GRADUATION FOR ALL

*A Governor's Guide to
Dropout Prevention and Recovery*

2009

DANIEL PRINCIOTTA

RYAN REYNA

*National Governors Association
Center for Best Practices*



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CONTENTS

Executive Summary	4
I. The Case for Action	6
The Scope of the Dropout Problem	6
Consequences for Individuals and States	8
II. The Dropout Challenge	12
Why Students Drop Out of School	12
State Challenges to Action	14
III. State Actions to Tackle the Dropout Problem	17
<i>Action 1:</i> Promote High School Graduation for All	17
<i>Action 2:</i> Target Youth At Risk of Dropping Out	23
<i>Action 3:</i> Reengage Youth Who Have Dropped Out of School	28
<i>Action 4:</i> Provide Rigorous, Relevant Options for Earning a High School Diploma	31
IV. The Path Ahead	37
Notes	38



NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices convened a National Dropout Prevention and Recovery Advisory Committee to inform the organization's efforts on dropout prevention and recovery, including the development of this publication. Advisory committee members, listed below, include current and former governors' education policy advisors, leading researchers, cutting-edge practitioners, and national experts.

Participation in the National Dropout Prevention and Recovery Advisory Committee does not constitute endorsement of the information and recommendations presented in this report. Any errors of omission or commission are the authors' own.

Robert Balfanz

Principal Research Scientist
Center for the Social Organization of Schools
Everyone Graduates Center
The Johns Hopkins University

Shay Bilchik

Director
Center for Juvenile Justice Reform
Georgetown University

Cynthia Brown

Vice President for Education Policy
Center for American Progress

Jo Lynne DeMary

Director, Center for School Improvement
School of Education
Virginia Commonwealth University

Johnny Franklin

Education Policy Advisor
Office of Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour

Ann Higdon

President and Founder
Improved Solutions for Urban Systems

Craig Jerald

President
Break the Curve Consulting

Paul K. Leather

Director, Division of Career Technology and
Adult Learning
New Hampshire Department of Education

Mary McNaught

Chief of Staff
Civic Enterprises, LLC

Bill Milliken

Founder and Vice Chairman
Communities In Schools

Charles Mojkowski

Senior Associate
Big Picture Learning

Andrew Moore

Senior Fellow
Institute for Youth, Education, and Families
National League of Cities

Yazeed Moore

Program Officer
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

Jennifer Rippner

Senior Policy Advisor
EducationCounsel LLC
Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP

Russell Rumberger

Director
California Dropout Research Project
University of California, Santa Barbara

Elizabeth Schneider

Vice President, State Advocacy and Outreach
Alliance for Excellent Education

Adria Steinberg

Vice President
Jobs for the Future

Chris Sturgis

President
MetisNet

Mala Thakur

Executive Director
National Youth Employment Coalition

Elliot Washor

Co-Director
The Big Picture Company

Kelli Wells

U.S. Education Program Director
GE Foundation

Richard Wells

Vice President of State and Community Mobilization
America's Promise Alliance





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As governors confront the worst state fiscal environment in the past 25 years, long-term prospects for strong economic growth are hampered by an immense underlying problem: the high school dropout crisis.¹ At least one student in five drops out of school, and nearly 5 million 18- to 24-year-olds lack a high school diploma.² Annually, dropouts cost the United States more than \$300 billion in lost wages and increased public-sector expenses.³ Furthermore, with the nation ranking 20 out of 28 among industrialized democracies on high school graduation rates, the dropout problem is a substantial drag on the nation's economic competitiveness.⁴

The high school dropout problem affects all states, but for some, it is more daunting. No state has higher than an 88 percent graduation rate, and 10 states have rates below 66 percent.⁵ All states also have “dropout factories,” schools that fail to promote at least 40 percent of 9th graders to 12th grade within three years.⁶ More than half the nation's dropouts come from these schools, which are typically located in high-poverty communities.⁷

Students drop out of school for four primary reasons, which are often interrelated.⁸ The first is academic failure, which involves failing courses or high school exit exams. The second is disinterest in school—a lack of engagement in academic or social aspects of school—which often leads to poor attendance. The third is problematic behavior inside or outside of school that interferes with learning. Finally, some students drop out because of life events, such as becoming pregnant, getting a job, or

caring for an ill family member. These drivers of high school dropout are, of course, strongly influenced by the broader social context of schools, districts, families, communities, and states.⁹

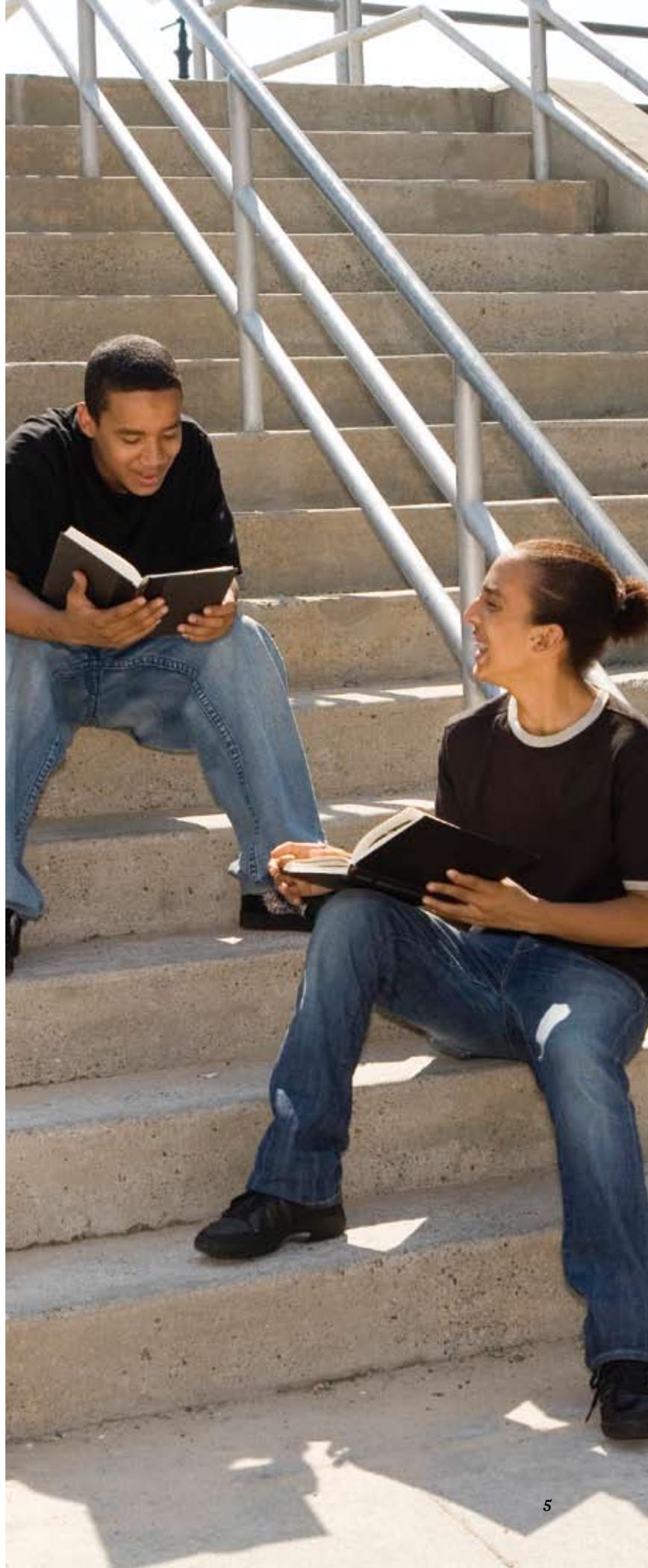
Although knowledge of why students drop out exists, states face numerous challenges to action. In many states, outdated laws allow students to drop out before age 18, schools are not held accountable for graduation rates, and responsibility for dropout prevention and recovery is diffuse or nonexistent. Many schools lack the capacity to identify and intervene on behalf of students at risk of dropping out and, once students have dropped out, no clear path back to school exists. Finally, in all states, there are too many low-performing schools and too few effective education options for children and youth.

Governors are in an extraordinary position to confront these challenges and stem the tide of high school dropouts. To do so, governors should take four actions:

- **Promote high school graduation for all.** Governors can raise the maximum compulsory and allowable school attendance ages, count graduation rates heavily in state accountability systems, champion higher graduation rates, and assign responsibility for dropout prevention and recovery.
- **Target youth at risk of dropping out.** Governors can support the creation of early warning data systems to identify individual students who are likely to drop out, and they can support local and state efforts to provide students with effective interventions and supports.

- **Reengage youth who have dropped out of school.** Governors can create incentives for dropout recovery, employ outreach strategies to reengage out-of-school youth, and establish re-entry programs for juvenile offenders.
- **Provide rigorous, relevant options for earning a high school diploma.** Governors can create new effective schools and learning programs, turn around low-performing schools, and award credit for performance—not seat time—to galvanize dropout prevention and recovery efforts.

Together, these strategies form a comprehensive approach to dropout prevention and recovery. Governors who pursue these reforms can expect to realize substantial benefits. Lowering dropout rates expands opportunity for more youth, paving the way for success in college, career, and life. It engenders stronger communities, enhanced civic life, and an improved workforce. In the long run, achieving graduation for all helps put states on the path to economic growth.





I. THE CASE FOR ACTION

States are facing the worst fiscal environment of the past 25 years.¹⁰ Even with the funds made available from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, governors face diminishing state revenues and projected deficits totaling at least \$210 billion through 2011.¹¹ As governors balance their budgets in the near term by cutting expenses and finding ways to raise new revenue, long-term prospects for economic growth are hampered by an immense underlying problem: the high school dropout crisis.

High school dropouts are an economic drag on states. Dropouts are less likely than others to be employed, more likely to receive public assistance, and much more likely to be incarcerated.¹² Each high school dropout costs the public sector \$209,100 over a lifetime.¹³ In the aggregate, dropouts cost the United States more than \$300 billion per year.¹⁴

Addressing the high school dropout problem is one of the surest paths governors can take to support long-term economic growth for their state. Fortunately, there are proven solutions and promising new approaches that governors can take to improve high school graduation rates.

Addressing the high school dropout problem is one of the surest paths governors can take to support long-term economic growth for their state.

The Scope of the Dropout Problem

The dropout rate in the United States is staggering. At least one in five students drops out of school.¹⁵ Each year, only about three-quarters of students graduate on time, leaving nearly a million students who fail to do so.¹⁶ Among 18- to 24-year-olds, an estimated 4.9 million lack a high school diploma.¹⁷

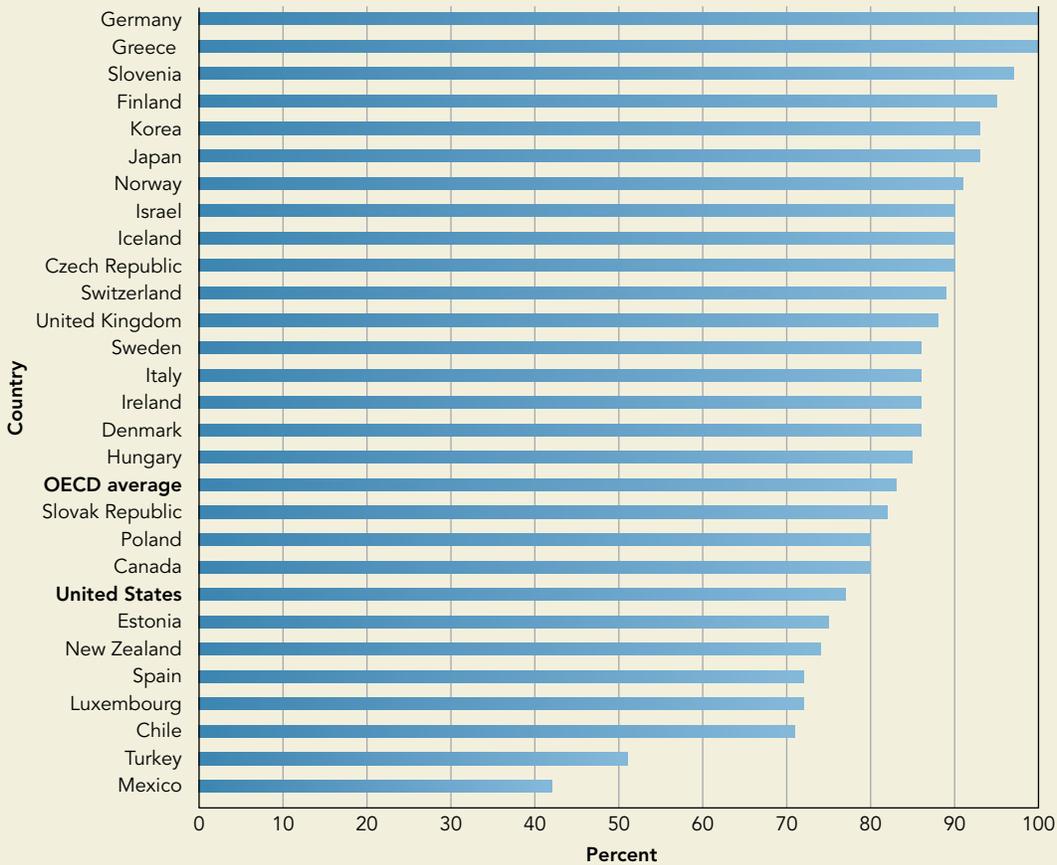
The high school dropout problem is not only large—it is growing. Since the high school graduation rate peaked at around 80 percent in the late 1960s, it has dropped four to five percentage points.¹⁸ This decline has contributed to the recent drop-off in college attendance, particularly among males.¹⁹

These statistics and trends are more distressing when viewed through an international lens. As of 2006, the United States ranked 20 out of 28 on high school graduation rates among industrialized democracies, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (see Figure 1).²⁰

This was not always the case. Americans ages 55 to 64 rank first in the world on attaining a high school credential.²¹ During the past 30 years, however, attainment rates have risen—often dramatically—in every country for which OECD has data, aside from the United States.²² The implications for the nation's economic competitiveness are profound.

Looking within our borders, all states face a high school dropout problem, but for some, it is more daunting. No state has higher than an 88 percent graduation rate, and 10 states have rates below 66

Figure 1. Upper Secondary Graduation Rates by Country: 2006



Source: Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, "Indicator A2: How many students finish secondary education and access tertiary education?" *Education at a Glance 2008: OECD Indicators* (Paris, France: Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, September 4, 2008). Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/23/46/41284038.pdf>.

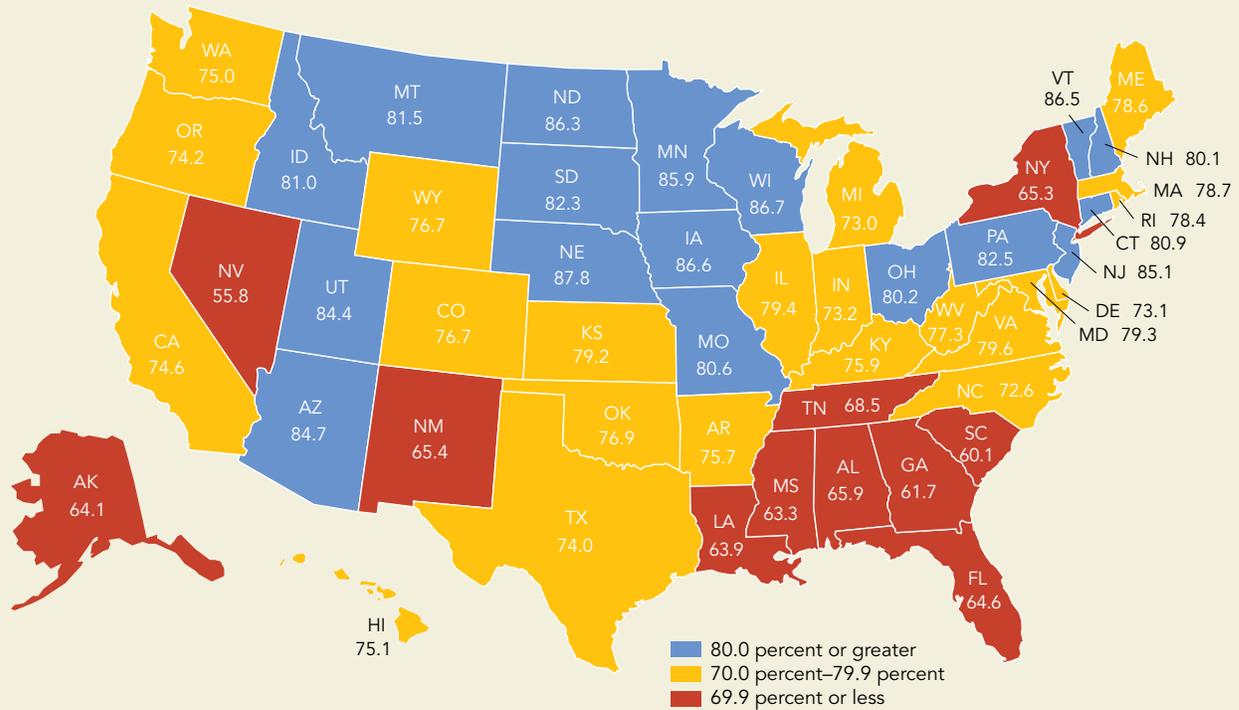
percent, according to National Center for Education Statistics estimates (see Figure 2).²³ Although imperfect, these estimates are among the best 50-state data currently available. Thanks to the NGA Center's Graduation Counts Compact, states are instituting a common method for calculating graduation rates that yields more accurate and comparable statistics. For more information, see Measuring Graduation and Dropout Rates on page 11.

Underscoring the fact that all states face a high school dropout problem, every state also has

schools where at least 40 percent of their 9th graders fail to reach 12th grade in three years (see table).²⁴ These schools, referred to as "dropout factories," supply most of the nation's dropouts.²⁵ Five states have more than 100 such schools.²⁶ Twenty-six states have 20 or more.²⁷ Nationwide, there are approximately 2,000 dropout factories.²⁸

Dropout factories do not deserve all the blame for failing to graduate their students. Unfortunately, many of the students attending these schools show up in 9th grade far below grade level aca-

Figure 2. Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate of Public High School Students by State: School Year 2004–2005
(U.S. average=74.7 percent)



Note: The averaged freshman graduation rate is an estimate of the percentage of an entering freshman class graduating in four years. For 2004–2005, it equals the total number of diploma recipients in 2004–2005 divided by the average membership of the 8th-grade class in 2000–2001, the 9th-grade class in 2001–2002, and the 10th-grade class in 2002–2003.

Source: J. Laird, E. F. Cataldi, A. K. Ramani, and C. Chapman, "Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate of Public High School Students by State: School Year 2004–2005," NCES 2008-053, Table 12 (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

demically and poised to drop out.²⁹ Furthermore, these schools typically serve high-poverty populations in large urban areas or rural areas.³⁰

Although students of all kinds drop out of school, certain subpopulations are at greater risk of doing so. Students from low-income families drop out at four times the rate of students from high-income families in grades 10 through 12.³¹ In 2006, the status dropout rate was 22 percent for Hispanics, 11 percent for blacks, 6 percent for whites, and 4 percent for Asians.³² Thirty-six percent of Hispanics born outside the United States were dropouts, compared with 12 percent born within the United States.³³

Demographic factors, however, are not destiny. In fact, they are by no means the most important indicator of dropping out. Once attendance, behavioral, and academic factors are considered, demographics explain little, if any, variation in dropout rates.³⁴

Consequences for Individuals and States

The economic consequences of dropping out of school are severe, both for individuals and states. More than 17 percent of high school dropouts are

unemployed—almost triple the rate of students who complete some postsecondary education (see Figure 3).³⁵ Dropouts who do find work are paid annual salaries averaging about \$7,000 less than a high school graduate and \$26,000 less than a college graduate (see Figure 4). Over a lifetime, a high school dropout earns \$1 million less than a college graduate.³⁶

The economic prospects for dropouts are likely to worsen as globalization increases. Forty years ago, a high school dropout could easily find work, but that is no longer the case. Many low-skill jobs have been automated or sent overseas. As required skill levels continue to rise, dropouts are falling further behind. Nearly 90 percent of the jobs expected to be created by the 2009 economic stimulus package will require at least a high school diploma.³⁷ By 2012, 63 percent of jobs in the U.S. workforce will require some level of postsecondary education, let alone a high school credential.³⁸

Unfortunately, state and federal governments also bear costs when students drop out of school. As dropouts search for work, they often turn to the state for services such as unemployment insurance, welfare assistance, and health care. Each individual who does not complete high school costs the public sector:³⁹

- \$139,000 in reduced tax payments;
- \$40,500 in increased public health costs;
- \$26,600 from increases in crime; and
- \$3,000 in increased welfare costs, on average, over a lifetime.

U.S. taxpayers could save \$45 billion annually if the number of high school dropouts were cut in half.⁴⁰ Even incremental increases in the number of students graduating from high school can have a large effect on states. Decreasing the number of males who fail to complete high school by 5 percent would result in annual state crime-related savings ranging from \$1.6 million in **South Dakota** to \$752 million in **California**.⁴¹ A 10 percent increase in graduation rates nationally would reduce murder and assault rates by approximately 20 percent.⁴² **Arizona** and **Maine** can save approximately \$11,000 in health costs per each additional high school

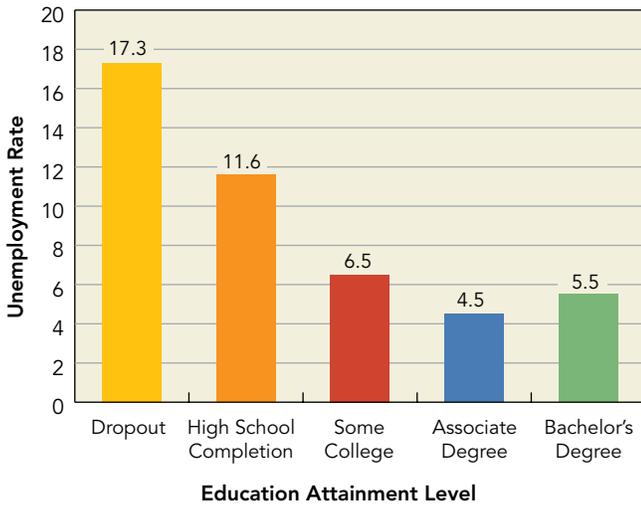
Table. Number and Percentage of Dropout Factories by State: 2005–2007

State	Total Number of Dropout Factory High Schools	Percentage of High Schools that are Dropout Factories
Alabama	43	11.9
Alaska	43	29.3
Arizona	69	18.8
Arkansas	9	3.2
California	147	13.4
Colorado	28	9.4
Connecticut	18	10.3
Delaware	8	25.0
Florida	186	38.8
Georgia	128	36.4
Hawaii	13	23.6
Idaho	4	3.0
Illinois	66	10.5
Indiana	18	5.0
Iowa	8	2.3
Kansas	10	3.0
Kentucky	17	8.1
Louisiana	45	15.7
Maine	2	1.6
Maryland	18	9.7
Massachusetts	36	11.1
Michigan	95	14.1
Minnesota	10	2.4
Mississippi	50	20.4
Missouri	30	5.8
Montana	6	4.9
Nebraska	7	2.6
Nevada	32	40.0
New Hampshire	3	3.9
New Jersey	13	3.5
New Mexico	39	29.8
New York	115	13.7
North Carolina	3	22.3
North Dakota	85	3.5
Ohio	89	11.0
Oklahoma	23	5.3
Oregon	6	2.5
Pennsylvania	55	8.7
Rhode Island	7	14.6
South Carolina	98	49.7
South Dakota	8	5.7
Tennessee	37	11.9
Texas	206	16.2
Utah	5	4.5
Vermont	1	1.6
Virginia	27	8.8
Washington	20	6.0
West Virginia	3	2.6
Wisconsin	28	6.1
Wyoming	2	3.3

Note: “Dropout factories” are schools where at least 40 percent of their 9th graders fail to reach the 12th grade in three years. Table includes only high schools that had 50 or more students and a 10th to 12th grade span during the 2005–2006 school year.

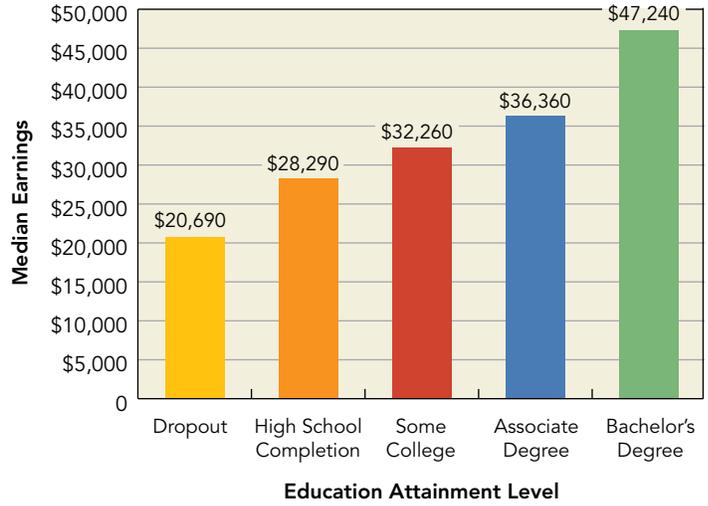
Source: Everyone Graduates Center, The Johns Hopkins University, “State Summary Table: Promoting Power” (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University, Everyone Graduates Center, 2007). Available at: <http://www.every1graduates.org/GradGapDatabase/States/StateSummariesP1.html>.

Figure 3. Unemployment Rates of Persons 16 Years Old and Older by Educational Attainment: 2007



Source: Adapted from U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 382: Unemployment rates of persons 16 years old and over, by age, sex, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment: 2005, 2006, and 2007," *Digest of Education Statistics* (Washington, D.C., 2008). Available at: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/tables/dt08_382.asp.

Figure 4. Median Earnings of Persons 25 Years Old and Older by Highest Level of Educational Attainment: 2007



Source: Adapted from U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 385: Distribution of earnings and median earnings of persons 25 years old and over, by highest level of educational attainment and sex: 2007," *Digest of Education Statistics* (Washington, D.C., 2008). Available at: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/tables/dt08_385.asp.

graduate.⁴³ Governors cannot afford for youth to walk out on school.

A low graduation rate can also serve as a barrier to state economic development. Companies that offer high-wage, high-skill jobs need a pipeline of educated workers. If these companies cannot draw on a highly educated pool of applicants in a particular region, they may relocate. At the same time, dropouts make states less enticing to new employers that may want to move into the area.

The negative consequences that states and communities face because of the dropout problem are more than monetary. When students drop out of school, communities suffer. Youth who drop out of school not only shortchange themselves, they diminish the quality of life for residents in their communities. Dropouts are less likely than high school graduates to volunteer in their community or vote in elections.⁴⁴ Dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to participate in criminal activi-

ties. In fact, 70 percent of state prison inmates are high school dropouts.⁴⁵

More broadly, the high school dropout problem short-circuits the American Dream—the idea that anyone can get ahead with sufficient hard work and sacrifice. The foundation of that dream is a quality education system that provides young Americans with the tools they need for success, regardless of their family's economic status. Today, however, the nation's education system is failing too many disadvantaged students. Two-thirds of dropouts are from families in the bottom 20 percent of family incomes.⁴⁶ Children of parents without a high school degree are far less likely to graduate high school themselves, compared with other children.⁴⁷

All states have compelling reasons to improve graduation rates. Yet before governors can act to prevent students from dropping out of school and to reengage out-of-school youth, they need to understand the root causes of the problem.

Measuring Graduation and Dropout Rates

Governors of all 50 states signed the NGA Center's Graduation Counts Compact in 2005. This unprecedented commitment to a common method for calculating each state's high school graduation rate demonstrates that governors recognize the importance of ensuring that students stay in school and graduate successfully. With the cohort graduation rate, states are better able to identify the scope of the problem, relying on exact counts rather than estimates. At the end of 2009, 25 states will report the NGA Compact Rate, with an additional 23 states adopting the calculation by the end of 2011.⁴⁸

The dropout rate, however, is not simply the graduation rate subtracted from 100 percent. Some students who fail to graduate in four years stay in school and graduate in five, six, or more years. Other students earn alternative high school credentials, such as the General Educational Development certificate. These students may or may not be counted as dropouts, depending on the measure. They are never, however, counted as high school graduates.

There are various dropout rate measures:

- An *event dropout rate* is the proportion of students who leave school each year without completing a high school program. The national event dropout rate was 3.8 percent in 2006 for students ages 15 to 24 in grades 10 to 12.⁴⁹
- A *status dropout rate* measures the proportion of a population that has dropped out of school, regardless of when they last attended school. The national status dropout rate was 9.3 percent in 2006 among individuals ages 16 to 24.⁵⁰
- A *cohort dropout rate* measures the proportion of students in a defined cohort who left school in a defined period of time. The most recent national analysis of longitudinal data found that at least 20 percent of 8th graders dropped out at some point during their high school career.⁵¹

According to the 2009 Graduation Counts survey, 22 states calculate and publicly report a dropout rate, with most using the cohort dropout rate.⁵² Because it is based on longitudinal data, the cohort rate is the most accurate means of characterizing the dropout problem. Unfortunately, many states cannot report a cohort dropout rate because they do not yet have adequate longitudinal data systems.

It is critical that states' dropout data are accurate and consistent. To help ensure accuracy, states can create guidance on the use and documentation of student exit codes, provide data training, and analyze data for inaccuracies and suspicious patterns.



II. THE DROPOUT CHALLENGE

To understand the dropout challenge, state leaders need to grasp both why students drop out of school and how schools, families, communities, and states contribute to the problem. Research on why students drop out is robust and illustrative of the challenges that states face in keeping students enrolled.

Why Students Drop Out of School

For most students, dropping out of high school is not a sudden event; it is a long process of disengagement.⁵³ Students are resilient, often returning to school several times before they leave permanently. Because of this, educators frequently have the opportunity to intervene before students leave school for good. Students drop out of school for four major, sometimes interconnected, reasons:⁵⁴

- Academic failure
- Disinterest in school
- Problematic behavior
- Life events

Both the state policy context and the broader environment in which children grow up substantially affect these factors.

Student academic failure, disinterest in school, and behavioral problems are often symptoms of schools failing students.

Academic Failure

Academic failure is one of the primary factors that drive students to drop out school. Students fail courses for different reasons, including lack of preparation in previous coursework, poor teacher performance, undiagnosed learning disabilities, and disinterest in school. Failure in a core course may lead to retention in grade and make it difficult for the student to complete all graduation requirements in four years. Many students who have failed a course lack resources to help them get back on track. Schools struggle to provide at-risk students with methods to recover credit, delaying credit accumulation and increasing the chances that the student will leave high school prior to graduation.

Disinterest in School

Dropouts point to disinterest in school as a key reason for missing classes and ultimately leaving school. Almost half of the dropouts surveyed in a national poll indicated that the main reason they left school was because classes were not interesting.⁵⁵ Students must be engaged in learning to succeed in school. In an increasingly technological world, students expect school to serve their needs and to do so quickly. When students are not interested in their coursework or not connected to school by sports or clubs, school becomes an afterthought. Disinterest in school can lead to attendance problems and disruption, both of which are associated with higher dropout rates.⁵⁶ As absences add up, students fall behind in class work and become socially separated from



their classmates and school staff.⁵⁷ These factors add to students' feeling lost in school and may drive students to leave permanently.

Problematic Behavior

Students may act out in class, get into fights, or otherwise misbehave in ways that interfere with their learning and make them more likely to dropout.⁵⁸ Misbehavior in school can also lead to suspensions or expulsions that severely hinder successful progress in school.⁵⁹ Outside of school, criminal behavior and drug and alcohol use are associated with an increased likelihood of dropping out of school.⁶⁰

Life Events

Life events can also influence a student's decision to drop out. Whether having to care for a child, get a job, or nurse an ill family member, students may leave school to take care of other responsibilities.⁶¹ It is difficult for these students to attend class and attend to their other responsibilities. High school

success is particularly difficult for court-involved youth, most of whom drop out.⁶² The longer schools wait to reenroll these youth, the more difficult it is to convince them to return to school.

These four reasons for dropping out do not depend simply on the abilities and efforts of individual students. They are strongly influenced by the broader social context of schools, families, and communities.⁶³ The effectiveness of schools and teachers has a direct effect on the odds of a student graduating school. In fact, student academic failure, disinterest in school, and behavioral problems are often symptoms of schools failing students. Family practices also are critical. Students are more likely to graduate if their parents possess high educational aspirations for their children, monitor student progress, and communicate appropriately with the school.⁶⁴ Communities with high concentrations of poverty are typically plagued by schools with low graduation rates. Children in these communities often face safety, environmental, and health hazards and have fewer opportunities for learning outside the classroom in places like museums and summer camps.⁶⁵

State Challenges to Action

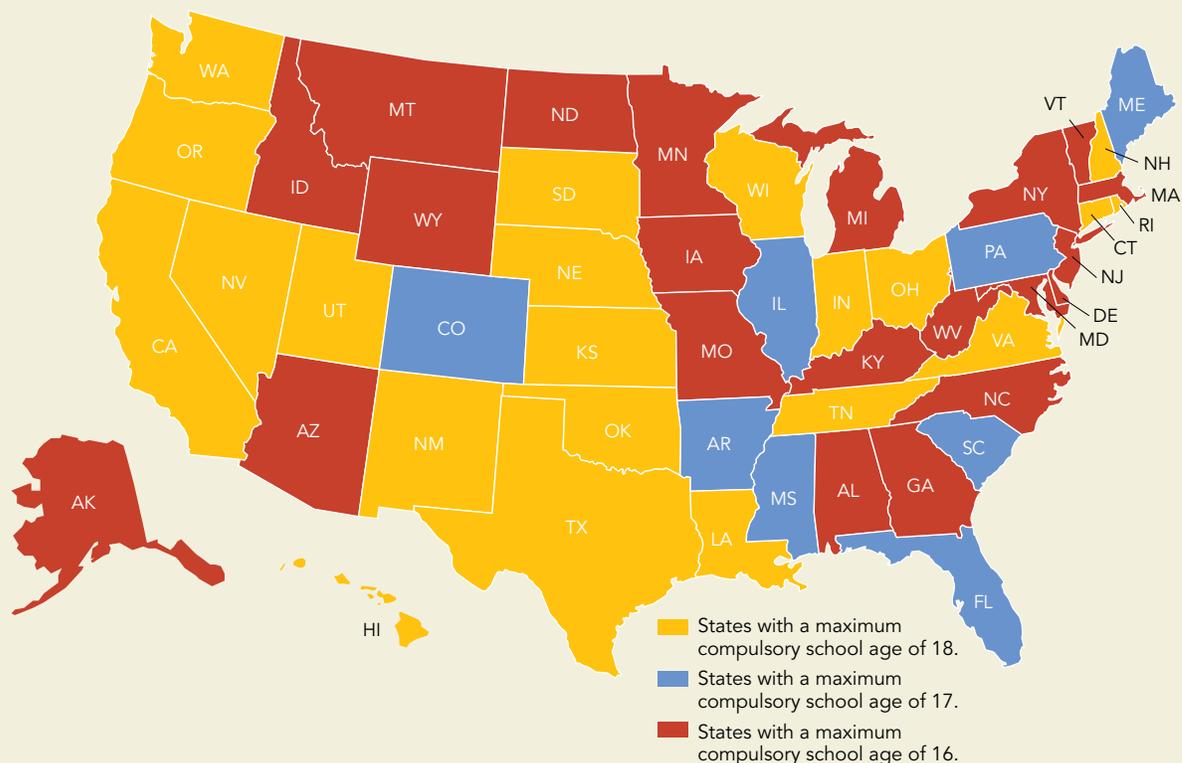
If it is clear why students drop out of school, then why does the number of dropouts remain substantial in every state? Governors seeking to confront the dropout problem face several challenges to action:

- It is too easy for schools to give up on students and students to give up on school;
- Schools lack the capacity to prevent students from dropping out;
- State systems to reengage dropouts are insufficient or nonexistent; and
- Students lack rigorous and relevant options for earning a high school credential.

It Is Too Easy for Schools to Give Up on Students and Students to Give Up on School

Outdated laws allow students to drop out of school before age 18, effectively endorsing failure as an option despite considerable evidence that dropping out of school vastly diminishes an individual's life prospects. In 29 states, students below age 18 can drop out of school, regardless of whether they have the basic knowledge and skills needed to function in the workplace or pursue postsecondary options (see Figure 5).⁶⁶ In 21 of these states, students can drop out of school as early as age 16.⁶⁷ These laws send the erroneous signal to students, parents, and teachers that high school completion is not for everyone.

Figure 5. Maximum Compulsory School Age by State: 2009



Note: Map represents maximum compulsory school attendance age as of January 1, 2009. Nearly all states have exemptions to age requirements related to employment, behavioral problems, or other considerations. For more information on exemptions, see the source document.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment Standards Administration, "Employment-Related Provisions in State Compulsory School Attendance Laws" (Washington, D.C., January 1, 2009). Available at: <http://www.dol.gov/esa/whd/state/schoolattend.htm>.

Similarly, current accountability systems effectively ignore graduation rates, letting schools with substantial dropout problems off the hook. In 2005, more than 40 percent of dropout factories were identified as making adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, despite the fact that only 60 percent of their 9th-grade students made it to 12th grade.⁶⁸ Many state accountability systems are based solely on student test scores, so they provide schools with incentives to allow—or even to push—students to drop out of school. After all, struggling students can bring down a school’s test scores.

Too often, parents, teachers, principals, and other key stakeholders think dropping out of school is a reasonable option. For example, less than 32 percent of teachers believe schools should expect and provide the supports needed for all students to graduate high school ready for college and career.⁶⁹ Furthermore, most principals do not believe that students at risk of dropping out would work harder in response to higher expectations.⁷⁰

Who is responsible for students’ education once they drop out of high school? In most states, the answer is, “no one.” This answer is echoed in most school districts. Although multiple agencies cover children’s issues at both the state and local levels, often no single entity is responsible for dropouts. Parents have an essential role to play in supporting their children’s education; however, too many parents fall prey to the notion that what was “good enough” for them remains true for their children. A generation ago, high school dropouts had more viable employment options, but today’s economy demands greater knowledge and skills for economic success.

Schools Lack the Capacity to Prevent Students from Dropping Out

Most schools do not have systems to identify students at risk of dropping out. Although states have made progress building longitudinal education data systems in recent years, even the most sophisticated state systems typically lack the data needed to identify students at risk of dropping out or to identify

Too often, parents, teachers, principals, and other key stakeholders think dropping out of school is a reasonable option.

which supports are best suited for a particular student. Without systems to accurately identify students likely to drop out, states, districts, and schools run the risk of squandering taxpayer funds spent on dropout prevention. Partly because of poor identification of at-risk students, the federal School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program showed discouraging results despite \$214 million invested in the program from 1988 to 1994.⁷¹

Even when schools can identify which students are at risk, they may lack the capacity to target effective assistance to the students. Effective teaching is the most important component of a student’s success in school, yet students who struggle the most are often taught by inexperienced and ineffective teachers in low-performing schools.⁷²

The struggles of at-risk students go beyond the schoolhouse door. Poverty is inextricably linked with poor school performance. Most schools are ill-equipped to provide the necessary health and social services to ensure that at-risk students are mentally and physically prepared to learn. For example, more than 50 percent of minority and low-income students have vision problems that can interfere with their schoolwork.⁷³

State Systems to Reengage Dropouts Are Insufficient or Nonexistent

Much of the leverage states have over their education system comes from state funding for education. Yet state funding formulas do not typically reward dropout recovery, largely because state funds do not follow students. State funding for education is typically apportioned at the district level, and districts allocate funding in different ways. Schools have little incentive to use valuable resources on children who may drive down test scores and graduation rates. This is among the reasons why significantly more dropouts than slots exist in alternative schools;

3.5 million youth without a high school credential are not enrolled in school or employed, but, according to one estimate, only 100,000 to 200,000 slots are available in alternative schools nationwide.⁷⁴

Most states' offender reentry systems lack programs for school-age youth. At the same time, responsibility for reenrolling juvenile offenders is not clear. Consequently, these youth often fail to successfully reenroll in school. This is particularly problematic as enrollment in school can reduce recidivism rates up to 29 percent.⁷⁵ Furthermore, those that reenroll struggle to complete their education because they are so far behind academically.

Students Lack Rigorous and Relevant Options for Earning a High School Diploma

Too many schools are low performing, and too few are effective. More than one-third of all schools did not meet AYP in 2008.⁷⁶ The approximately 15 million students in these schools face challenges beyond their control.⁷⁷ Blaming a child for not succeeding in school, when the school is not succeeding, is unacceptable.

Regardless of performance, many schools' education offerings lack relevance and fail to hold students' attention and interest throughout the day. Even with the increase of school models with integrated academic and career-oriented content, an insufficient number are available for U.S. students. Many of the innovative school models are concentrated in urban centers, and even these schools can only serve a limited number of students. For example, High Tech High School in San Diego, **California**, a school that has been regarded as a pioneer in real-world learning, only enrolls 490 students.⁷⁸ At the current scale, thousands of students are left without a relevant schooling opportunity.

The nation's education system is tethered to the Carnegie unit—a relic of the early 20th century that is a substantial, and unnecessary, barrier to the development of flexible options for earning a high school diploma. The Carnegie unit links credit attainment to classroom or “seat time,” rather than student learning, and was established in the late 1800s and early 1900s as a means to ease college admissions decisions by winnowing out students.⁷⁹



III. STATE ACTIONS TO TACKLE THE DROPOUT PROBLEM

States can make the changes needed to ensure that all students graduate high school ready for college, work, and life. To stem the tide of high school dropouts and limit red ink in their future state budgets, governors can take the following four actions:

1. Promote high school graduation for all;
2. Target youth at risk of dropping out;
3. Reengage youth who have dropped out of school; and
4. Provide rigorous, relevant pathways to a high school credential.

Piecemeal approaches are insufficient to resolve the dropout crisis. To tackle this problem, governors must act in each of these four areas. Recent research on states that have improved graduation rates confirms that no single policy can cause the improvements in graduation rates that governors seek.⁸⁰ Governors must institute multiple policy changes and take a comprehensive approach to the problem. In particular, governors must focus on both dropout prevention and recovery to achieve graduation for all. No matter how effective dropout prevention efforts are, some students will drop out of school. Dropout recovery programs offer these students the second chance they need.

As states seek to establish a successful dropout prevention and recovery agenda, they must target their efforts. To do so, states need to determine the nature and scope of the dropout problem within their borders. Just as states review traffic patterns

prior to building a new road, they need an accurate assessment of where students fall off track prior to developing state policy. In some states, the dropout problem is fueled by an intense concentration of dropout factories in one or two metropolitan school districts.⁸¹ In other states, a handful of dropout factories are spread throughout much of the state.⁸² Still other states face a statewide crisis, with high concentrations of dropout factories across the state.⁸³

ACTION 1: Promote High School Graduation for All

For too long, too many teachers, principals, schools, and states have tacitly endorsed dropping out of school as an option. Governors must make it difficult for schools to give up on students and students to give up on schools. To promote graduation for all, governors can:

- Raise the maximum compulsory and allowable school attendance ages;
- Count graduation rates heavily in state accountability systems;
- Champion higher graduation rates; and
- Assign responsibility for dropout prevention and recovery.

Governors must focus on both dropout prevention and recovery to achieve graduation for all.

Raise the Maximum Compulsory and Allowable School Attendance Ages

Governors of the 29 states that allow students to drop out of school before they are 18 years old can make a strong statement that dropping out of high school is no longer an option by raising the maximum compulsory school attendance age to age 18 and tying this requirement to incentives that keep youth in school.⁸⁴ Furthermore, states can increase the maximum allowable age for public education to age 21 or above to provide older youth with opportunities to earn a traditional high school diploma.

Raising the required school attendance age works. Raising the maximum compulsory school attendance age above age 16 increases the percentage of 20- to 24-year-olds with a high school degree by one to two percentage points.⁸⁵ It also increases the proportion of young adults with some postsecondary experience, reduces unemployment, and boosts wages.⁸⁶

In recent years, several governors have raised the minimum school-leaving age. **New Hampshire** Governor John Lynch championed and then signed legislation into law that raised the minimum school-leaving age to 18. **Nevada** Governor Jim Gibbons signed similar legislation, and governors in **Colorado** and **Illinois** have signed legislation raising the compulsory school attendance age in their state to 17.

Without enforcement, these age requirements will be less effective. States can tie their school attendance requirements to clear, short-term incentives that keep youth in school. In **Indiana**, for example, if students drop out before age 18, they lose their work permits and driving privileges. Indiana students truant for 10 days also lose their work permits.

To counter concerns from the homeschooling lobby that such changes infringe on parents' right to educate their children, many states make exceptions in their maximum compulsory school attendance laws for homeschooled youth. Proponents of raising the compulsory school attendance age argue that, in much the same way that states do not allow youth to make decisions about smoking before age 18, they should not let youth drop out of school be-

fore age 18, given the substantial negative ramifications of this decision for individuals and states.

In addition to increasing the maximum compulsory school attendance age, governors can raise the maximum allowable age for public education.⁸⁷ One of the most formidable roadblocks for older, disengaged youth to complete a high school degree is a state's upper statutory age for public education. Districts do not receive funding for educating youth beyond the state's maximum allowable age, so there is a disincentive for serving older students. Governors in 31 states have identified this as a barrier and established the maximum allowable age for public education at age 21.⁸⁸ In 2007, **Texas** passed legislation allowing individuals up to age 26 to attend public school.⁸⁹ **Indiana** and **Massachusetts** place no upper age limit on high school enrollment for per-pupil K-12 funding purposes.⁹⁰

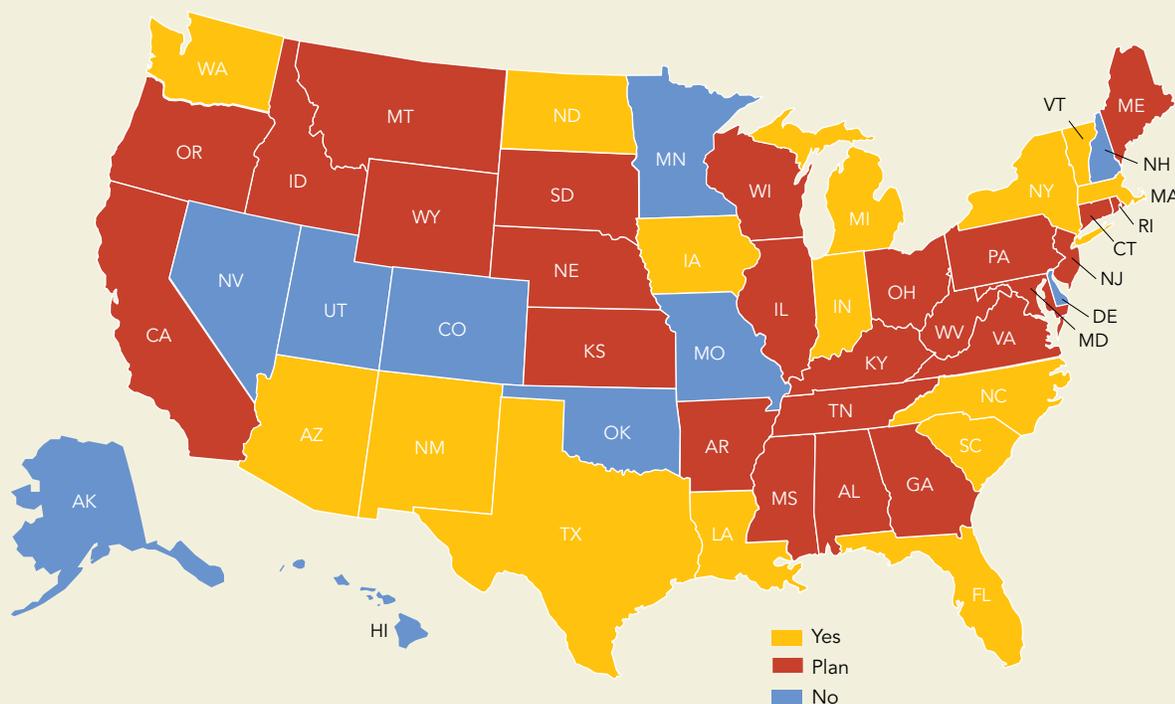
Count Graduation Rates Heavily in State Accountability Systems

States must hold schools and districts accountable for their graduation rates. When state accountability systems focus solely on student test scores, they create perverse incentives that encourage school administrators to let struggling students drop out and to avoid reengaging out-of-school youth.

To discourage schools and districts from turning a blind eye to the dropout problem, governors can work with their state board of education to count graduation rates in state accountability systems. As of 2009, 15 states factor four-year cohort graduation rates into their state accountability systems and an additional 25 states plan to do so in the near future (see Figure 6).⁹¹ A few states, such as **California**,⁹² have even begun to hold schools accountable for students graduating beyond the traditional four-year time frame. As states continue to restructure their accountability systems, four-, five-, and six-year cohort rates should be used so schools and districts have incentives to keep students engaged, even beyond the traditional time frame.

Graduation rates should not just be included in state accountability systems; these rates should *count heavily* in state accountability systems.

Figure 6. States That Factor Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rates into Their State Accountability Systems or Plan to Do So in the Near Future: 2009



Source: Achieve, Inc., *Closing the Expectations Gap 2009: Fourth Annual 50-State Progress Report on the Alignment of High School Policies with the Demands of College and Careers* (Washington, D.C.: Achieve, Inc., 2009). Available at: <http://www.achieve.org/files/50-state-2009.pdf>.

Louisiana is a leading state in this regard. In 2007, the state created its Graduation Index, which rewards schools for both dropout prevention and recovery. Schools receive 70 percent of their accountability scores for student test performance and 30 percent for graduating students and preparing them for college and careers (see The Louisiana Graduation Index on page 20).⁹³ Beginning with the 2011–2012 school year, schools in **Virginia** will have to meet graduation rate targets to keep their accreditation.

More than simply including graduation rates in accountability systems, states need to set goals for improvement. Most states currently have minimal graduation rate improvement targets under federal accountability, often allowing “any progress” to be counted as sufficient.⁹⁴ These minimal targets signal to schools that significant gains in graduation rates are unnecessary. For example, if **North Carolina** were to simply meet its annual 0.1 percent im-

provement target it would need 97 years to reach the state goal of 80 percent.⁹⁵

The federal government has stepped in to make states accountable for improving their graduation rates. In October 2008, the U.S. Department of Education released regulations requiring states to adopt a four-year cohort graduation rate. The cohort rate will be used in federal accountability decisions following the 2011–2012 school year. The regulations also require states to set a graduation goal and annual targets that reflect “continuous and substantial improvement” from the previous year beginning in 2010. States must submit their graduation goal and targets for approval, and they have been instructed by the department that targets such as any improvement or an improvement as little as 0.1 percent will not be acceptable. States are required to set a single graduation rate goal for all schools to meet, but they may establish targets that vary for different schools and districts.⁹⁶

The Louisiana Graduation Index

The Louisiana Graduation Index rewards schools for keeping students in school as well as preparing them for success in college and careers. Schools receive points for each student according to student progress in school. The Graduation Index also counts students who take more than four years to graduate. Schools receive 30 points for a student who does not graduate in four years but still remains in school. If the student eventually graduates or receives a certificate, the school's score changes to reflect the individual's progress. At the same time, schools are penalized for each student identified as a dropout. This encourages schools to reengage out-of-school youth.

Student Result	Points
Academic Endorsement or Career/Technical Endorsement	180
Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) [a scholarship program in the state]	160
Industry Based Certification or TOPS Tech with Dual Enrollment or Articulated Credit	140
Regular High School Diploma	120
General Educational Development Certificate	90
Skills Certificate/Certificate of Achievement	60
Attendee	30
Dropout	0

As states ratchet up accountability for graduation rates, they can expect to see substantial improvements. For example, under its federal accountability plan, **Tennessee** set a goal of 90 percent for its graduation rate by the 2013–2014 school year. For a high school to make adequate yearly progress under the state's plan, it either needs to meet the 90 percent goal, or be “on track” to do so by 2013–2014. Tennessee defined what it meant to be “on track” by determining, for each school, how many points it needed to improve to reach 90 percent and then apportioning required improvements evenly across 10 years. Thus, a school with an 80 percent graduation rate would need to improve its graduation rate at least one percentage point each year and a school with a 70 percent graduation rate would need to improve two percentage points each year until 2013–2014.⁹⁷ The Tennessee governor's office credits the state's robust annual graduation rate targets

with driving schools to focus on improving their graduation rates.⁹⁸ From 2002 to 2006, Tennessee's graduation rate improved 11 percentage points—from 61 percent to 72 percent. This improvement was the largest among states nationwide.

Governors can also hold teachers and principals accountable for improving graduation rates. As teacher and principal incentive pay programs begin to take hold in states such as **Colorado, Minnesota,** and **Texas,** states should provide financial bonuses not only for increasing student achievement, but also for decreasing dropout rates. For example, **Georgia** Governor Sonny Perdue proposed legislation in 2009 to establish a high school principal incentive pay program for principals who raise graduation rates in their school.⁹⁹ Governors interested in tying teacher compensation to graduation rates should consider school-wide incentives for teachers. Governors can also consider tying school counselor compensation to student graduation success.

Champion Higher Graduation Rates

Via their bully pulpit, governors can take ownership of the dropout problem, rouse public support, and rally key stakeholders to the cause. To ensure that combating the high school dropout problem remains prominent on the state agenda, governors can champion higher graduation rates to state and local policymakers, teachers, and the general public. They can also convey to students and parents the importance of hard work and high school graduation as a gateway to postsecondary education, a successful career, and a productive, fulfilling life.

One approach governors can take is to speak about the importance of high school graduation in their state-of-the-state address. Several governors did exactly this in 2009. For example, **Texas** Governor Rick Perry highlighted the collective goal of ensuring that “every student graduates from Texas high schools.”¹⁰⁰ **Oklahoma** Governor Brad Henry said, “Too many of our students are failing to graduate from high school,” and touted a program to bring “volunteers from our communities into our schools to serve as guides, mentors, and champions for students at risk of dropping out.”¹⁰¹

Governors can also set state goals to improve high school graduation rates and decrease dropout rates and rally stakeholders around these goals. Graduation rate goals should be specific, aggressive, achievable, and measurable. For example, **Colorado** Governor Bill Ritter has set the goal of cutting the state's dropout rate in half over 10 years.¹⁰² **Delaware** seeks to achieve a 90 percent graduation rate by 2018, and **Nevada** has established a state goal to boost high school graduation rates by 10 percent by 2013. Goals such as these provide state agency staff and relevant stakeholders with clear objectives and common purpose.

Governors can spearhead statewide communications campaigns to convey the urgency of the dropout problem, build momentum for a dropout prevention and recovery policy agenda, and correct misperceptions among the public. **Mississippi** recently waged a statewide multimedia campaign, dubbed "On the Bus." The campaign includes two 30-second television spots, a 60-second radio spot, billboards, and a Web site (<http://onthebus.ms>). The television spots aimed to focus students, families, and community members on the bleak future awaiting high school dropouts. They also sought to highlight the economic costs of dropouts to the state—estimated at \$458 million each year. The campaign was funded by a \$1.5 million grant from State Farm to the Public Education Forum of Mississippi.¹⁰³

Of course, states can also pursue an effective communications campaign on a limited budget, using little more than the time of skilled staff in the governor's office or state department of education. Staff can make pitch calls and help convene editorial board meetings to generate media interest. In addition, they can take advantage of new social media tools, such as Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and blogs. For example, **Delaware** secured many news articles and opinion pieces highlighting its high school redesign work by soliciting coverage through a statewide local radio and print media tour. The state also used various social media tools to highlight its high school reform efforts, including a MySpace page (www.myspace.com/delawareeyc).

State and community convenings are another low-cost approach governors can pursue to make



Many out-of-school youth want to return to school but do not know where to turn.

the case for dropout prevention and recovery. For example, 23 states have held a dropout prevention summit supported by the America's Promise Alliance. Governors in the remaining states have been invited to hold a summit by 2010, and 55 mayors and superintendents have been invited to host separate city-level summits. The summits seek to increase public awareness of the dropout crisis; foster collaboration among the corporate, nonprofit, and public sectors; and launch the development of state and community dropout prevention plans.¹⁰⁴

Assign Responsibility for Dropout Prevention and Recovery

Many out-of-school youth want to return to school but do not know where to turn. These students simply need someone to reach out and connect them with supports, but very few states and communities assign responsibility for dropout prevention and re-

covery. This type of action will not occur without direction. Governors must commit to bringing dropouts back to school by assigning responsibility for dropout prevention and recovery at the state level and fostering community-wide approaches at the local level.

States have begun to recognize that assigning responsibility for dropout prevention and recovery is essential to ensure action. Some states vest responsibility for dropouts in the state education agency. For example, legislation in **Mississippi** created an office of dropout prevention in the state department of education that is responsible for coordinating with districts on their dropout prevention plans.¹⁰⁵ The **Colorado** Department of Education has created a staff position for dropout prevention and recovery. Working in coordination with districts, this individual is responsible for coordinating dropout prevention and recovery strategies across the department and the state. This individual can share best practices, tailor support services, and communicate the importance of improving graduation rates to stakeholders at all levels. Assigning dropout recovery responsibility at the state level sends a strong message to schools and districts that the state is committed to reengaging out-of-school youth.

Governors are also well positioned to enable cross-agency and cross-sector collaboration to address the high school dropout problem. The challenges of dropout prevention and recovery are not confined to the education system. At-risk students and dropouts can come into contact with multiple state service agencies, including mental health, juvenile justice, and foster care agencies. These state agencies must work together to develop solutions. Cross-agency and cross-sector collaboration can lead to a shared vision for dropout prevention and recovery and counteract what could otherwise be a diffuse approach to the issue.

The challenges of dropout prevention and recovery are not confined to the education system.

State-level collaborative bodies should include representatives from organizations that have resources to bring to the table, including both public and private funds. Public funds for dropout prevention and recovery at the state level include per-pupil education expenditures, alternative education funds, charter school funds, and dropout prevention and recovery grants. Federal dollars for dropout prevention and recovery that are administered at the state level include funds from the U.S. Departments of Labor, Justice, Education, and Health and Human Services. For example, 15 percent of Workforce Investment Act Title I funds are set aside for expenditures by the governor's office for statewide activities, including efforts to help reconnect dropouts to school. For more information on funds that can be used for dropout prevention and recovery, see the National Youth Employment Coalition report, *Expanding Options: State Financing of Education Pathways for Struggling Students and Out-of-School Youth*.¹⁰⁶

Governors can use preexisting collaborative groups, such as Children's Cabinets and P-20 councils, to address the dropout problem. Fifteen states, including **New York** and **Utah**, have established a multi-agency Children's Cabinet to streamline services and develop policy action plans that focus on the needs of children. P-20 councils, which facilitate a seamless approach to education policy from early childhood to postsecondary, serve as an important driver of education reform in approximately 30 states.¹⁰⁷ These councils afford governors an opportunity to define their vision for dropout recovery and identify strategies for reaching that vision. **Delaware** is one example of a state that has created a dropout committee on its P-20 council.

States can also foster collaborative approaches to dropout prevention and recovery at the local level. Without a coordinated effort from community members and education stakeholders, state policies may not have a substantial effect. **Washington's** Building Bridges program provides grants to school, family, and community partnerships that seek to build a comprehensive dropout plan. The grant requires broad local participation from, for example, education, workforce, transportation,

and juvenile justice agencies. At the state level, a workgroup reviews successful local strategies and provides recommendations to the legislature. In Cincinnati, **Ohio**, the Strive partnership brings together business, nonprofit, community, civic, and philanthropic organizations to provide financial and programmatic support to assist the school district. Strive has developed a road map for student success and helped set community targets for high school graduation.

ACTION 2: Target Youth At Risk of Dropping Out

Most schools lack systems and staff that identify students at risk of dropping out and provide them with necessary supports. To prevent students from dropping out, governors can:

- Support the development of early warning data systems;
- Target investments in promising strategies; and
- Connect students to existing supports.

Identify Students Likely to Drop Out with Early Warning Data Systems

Governors can support the creation of early warning data systems to help schools accurately identify individual students likely to drop out. Early warning data systems use basic academic and attendance information to flag individual students at high risk of dropping out and report that information to people who can intervene. Armed with information from these systems, teachers, counselors, and others can provide students at risk of dropping out with the extra supports they need to succeed in school.

Early warning data systems should include data from middle and high school. Difficulty in the transition years—the first year of middle school and the first year of high school—often presages dropping out.¹⁰⁸ In Philadelphia, **Pennsylvania**, for example, about 40 percent of eventual dropouts showed early warning signs in the 6th grade, and 80 percent of eventual dropouts were identified by the end of 9th

grade.¹⁰⁹ By starting early warning data systems in middle school, teachers, counselors, and others will have more time to intervene.

States can develop early warning data systems for use at the school, district, and state levels. **Louisiana** has pioneered the development of a state early warning data system. The state's system flags students as at risk of dropping out if they are absent 10 percent of the days they have been enrolled, their discipline count is 7 percent of days or greater, their current grade point average is 1.00 or less, their grade point average has dropped by at least 0.50, or they are overage for grade.¹¹⁰ For lessons learned from Louisiana's efforts, see Guiding Principles for Early Warning Data Systems: The Louisiana Approach on page 24.

Developing an early warning data system at the state level offers several advantages. First, it saves money by minimizing duplication of efforts. Second, by avoiding a piecemeal approach to early warning data system development across districts, it helps ensure that greater numbers of students are served by such systems. Finally, it can inform resource allocation decisions by providing states with better data to analyze which districts and schools are most effective. Consequently, several states, including **Colorado**, are following Louisiana's lead



and developing an early warning data system at the state level.

Other states are fostering the development of such systems at the school and district levels with incentives or mandates. This approach may allow for greater accuracy because each school and district is somewhat different from another. Furthermore, it can help develop buy-in among the teachers, counselors, and administrators who will be tailoring interventions for students identified by the system. The state education agency in **Virginia** is supporting four school districts' efforts to develop an early warning system under a pilot program.

Whether or not they are developed at the state level, early warning data systems save states money.

They limit the costs of dropout prevention by enabling schools and districts to target assistance to students likely to drop out without wasting resources on students likely to graduate without any extra help. Similarly, while every state in the nation has a dropout problem, every region in every state does not. Information from a state data system is extremely important for targeting supports, interventions, and funding to the lowest-performing schools and districts in the state. Furthermore, information from a state early warning data system can be used to calculate returns on investment in dropout prevention.

Today, early warning data systems are very accurate thanks to groundbreaking research and de-

Guiding Principles for Early Warning Data Systems: The Louisiana Approach

The Louisiana approach provides several lessons for other states interested in developing early warning data systems:

- **Build off existing state data systems.** States have been leading the way on developing longitudinal student data systems that enable individual students to be tracked over time. Early warning data systems should take advantage of existing data infrastructure or be designed to be easily incorporated into future systems.
- **Partner with external organizations.** States can partner with higher education institutions, nonprofit organizations, software vendors, or school reform organizations to boost their capacity for research and development. Louisiana partnered with a regional educational software vendor and the state university to create its early warning data system.¹¹¹
- **Focus on ease of use and timeliness.** To be useful, early warning system data need to be regularly updated and easily accessible. To get results, teachers and counselors need timely data that are easy to interpret. In Louisiana, the system automatically e-mails school and district leaders regarding at-risk

students twice per month.¹¹² States should offer trainings on how to use the system effectively.

- **Look back to move forward.** Louisiana performed a retrospective, longitudinal analysis to inform the development of its early warning data system. This enabled the state to fine-tune indicators, increasing the accuracy of the system.¹¹³
- **Allow for flexibility on warning signs.** In Louisiana, the early warning data system triggers can be modified at the district or school level. Research suggests that the thresholds for triggers can vary from school to school and from grade to grade. For example, research in Philadelphia, **Pennsylvania**, found that 8th graders were very likely to drop out if they missed five weeks of school, but in 9th grade, missing seven weeks of school was the tipping point.¹¹⁴
- **Tie funding to early warning data system use.** Require the use of an early warning data system—designed or used according to state guidelines—as a requirement to receive specific state funding. In Louisiana, schools received state grants and technology in exchange for generating student reports and crafting intervention programs.¹¹⁵

velopment in several public school districts. For example, in Chicago, **Illinois**, 85 percent of eventual dropouts can be identified by the end of 9th grade.¹¹⁶ These highly accurate systems enable tailored interventions and more efficient resource allocation.

Furthermore, early warning data systems are neither expensive nor difficult to build because they are based on basic academic information already collected at the school and district levels: attendance, behavior, course achievement, and student age and grade. In numerous studies, indicators based on these data have been shown to be highly predictive of dropping out.¹¹⁷ Several studies suggest that grades are more highly predictive than test scores for graduation, but states with graduation tests should consider including low test scores as an indicator.¹¹⁸

Early warning data systems can also help educators focus on small populations of students who are highly likely to drop out of school, such as foster care youth. In Philadelphia, **Pennsylvania**, for example, 70 percent of students with a foster care placement or who had a substantiated case of abuse or neglect during high school dropped out of school.¹¹⁹ Governors can encourage agencies in charge of foster care and juvenile justice to share data with the state education agency to strengthen early warning data systems and coordinate supports for students at risk of dropping out.

Target Investments to Promising Dropout Prevention Strategies

Once students are identified as being at risk of dropping out, teachers, counselors, and community partners must intervene with proven and promising dropout prevention strategies tailored to the needs of individual students. Although these strategies are implemented at the local level, the state has a key role to play in building the capacity of schools, districts, and communities to intervene effectively. Furthermore, states can support targeted state-level investments in dropout prevention and evaluation of dropout prevention efforts.

Governors can support dropout prevention efforts at the local level by issuing guidance or require-

ments that focus on evidence-based practices to help make the best use of scarce funds. For example, **South Carolina** issued its *At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide* to support evidence-based decisionmaking at the local level. The guide contains descriptions of effective dropout prevention programs and a matrix that helps local leaders match effective programs with identified student risk factors.¹²⁰ Similarly, in **Mississippi**, school districts are required to craft plans that incorporate different dropout prevention strategies, based on their specific and local needs, using a dropout prevention framework issued by the state department of education. Governors can look to the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>) for the latest research on best practices in dropout prevention.

Governors can build local-level dropout prevention capacity by targeting flexible dropout prevention funds to schools and districts in need. For example, former **North Carolina** Governor Michael Easley signed legislation allocating \$7 million in grants to fund dropout prevention and recovery programs based on best practices and run by school districts, schools, local agencies, or nonprofit organizations. The Preparing **Alabama** Students for Success program awarded 38 local education agencies \$4.4 million. These school districts regranted the funds to schools to improve attendance, academic success, and school engagement for 6th through 12th graders at risk of school failure.

To ensure that state investments in dropout prevention strategies are effective, states should target their investments using data and support evaluations of their efforts. For example, **Texas** launched a 9th-grade transition program in 2009 to provide 8th graders identified as being at risk of dropping out with summer programming followed by increased monitoring and support at the start of 9th grade. The state is conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the program through an external, third party. This evaluation will inform the state's policymakers as they decide whether and how to move forward with the program.

Governors can also direct funds toward K-12 reform efforts proven to improve graduation rates or

factors related to graduation, such as attendance, behavior, academic success, and engagement in school. For example, reducing class sizes for a cohort of students from 25 to 15 in kindergarten through grade 3 means an increase in graduation rates of 11 percentage points.¹²¹ Similarly, improving teacher quality and early reading skills have been linked to decreased dropout rates in the long run.¹²²

In addition, governors can increase graduation rates by investing in early childhood programs. For every 100 children participating in the Perry Preschool program, an additional 19 children eventually graduated high school.¹²³ Many governors have supported early childhood initiatives that address the comprehensive needs of at-risk children from birth to age 5. For example, in **Kansas**, former Governor Kathleen Sebelius worked with state leaders to develop an effective early childhood system. The system aims to provide the state's children with ready access to parent education, health insurance, an infant-toddler mental health system, and high quality early care and education.

Like early childhood programs, expanded learning opportunities—such as afterschool, summer learning, tutoring, and mentoring programs—help mitigate challenges faced by students at risk of dropping out. High-quality expanded learning opportunities improve students' behavior, academic performance, and school engagement and attendance.¹²⁴ At-risk 9th-grade students who participated in an expanded learning opportunity called the Quantum Opportunities Program graduated high school at a rate about 20 percentage points higher than their peers who did not participate.¹²⁵

Governors can target federal and state support for expanded learning opportunities to populations that are at a high risk of dropping out. For example, **California's** After School Safety and Enrichment for Teens (ASSETs) program prioritizes high-poverty schools when awarding grants for high school afterschool programs using federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers funding. Students who participated in ASSETs passed the California High School Exit Exam at significantly higher rates than other students.¹²⁶ Sixty-three percent of participating students passed the mathematics portion

of the exam, compared with 53 percent of similar students who did not participate in the program.¹²⁷

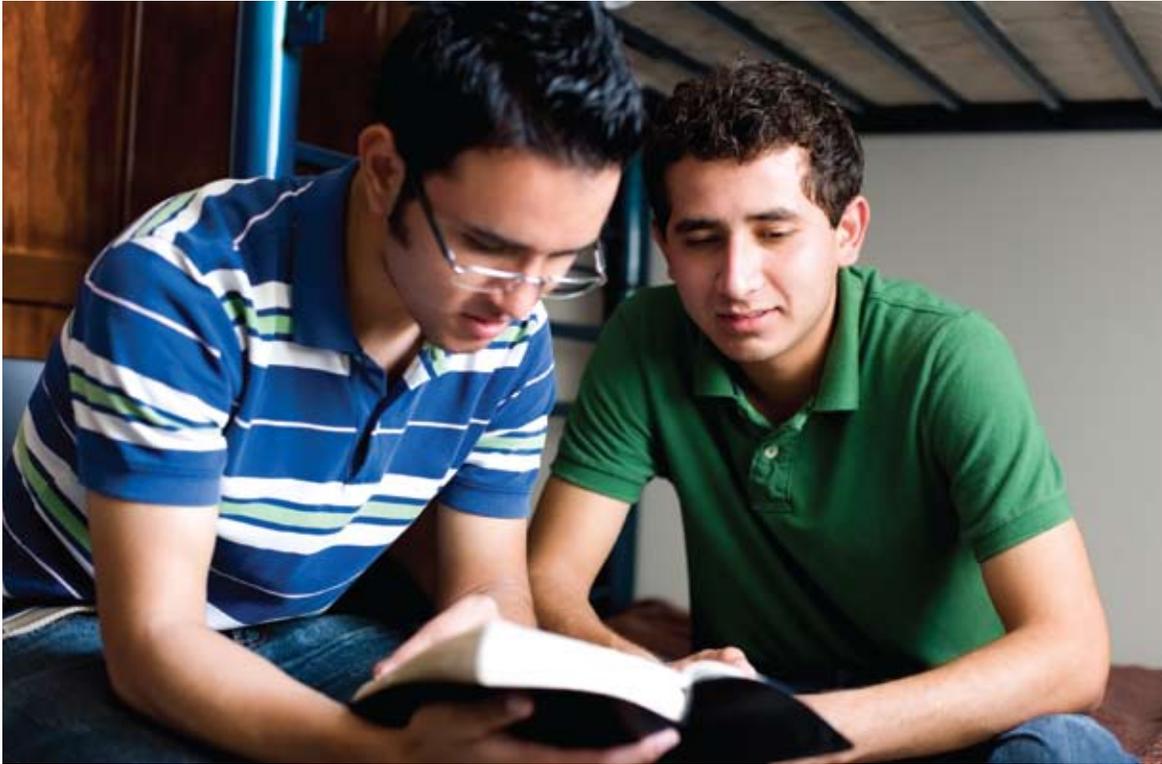
Investments in early childhood education and expanded learning opportunities are mutually reinforcing. A recent study found that, among disadvantaged students, attending quality preschool would boost graduation rates from 41 percent to 66 percent. Moreover, investing in additional supports in a balanced manner as the children age would raise the graduation rate from 66 percent to 91 percent.¹²⁸ Similar to how compounding interest over time leads to exponentially larger returns on fiscal investments, steady human capital investments in young people—tipped toward the younger years of a child's life—pay the greatest dividends.¹²⁹

Connect Students to Supports

Governors can connect students to supports that will help them graduate by supporting graduation coaches, community schools, and personalized learning plans. Graduation coaches are individuals whose only responsibilities are identifying students at risk of dropping out and steering them toward graduation. Community schools support students' academic success, as well as their overall development, by engaging community partners within schools. Personalized learning plans provide students with an accurate assessment of the courses, knowledge, and supports they need to reach their career goals.

Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue coined the term "graduation coach," having had coaches growing up that knew how to support and motivate young athletes. Like the coaches of his youth, Governor Perdue expects graduation coaches to know how to support the success of young people. Graduation coaches help connect students to mentoring, tutoring, and life skills programming as well as credit recovery efforts and attendance interventions.

Governor Perdue championed graduation coaches in his 2006 state-of-the-state address. He signed legislation later that year providing funding for a graduation coach in each of the state's high schools. The state pays \$40,000 per year for each graduation coach.¹³⁰ In 2007, the governor expanded the initiative to include middle school coaches and



community coaches. The middle school coaches help students explore career opportunities, understand the importance of education to meeting their life goals, and successfully transition to high school. The volunteer community coaches are private-sector leaders statewide who provide graduation coaches with a conduit to the business community.

In the two years since Georgia launched its graduation coaches initiative, the state's graduation rate has improved by nearly five percentage points, surpassing 75 percent for the first time.¹³¹ The percentage of dropouts per year fell from 4.7 percent to 3.7 percent during that same period.¹³² In 2007–2008, graduation coaches worked with 33,884 students at risk because of poor attendance.¹³³ By the end of the year, 13,723 of those students no longer demonstrated attendance problems.¹³⁴

In part because of results such as these, several states are following Georgia's lead. To contain costs, these states are focusing on schools with the highest dropout rates or making use of volunteer staff. For example, **Alabama** has established a pilot program that will provide \$1.7 million in funding to 25 pilot schools to hire dropout prevention advisors.¹³⁵

Governor Brad Henry in **Oklahoma** touted graduation coaches in his 2008 and 2009 state-of-the-state addresses and recently signed into law a graduation coach bill.¹³⁶ Graduation coaches in the Sooner State will be volunteers recruited from the community rather than paid district staff.¹³⁷ **Massachusetts** Governor Deval Patrick has proposed placing student support coordinators in every low-income school to connect students and families to services, such as health, housing, and social services.

Another approach governors can take to connect students and families to health, social, and academic support services is to support community schools. In community schools, the school serves as a hub for multiple partners to offer various supports to youth, families, and communities. Community schools can be effective in improving student academic performance, attendance, and behavior, and they can support improved graduation rates.¹³⁸ For example, students enrolled in schools supported by Communities In Schools, a national community school initiative, are more likely to graduate on time with a regular diploma than are similar students attending traditional schools.¹³⁹

Kentucky supports the community school concept, in part, through its state-funded family resource and youth services centers. Schools are eligible to apply for funding from this initiative if at least 20 percent of their student population live in poverty. Family resource centers serve children and their families from birth through elementary school and coordinate preschool programs, afterschool programs, family trainings, and health services and referrals.¹⁴⁰ Youth service centers serve middle and high school students and coordinate referrals to health and social services, career exploration and development, summer and part-time job development, substance abuse education and counseling, and family crisis and mental health counseling.¹⁴¹ Governors can encourage districts to work with community-based organizations to ensure that youth services are coordinated.

One way states have begun to deal with student disengagement is by creating personalized learning plans. Students with a clear path to their future may be more likely to remain in school. Governors can require personal learning plans for all students as a way to connect students to adults in school, cultivate future interests, and connect school to postsecondary and career options. For example, **Delaware** requires counselors to develop individual learning plans for all students. **Virginia** will require similar plans in the 2010–2011 school year. These plans help schools tailor supports to students and provide students with an accurate assessment of the courses, knowledge, training, and skills they will need to obtain for their desired career path.

ACTION 3: Reengage Youth Who Have Dropped Out of School

Call them the “Comeback Kids.” More than half of all high school dropouts eventually earn a high school diploma or alternative credential such as a General Educational Development (GED) certificate.¹⁴² These students show state policymakers that dropout recovery is a reality.

Unfortunately, most states do not make it easy for students who have dropped out to return to

school. Governors must create policies and programs that aim to recover high school dropouts. No matter how effective a state’s dropout prevention efforts, students will invariably fall through the cracks. By creating dropout recovery systems, governors can provide out-of-school youth with on-ramps back to school.

Governors should focus primarily on supporting dropout recovery programs and schools that provide students the opportunity to earn a traditional high school diploma. This is because individuals with traditional diplomas have better labor market outcomes than individuals who have earned GEDs.¹⁴³ For more information, see *The GED: An Important Last Resort* on page 29.

Governors can help steer high school dropouts back to school by creating incentives for dropout recovery, employing outreach strategies to reengage out-of-school youth, and establishing school reentry programs for juvenile offenders. Governors can also support new and more flexible options for earning a traditional high school diploma that are relevant for students who have dropped out of school (see *Action 4: Provide Rigorous, Relevant Options for Earning a High School Diploma* on page 31).

Create Incentives for Dropout Recovery

Reengaging out-of-school youth is a difficult task for school systems. State funding streams and accountability systems are largely structured in a way that discourages dropout recovery. At the same time, schools and districts are often ill equipped to recover large numbers of dropouts because of limited budget and capacity. Consequently, offering incentives can serve as a crucial starting point for dropout recovery in a state. States can restructure funding streams, offer new funds, or provide nonmonetary rewards to encourage dropout recovery efforts.

To buttress dropout recovery programs that are run as charter schools, at community colleges, or by community-based organizations, states can ensure that state and local per-pupil education funding can flow to students in alternative settings. For example, school districts in **Oregon** receive full funding for each dropout they recover and place in an alterna-

The GED: An Important Last Resort

General Educational Development (GED) certificate programs are an important last resort for individuals who have exhausted options for earning a traditional high school diploma. GEDs can help adults without high school diplomas enhance their educational and economic opportunities. For example, years before taking office in **Delaware**, former Governor Ruth Ann Minner earned her GED after being widowed suddenly at age 32 with three sons to raise.¹⁴⁴ To earn a GED today, an individual must pass subject-matter tests in science, math, social studies, reading, and writing, with scores equivalent to about the 40th percentile of graduating seniors.

Individuals with traditional diplomas typically outperform GED recipients with respect to employment, earnings, and other labor market outcomes.¹⁴⁵ However, earning a GED is often better than earning no high school credential at all. For example, among 27-year-old males who had dropped out of school with weak academic skills, GED recipients earned 36 percent more than dropouts without the credential; among females, this statistic was 25 percent.¹⁴⁶

Furthermore, GEDs open the door to postsecondary education, and postsecondary credentials trump both traditional and alternative high school credentials in the labor market. That is, the returns to postsecondary education are equivalent for GED recipients and high school graduates.¹⁴⁷

Although 66 percent of GED examinees in 2000 said they were taking the GED so they could pursue further education, just a third of GED recipients actually receive any postsecondary education. Between 5 percent and 10 percent of GED recipients attain a year of postsecondary education, and only 3 percent of male and 0.5 percent of female GED certificate holders earn an associate degree.¹⁴⁸

Governors may consider supporting programs that aim to help people earn GEDs and complete postsecondary programs. YouthBuild USA, for example, has launched Creating Pathways to Success, a three-year postsecondary education initiative. The project is supporting seven local YouthBuild programs so more than 1,500 poor dropouts can earn a GED or diploma and go on to complete two- and four-year colleges, technical schools, and apprenticeships.¹⁴⁹

Governors seeking to support GED programs should also consider how to do so without undermining dropout recovery programs that lead to a traditional high school diploma. One approach is to refrain from allowing individuals to take the GED until they have reached age 18. For example, **California** generally requires individuals to be 18 years old, or within 60 days of their 18th birthday, to take the GED. The state allows 17-year-olds to take the test if they have been out of school for at least 60 consecutive school days and provide a letter of request for the test from the military, a postsecondary institution, or a prospective employer.¹⁵⁰

tive education program, but they only pay 80 percent of the funding to external alternative education programs.¹⁵¹ This funding structure provides the district with a strong incentive to focus on dropout recovery, and it establishes a symbiotic relationship between the school district and alternative education providers. All school districts in the state must either establish an alternative education program or contract with a private provider.¹⁵² The alternative programs provide recovered dropouts with learning environments that are flexible with respect to time,

place, structure, and teaching methods.¹⁵³ In addition, states can consider ways to ensure dropout recovery programs receive as much state and local per-pupil education funds as traditional K-12 public schools serving similar student populations.

States can also offer new sources of funding to schools and districts focused on dropout recovery. In 2008, the **Texas** Education Agency created a Dropout Recovery Pilot Program, making it one of the first statewide efforts to focus specifically on recovering out-of-school youth. The pilot program



provides eligible entities with grants to identify and recruit students who have dropped out of Texas public schools. School districts, nonprofit education organizations, and education service centers are eligible to apply for grant funds. The entities receive financial incentives up to \$2,000 per student above base state funding, including \$250 for each interim student achievement benchmark met, such as earning enough credits to advance to the next grade level. Grantees receive \$1,000 for each student who earns a high school diploma, obtains a GED plus college credit, or gains advanced technical credit.¹⁵⁴ A similar program in **Wisconsin** provides school districts with “bonus aid” for reenrolling students and helping them progress toward a diploma.¹⁵⁵

Incentives do not need to be monetary. Simple recognition can go a long way toward encouraging dropout prevention at the local level. Several states have annual recognition programs, such as Teacher of the Year, that highlight the good work of an individual or a school. This concept could be replicated for schools or districts that display serious commitment to dropout recovery. Creating a statewide dropout recovery award can highlight best practices,

A focus on creating a “portfolio” of school models is needed, so students have multiple on-ramps to graduation.

provide deserved recognition to faculty and staff, and encourage other schools and districts to turn their attention to reengaging dropouts. Furthermore, such an award would raise awareness of dropout recovery programs among out-of-school youth.

Employ Outreach Strategies to Reengage Out-of-School Youth

Reengaging out-of-school youth is a full-time job. About 20 percent of U.S. students do not complete high school, some of whom leave school only a few credits shy of graduation.¹⁵⁶ States should not treat these students as a lost cause.

States and districts have begun to step up their efforts to reengage out-of-school youth. In **Texas**, volunteers, including district superintendents, visit the homes of students who do not return to school in the fall through the Reach Out to Dropouts program. The program has recovered more than 5,500 students in Houston since 2004 and spread to 17 other school districts in the state.¹⁵⁷

To be most effective, outreach efforts need to go beyond a single school and involve all community stakeholders. To counteract one of the lowest graduation rates in the nation, Philadelphia, **Pennsylvania**, created a dropout outreach strategy called Project U-Turn in October 2006. In just two and one-half years, the project has:¹⁵⁸

- Held four community and one state dropout prevention and reengagement summits;
- Created two accelerated high schools and offered credit recovery programs to more than 3,000 undercredited students;
- Published research reports documenting the fiscal consequences of dropping out of school in Philadelphia; and
- Increased the four-year cohort graduation rate by 10 percent.

Project U-Turn’s commitment to reengaging dropouts is most readily apparent in the opening of the Re-engagement Center, a one-stop service center for reengaging out-of-school youth and giving them support once they reenroll in school. The center em-

employs district and city staff to identify dropouts; connects youth with social, emotional, and academic supports; and monitors student success for 120 days after the youth return to school.¹⁵⁹ From May 2008 to April 2009, the center referred more than 1,600 dropouts to education options in the city.¹⁶⁰

Establish School Reentry Options for Juvenile Offenders

Court-involved youth present a unique challenge for traditional public schools to reengage. The sheer number of youth returning to society after time in the juvenile justice system is astonishing. Approximately 130,000 youth—or the total number of students in **Alaska**—are released annually from juvenile justice or probation facilities in **California** alone.¹⁶¹ These children need support services to reenroll in school and transition back to life outside the court system.

School can serve as a safe haven for students trying to move beyond their past and, in the long run, it is much cheaper to return to school than to return to the justice system.¹⁶² In **California**, a Green Dot charter school operates a reentry program for youth returning from residential facilities. The goal is to teach the students social and academic skills that will enable them to join traditional classrooms within one year of enrollment.¹⁶³

Reenrollment is often the largest barrier for court-involved youth to return to school. Strategies to ease the transition process include clearly defining interagency roles and responsibilities, including family in the school reenrollment process, ensuring speedy placement, and allowing placement in the least restrictive environment needed.¹⁶⁴ In 2006, **Virginia** codified many of these reenrollment strategies. For youth in a state-operated juvenile correctional center, the state's department of juvenile justice must begin the enrollment process a month in advance of release. The regulations establish timeframes for notifying the local educational authority, provide documentation of the reenrollment process to the youth and his or her family, develop a reenrollment plan that identifies the student's educational placement and academic program, and ensure school reenrollment within two school days of release.¹⁶⁵

ACTION 4: Provide Rigorous, Relevant Options for Earning a High School Diploma

Schools lose students because they do not provide rigorous and relevant content that is connected to the real world. To address this problem, governors can create rigorous and relevant pathways for all students to graduate high school. Clear connections to postsecondary and workforce interests, including dual enrollment, internships, and apprenticeships, keep students engaged in school with a focus on their future goals.

Create New Effective Schools

Every student should receive the opportunity to attend an effective school. As communities expand and failing schools are replaced, governors should support the creation of new effective school models that set rigorous expectations and emphasize real-world training. Creating new effective schools will lead to a stronger education system that will keep students engaged and prepare them for success in college and careers.

Students are just as diverse in learning styles and education interests as they are in demographic characteristics and social interests. A student who wants to pursue engineering in college will likely need a different type of school—in terms of pace, place, and content—than an 18-year-old dropout who desires a high school degree to move up in the workforce. States and large urban districts can no longer afford to offer only comprehensive high schools. A focus on creating a “portfolio” of school models is needed, so students have multiple on-ramps to graduation.

There are many mechanisms to offer new, effective school models statewide. States can partner with private industry or foundations to create career-focused models; provide online school options to allow anywhere, anytime learning; or partner with large urban districts to offer successful, open-enrollment charter schools. Regardless of how a state creates school options, these models must connect students to their interests and future career

aspirations, reconnect dropouts to school, and increase college readiness. From career academies to dropout recovery alternative schools, governors should promote a portfolio of successful school models at the state and district levels.

Fortunately, several successful school models are emerging in states and districts across the nation. Governors can endorse career technical education (CTE) “Programs of Study” as viable pathways for students to graduate high school, pursue postsecondary education options, and enter high-wage, high-skill professions. Taking both academic and career technical classes can lower a student’s likelihood of dropping out of school.¹⁶⁶ At its best, CTE can help students progress through high school while preparing them to meet college and career expectations.¹⁶⁷ In **Maryland**, more than 50 percent of CTE concentrators—students who take four or more CTE courses—meet the state university’s entrance requirements.

Career academies are an illustrative model of real-world learning that is personalized to student interest. Governor Tim Kaine of **Virginia** has spurred the development of nine Governor’s Career and Technical Academies that enable high school students to earn college credit in programs such as automotive technology, engineering, digital media, health sciences, and information technology. In 2003, **California**’s Sacramento Unified School District transitioned to six career-themed high schools with 36 career-themed academies. From 2004 to 2007, the city’s dropout rate fell from 24 percent to 14 percent.¹⁶⁸

As of fall 2008, 34 states offer state-led online initiatives, ranging from online course clearing-houses to state-run virtual schools.¹⁶⁹ Creating an online school option is appealing for these states because, in terms of technology, proficiency, and time, virtual learning meets students where they are. State-run virtual schools in **Colorado**, **Florida**, **Georgia**, and **Michigan** have experienced success, even when serving similar numbers of at-risk students as traditional public schools.¹⁷⁰ For example, Florida Virtual School students outperformed students in similar courses on both the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test and Advanced Placement exams.¹⁷¹ States should strive to replicate

models of schooling that engage youth through flexibility and technology.

It is imperative that some new school models specifically serve students who have dropped out of traditional schools. For example, New York City’s “transfer schools” provide overage, undercredit students with a personalized learning environment and a community-based support structure.¹⁷² These schools have been very successful in reengaging dropouts, with nearly 60 percent of the students continuing to graduation. This is a significant improvement over traditional schools that were graduating these same students at below 20 percent.¹⁷³ The Alternative High School Initiative is a national consortium of schools dedicated to at-risk and out-of-school youth. Participating schools exist in more than 35 states (see The Alternative High School Initiative on page 33).¹⁷⁴

The goal of all high schools is to prepare students for college and careers. Unfortunately, many current high schools are not meeting this goal. To meet the challenge of college and career readiness, states are supporting models that create a direct bridge from high school to postsecondary study. States such as **Indiana**, **North Carolina**, and **Texas** have obtained private financing to create rigorous high school models that focus on college preparedness.

The **North Carolina** New Schools Project has created more than 100 innovative high schools, including early college high schools (ECHSs) and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) academies. The dropout rate in these high schools, which serve mostly minority and lower income students, is nearly half the state rate at 2.8 percent.¹⁷⁵ The state worked closely with Jobs for the Future to develop a statewide ECHS network. Schools in the network had a combined dropout rate of less than 1 percent in 2007–2008.¹⁷⁶

The **Texas** High School Project has created 91 new schools in high-need districts statewide, with an emphasis on urban areas and the Texas-Mexico border. In 2008, more than half of the schools received accountability rankings of “Exemplary” or “Recognized”—the two highest ratings given by the state.¹⁷⁷

In early 2009, KnowledgeWorks Foundation committed \$10 million to expand the New Technol-

The Alternative High School Initiative

The Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI) is a consortium of 12 organizations committed to creating rigorous education opportunities for students outside conventional public schools. These high schools engage students in real-world learning and a personalized school culture. For example, Big Picture Schools in 16 states, including **Missouri**, **New Mexico**, and **Rhode Island**, emphasize that learning must be based on the interests of the student and relevant to the student's community. Big Picture Schools graduate more than 90 percent of their students annually.¹⁷⁸

Working with **Indiana**, **New Jersey**, and **Tennessee**, AHSI has developed a local strategy to offer alternative high school options. The Place-Based Partnerships in Indianapolis, Newark, and Nashville, respectively, represent a three-year commitment from local government and education stakeholders to develop new schools and programs for at-risk and out-of-school youth. The cities plan to open several school models, including these:

- **Diploma Plus** offers out-of-school youth a competency-based path to a high school diploma. Students

progress through the program by meeting academic competencies that are mapped to state standards. To earn a high school diploma, students must successfully complete real-world projects, an internship, and one or more credit-bearing college courses.

- **Gateway to College** provides out-of-school and at-risk youth with an opportunity to earn a high school diploma while obtaining college credits. In their first semester, students learn core skills and study habits in a small peer community. After the initial semester, students take courses on a college campus with the goal of obtaining a certificate or an associate degree.
- **YouthBuild** concurrently provides on-the-job training and a competency-based school program to out-of-school youth. The reengaged youth divide their time between building affordable housing for low-income people and studying for their high school diploma. The program emphasizes leadership, community service, and college and career readiness. It is supported primarily by the U.S. Department of Labor.

ogy High School model to high schools across **Indiana**. New Technology High Schools use project-based learning to engage students and teach 21st-century skills, such as communication and collaboration, which prepare students to compete in the global workforce.

Governors can also look to high-performing charter schools to increase graduation rates. High-performing charter schools, such as YES Prep Public Schools in Houston, **Texas**, provide rigorous high school experiences to minority and disadvantaged students. Despite these schools serving a majority of students who enter school at least one year behind in mathematics and English, every graduating YES Prep senior has been accepted into a four-year college for nine consecutive years, and 84 percent of alumni have graduated from or are still enrolled in a four-year college.¹⁷⁹ This success rate is

impressive, but YES Prep has only five campuses because of significant barriers to expansion.

Governors seeking to increase the number of high-performing charter schools can:¹⁸⁰

- Define charter school quality to guide charter school expansion;
- Streamline reporting, renewal, and governance requirements for high-performing charter schools;
- Create at least one statewide authorizing body to facilitate outstanding charter school expansion;
- Ensure greater parity of funding between charter schools and district public schools; and
- Support charter schools' access to adequate facilities.



Finally, governors can ease the transition to postsecondary training for students who did not complete high school. Not having a high school degree can be a barrier to the pursuit of postsecondary training and can jeopardize opportunities to obtain sustainable employment. **Indiana's** Fast Track to College program aims to counteract this problem. The program enables students ages 17 and older who are not enrolled in high school to earn a high school diploma from a state college or university while enrolled in a certificate or an associate degree program. To receive a high school diploma, students must pass the state graduation exam or an approved equivalent. High school coursework is paid for by the school district if students are ages 17 or 18.¹⁸¹

Turn Around Low-Performing Schools

For governors to address the dropout problem, they must dramatically improve the nation's dropout factories and their feeder middle schools. Fortunately, states have an extraordinary opportunity to

turn around these and other low-performing schools. The federal government is spending a total of \$3.5 billion in School Improvement Grant funds to states and localities in fiscal 2009 and 2010. Under draft federal guidance, approximately 1,600 of the 2,000 identified dropout factories will be eligible to receive these funds.¹⁸²

The first step to turn around a state's low-performing schools is to identify a comprehensive strategy for reform. Governors can rely on a framework from Mass Insight Education and Research Institute (Mass Insight) that encourages states to:

- Create new authority to intervene in chronically low-performing schools;
- Build state and district capacity to assist struggling schools and districts; and
- Provide flexibility in state policies on hiring, budgeting, staff allocation and compensation, and contracting with education personnel.

States have begun to implement pieces of the Mass Insight framework to create better schools for all students. Governors can look to **Colorado's** and **West Virginia's** Innovation Zone legislation, which provides schools with more authority over hiring, placement, compensation, and work rules; **Massachusetts' Expanded Learning Time Initiative**, which provides more scheduling authority for a longer school day and longer school year; **Virginia's** efforts to build leadership capacity through its School Turnaround Specialist Program; and Chicago, **Illinois'**, Renaissance 2010 initiative, which clusters schools for efficiency, effectiveness, and modeling new kinds of school network design.

States have also begun to experiment with creating a special "zone" to provide unique support services to chronically low-performing schools. **Louisiana** and **Mississippi** each enacted legislation creating a Recovery School District to cluster chronically low-performing schools. In this special district, schools partner with turnaround specialists, receive greater operating flexibility and state support, and are held to higher accountability standards. In **Lou-**

isiana, this intensive support structure has helped drive student performance. Graduation rates in the Recovery School District rose from 39 percent in 2007 to 67 percent in 2008.¹⁸³

Breaking apart large schools into small communities can have a positive effect on graduation rates.¹⁸⁴ Consider the First Things First whole school reform model. This model involves small learning communities, family advocacy, and instructional improvements. For every 100 students who participate in First Things First in grades 9 to 12, 16 additional students graduate high school.¹⁸⁵ In small learning communities, students can build stronger relationships with faculty, counteracting the feeling of being lost in a crowd that can occur in large high school settings. **Michigan** created a 21st Century Schools Fund to break apart low-performing high schools into clusters of small schools. The fund provides grants to school districts for planning and start-up costs to design small high schools with no more than 110 students in each grade. Each of the schools is designed to achieve at least an 80 percent graduation rate within three years of opening.¹⁸⁶ Governors should be aware that while small schools may increase graduation rates, they have not been shown to positively affect student achievement and are costly to operate.¹⁸⁷

Award Credit for Performance, Not Seat Time

States, because of their progress on standards-based reform, are well positioned to decouple credit attainment from seat time and instead tie it to demonstrations of what students know and are able to do. States have already established academic content standards, set up assessments to measure whether students are meeting those standards, and challenged education stakeholders to ensure that all students achieve. The time has come to crack the Carnegie unit.

Governors can work with their school boards or state legislators to allow students to earn credit based on their content knowledge and related skills. Twenty-two states have taken this initial step. **South Dakota** is one of the most recent to do so. That state's school board adopted a rule allowing schools



to award credit based on student results on end-of-course exams or other assessments, as an alternative to the previous requirement that students spend 146 hours in class over the course of a year.

To make this policy a reality, states have supported fast-track credit recovery programs, charter and alternative schools that provide credit for student performance, and initiatives that enable students to earn credit in afterschool and summer learning programs. These types of efforts, when successful, pave the way for fundamental changes to the school day in traditional public schools.

States can support credit recovery programs in traditional or virtual schools. As an example of the former, **Louisiana's** Credit Recovery Grant Program provides funding to districts to establish programs to help students recover credit after they have failed a course. In this way, students can advance to 9th and 10th grade on time.¹⁸⁸ The grant funds can be used for teacher stipends, computer software, sup-

The time has come to crack the Carnegie unit.

plies and materials, and professional development.¹⁸⁹ **Georgia** offers credit recovery through its virtual school. As of April 2009, more than 175 public schools from 86 school districts were participating in Georgia's credit recovery program.

Charter and alternative schools are often more likely to take advantage of state policies that allow credit to be awarded for performance, rather than seat time. For example, in Dayton, **Ohio**, both the Integrated Solutions for Urban Students charter school and the Mound Street Academies alternative schools offer courses that are competency-based and tied to state education standards.¹⁹⁰ Each of these programs primarily serves students who have already dropped out, and allows for accelerated learning.¹⁹¹ These programs are possible because of state policy that allows students ages 16 to 21 who are at least one grade level behind their cohort in school to enroll in a competency-based program.

Allowing students to earn credit in afterschool and summer learning programs is a promising avenue to increase flexibility in state education systems. **New Hampshire** high school students are now earning regular academic credit in their afterschool and summer learning programs, thanks to a group of key state leaders, including representatives from the governor's office, the state education

agency, the state legislature, and a statewide afterschool coalition.¹⁹² With financial support for implementation from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, New Hampshire established a pilot program at four high schools, where students earn credit in social studies at federally funded afterschool and summer learning programs.

Whether offered afterschool, in school, or online, programs that award credit based on student performance must be academically rigorous in nature. For example, in the **New Hampshire** program, regular high school teachers assess student work and act as the ultimate arbiters of whether or not credit is awarded. Of the 337 students who participated in the pilot program in its first year, 140 earned credit toward graduation.¹⁹³ To receive credit for a course at the **Georgia** virtual school, students must complete the entire course and pass a proctored final exam or end-of-course test.

By cracking the Carnegie unit, states can address the fundamental mismatch between rigid, lockstep education systems and the demands of the current economy. They can open the door to innovative ways of instructing students and to a more flexible and personalized education system that can better engage students, improve student achievement, and ultimately reduce dropout rates.



IV. THE PATH AHEAD

Governors have led the national effort to shine a light on America’s catastrophically low high school graduation rates. Now is the time to move from illuminating the problem to solving it. Governors, facing the worst fiscal environment in years, know they must lay the foundation for strong economic growth. States can no longer afford a high school dropout problem that wastes the potential of so many of their young citizens.

Even states facing budget shortfalls can advance the dropout prevention and recovery agenda by cutting ineffective programs and directing scarce resources to policies that lower dropout rates. In fact, by forcing difficult decisions that might otherwise be deferred, budgetary crises can provide the political cover needed for dramatic reforms, such as restructuring school funding formulas so funds follow students.

Fortunately, given the tough economic times, states can look forward to some help. During the next two years, the federal government will funnel a total of \$3.5 billion to states and localities to turn around low-performing schools. These school improvement funds provide states with an historic opportunity to reform the dropout factories that substantially contribute to the nation’s dropout problem.

Looking across states, governors have many recent successes on which to draw. From Louisiana’s early warning data system to Georgia’s graduation coach initiative, promising state policies to tackle the dropout problem have never been more prevalent. States can also build off proven local initiatives, such as dropout recovery programs and innovative charter schools.

There is no single fix for the dropout problem. To be most effective, governors must address both dropout prevention and dropout recovery. As recommended in this guide, governors must take a comprehensive approach to reform, connecting early warning data systems to student supports and creating incentives for dropout recovery in a system that awards credit for performance.

Governors who pursue comprehensive reforms to achieve graduation for all of their youth can expect to realize substantial benefits. Lowering dropout rates means expanding opportunity for more youth—opening the door to success in college, career, and life. It means stronger communities, enhanced civic life, and an improved workforce. In the long run, lowering dropout rates means sizeable economic returns that strengthen states’ budgets and economies.



NOTES

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The Center is organized into five divisions with some collaborative projects across all divisions.

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John Thomasian, Director
NGA Center for Best Practices
444 North Capitol Street, Suite 267
Washington, DC 20001
202-624-5300
www.nga.org/center

