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Preventing Dropouts: The Important Role of Afterschool

Over the last decade, high school dropout rates have declined to single digits nationally. However, the U.S. only ranks 22nd in high school graduation rates and 14th in college attainment among industrialized countries.ⁱ Furthermore, graduation gaps persist among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and minority racial groups. Reducing dropout rates is not merely a moral imperative, more than half a century after the passage of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, but an economic necessity. Dropping out of school dramatically affects a young person's future, which in turn has a significant economic impact on our nation, including affecting the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) through diminished personal earnings, spending and savings; the cost of juvenile and adult crime; and health care costs such as Medicaid and Medicare. Addressing the dropout issue is critical if we want to encourage a culture of lifelong learning, ensure all young people are given the tools and skills they need to thrive, and help the country remain competitive in the 21st century.

A growing body of research helps identify the dropout risk factors and the students who are likely to drop out. Afterschool programs are a proven intervention strategy to address these risk factors and provide the necessary supports to students who are struggling. Studies, both qualitative and quantitative, demonstrate the ability of afterschool programs to help stem the tide of dropouts. This brief offers evidence of afterschool programs' effectiveness in addressing the dropout issue and makes the case for greater investment in afterschool programs.

Digging into the Dropout Data

There has been much progress over the last decade. The national graduation rate rose from 69 percent to 78 percent between 1999 and 2010, with most of the increase occurring between 2006 and 2010.ⁱⁱ The number of "dropout factories"—high schools graduating 60 percent or fewer students—has also declined 29 percent between 2002 and 2011.ⁱⁱⁱ

The improved graduation rates of Latino and African-American students is another promising sign, accounting for a significant portion of the rise in graduation rates between 2006 and 2010.^{iv} According to *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic*, for the first time we are on track to meet the national goal of a 90 percent high school graduation rate by the end of the decade.^v

"The dropout crisis affects every one of us, since dropouts are less likely to be employed, to vote or to volunteer, and give back to their communities. Their disappearance from our economy and from our civic life affects all of us. And all of us have the obligation to help."

— Former First Lady Laura Bush

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However, despite these gains, significant gaps persist in graduation rates among states, races, income levels, and students with disabilities and limited English proficiency. For instance, although more than half of states increased their graduation rates since 2002, there are 23 states that are unlikely to reach the goal of a 90 percent graduation rate by 2020.^{vi}

Examining the graduation rates by race, 33 percent of African-American students and nearly 30 percent of Latino and Native American students fail to graduate from public high school on time with their class.^{vii} The *Building a Grad Nation* report found that the graduation rate is less than half for students with disabilities in 12 states and less than half for students with limited English proficiency in nine states.^{viii}

Additionally, analysis of graduation rates indicates that 40 percent of the country's dropouts come from about 11 percent of America's high schools. These "dropout factories" are often in high-poverty neighborhoods—both urban and rural—with students who face challenges, both in school and out.^{ix}

The National Impact of the Dropout Problem

The negative impact of dropping out of school affects not only the students who drop out, but in an increasingly global economy, the economic, social and legal consequences of dropping out are devastating for the local community and the national economy as well.

The Department of Labor estimates that 90 percent of new high-growth, high-wage jobs will require some postsecondary education.^x The median annual earnings of \$26,700 for a high school graduate is 36 percent higher than a dropout who earns \$19,600.^{xi} And, it's estimated that over the course of 40 years, an individual who earns a bachelor's degree can make approximately 66 percent more than an individual who graduates from high school.^{xii}

In addition to affecting one's future earnings, research shows that dropping out of high school impacts one's health. Individuals with less education often lack health insurance, and research has found that uninsured adults with chronic illnesses are far less likely to receive adequate care.^{xiii} On the other side of the spectrum, high school graduates have better health and lower medical costs than high school dropouts due to increases in their future income, occupational status and social capital.^{xiv}

“High school dropouts are three times as likely to be unemployed as those who have completed four or more years of college.”

—Census Bureau

Legal consequences are also associated with dropping out of school. A report by the Coalition for Juvenile Justice found that when compared to high school graduates, the likelihood of arrest for young people who drop out of school is more than three times as high.^{xv} Nearly 75 percent of America's state prison inmates, almost 60 percent of federal inmates and almost 70 percent of jail inmates had not completed high school.^{xvi} Researchers estimate that the country could see \$8 billion in savings and revenue yearly if there was just a 5 percent increase in the male student high school graduation rate and college enrollment rate.^{xvii}

“In this kind of knowledge economy giving up on your education and dropping out of school means not only giving up on your future, but it's also giving up on your family's future and giving up on your country's future.”

—President Barack Obama

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The ABC's of Dropout Risk: A Cycle that Begins in Elementary School

Research indicates two sets of risk factors impact the decision to drop out: individual and institutional. Student engagement is a key individual factor in a student's decision to stay in or drop out of school, while family, school and community are the institutional factors that affect their decision. Disengagement often begins as early as elementary school and persists through the higher grades. The process of disengagement generally is characterized by three indicators, also known simply as the ABCs— high Absenteeism, Behavior problems and Course failure, including both incomplete assignments and failed courses.^{xviii}

The ABCs are closely connected to one another. For example, many students begin exhibiting signs of high absenteeism in elementary school. Students who are absent often are less likely to complete their homework and complete their course.^{xix}

In middle school, a student's elementary school patterns may persist and can be reinforced by early adult responsibilities, such as caring for a younger sibling. Low levels of school engagement—as evidenced by attendance problems, course failure in English or mathematics, and conduct issues—can predict as least 50 percent of eventual dropouts.^{xx}

At the high school level, social behaviors—such as being a member of a high-risk social group that engages in risky behaviors—may result in drug use, teenage pregnancy, and gang membership, all of which further fuels disengagement. Ninth grade failure—which affects a student's school engagement and motivation to graduate—is also often linked to retention in the elementary grades, therefore establishing a pattern that begins with poor attendance and behavior and coursework issues as early as elementary grades.^{xxi} *Chart 1* outlines the individual risk factors as they relate to elementary, middle and high school students.

The cycle of student disengagement is further impacted by the institutional risk factors of family, school and the community. The individual and institutional risks related to a young person's decision to drop out of school are complex, as evidenced in *Chart 2*. This complexity is compounded by the effect of poverty, which has a major influence on each of the risk factors involved.

The evidence underscores the need for early and ongoing interventions with at-risk students to prevent their likelihood of dropping out of school in the higher grades. As stated in the report *Beyond The Indicators: An Integrated School-Level Approach to Dropout Prevention*, “it is extremely difficult to bring students who are off track in the ninth grade back on track to graduation.”^{xxii}

Chart 1

Individual Risk Category and Risk Factor	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Attendance			
Poor Attendance	●	●	●
Early Adult Responsibilities-High Work Hours		●	●
Early Adult Responsibilities-Parenthood			●
Behavior			
Conduct	●	●	●
Social		●	●
Low Levels of School Engagement		●	●
Coursework			
Low Achievement	●	●	●
Retention/Overage for Grade	●	●	●

SOURCE: Adapted from National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC) at Clemson University and Communities in Schools, Inc. (2007).

NOTE: Additional risk factors were included in original NDPC research.

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Addressing the Dropout Problem

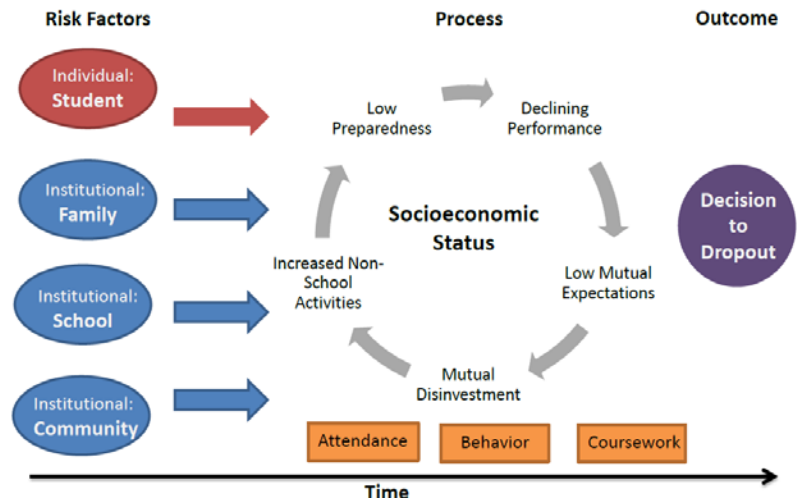
Having access to data on where dropouts occur, who drops out, and why they drop out is only useful if it is employed to prevent future dropouts. Dropout prevention efforts need to focus on key transition points in a student’s adolescent school years to be most effective; the transition into middle school, the transition into high school and the completion of high school. According to Dr. Robert Balfanz, co-director of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, “We have the tools of intervention that can be deployed in a targeted manner. This makes a compelling argument for targeted early interventions to diminish dropout. This is like insider trading for social good.”^{xxiii}

Research suggests that it is vital to focus on building both academic and social skills in middle school (reading comprehension, fluency, transition from arithmetic to mathematics and a need for camaraderie) and high school (path to college and career readiness, transition to adult behaviors and mindset and, extra help for below grade-level students). Intervention strategies to mitigate the dropout problem call for input from all four constituents involved in the dropout process—individual, family, school and community. Suggested interventions include systemic school renewal, school-community collaboration, safe learning environments, family engagement, early childhood education, mentoring, service learning, individualized instruction, and career and technology education.^{xxiv} Also included in this list of strategies to effectively help students stay in school are afterschool programs.

Impact of Afterschool Programs

Afterschool programs have gained significant popularity with parents and educators alike—driven by the need for safe havens for children, academic enrichment opportunities for students, and support for working families after regular school hours. Rigorous studies on the efficacy and effectiveness of afterschool programs have proven that afterschool programs work to help improve educational outcomes and mitigate dropout rates, addressing legitimate questions raised by budget-minded policy makers and administrators who have to decide whether afterschool programs provide “bang for the buck.”

Chart 2
The Dropout Process



“We have the tools of intervention that can be deployed in a targeted manner. This makes a compelling argument for targeted early intervention to diminish dropout. This is like insider trading for social good.”

—Dr. Robert Balfanz, Johns Hopkins University’s Everyone Graduates Center

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Evaluations of afterschool programs have found that they positively influence students in a multitude of ways. Below are studies that point to the ability of afterschool programs to have a beneficial effect on the factors that can lead to a student dropping out of school: a student's school day attendance, behavior and course performance.

Attendance:

- The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) conducted a meta-analysis of 68 studies of afterschool programs and found that when compared to their non-participating peers, students participating in a high quality afterschool program demonstrated improvements in a number of areas, including better school day attendance.^{xxv}
- An evaluation of Chicago After-School All-Stars—an afterschool program that focuses on developing all aspects of their students and supports their academic growth, their social and emotional skills, and their health and fitness—found that participation in the program resulted in fewer regular school-day absences and fewer suspensions. After-School All-Stars' participants demonstrated a 14 percent reduction in absences and a 17 percent reduction in suspensions.^{xxvi}
- A 2012 evaluation of the Schools & Homes in Education (SHINE) afterschool program, located in rural Pennsylvania, found that of students who regularly attended the program and demonstrated a need to improve behavior, more than one-third improved their school day attendance (37 percent).^{xxvii} Additionally, between 2005 and 2012, close to 6 in 10 students (58 percent) regularly attending the program—which focuses on engaging students in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) learning—maintained “exceptionally good” school day attendance, where “exceptionally good” attendance was defined as missing nine days of school or less. Parents of students participating in the program also saw a difference. An average of 84 percent of respondents on the parent survey said that their child's school day attendance had improved over the last five years.^{xxviii}

Behavior:

- The Promising After-School Programs Study examined 35 high-quality afterschool programs across the nation that served close to 3,000 low-income and ethnically-diverse students. The study found that regular participation in high-quality afterschool programs is linked to positive effects on student behavior. Students regularly participating in the high-quality afterschool programs were less likely to misbehave, less likely to become aggressive with their peers, and less likely to engage in drug and alcohol use.^{xxix}
- Researchers found that 77 percent of students participating in New York City's Beacon Community Centers said that the program helped them learn about the dangers of alcohol, drugs and other risky activities, with almost half (49 percent) reporting that they “agreed a lot” with the statement.^{xxx} An earlier study of the program found that 80 percent of students who took part in the interviews reported that the Beacon was either “very helpful” or “pretty helpful” in avoiding drug use and 74 percent said that the Beacon was either “very helpful” or “pretty helpful” in avoiding fighting.^{xxxi}
- Results from a longitudinal evaluation of LA's BEST—a program that provides afterschool enrichment to more than 28,000 kids throughout Los Angeles—showed that students who regularly attended the afterschool program were less likely to participate in criminal activities than non-participating students.^{xxxii} Translating the reduction in juvenile crime into cost savings for the city, researchers calculated that every dollar invested in the program resulted

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in \$2.50 in costs savings for the city. The study also found that LA's BEST students were 20 percent less likely than non-participants to drop out of school.

Course Performance:

- Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), with funding from the Department of Education, conducted a meta-analysis of 35 afterschool program studies and found that the programs had a positive impact on the academic performance of students who were most in need of help. The analysis found that students participating in the afterschool programs, and who were at risk of failing reading or math, saw gains in both subjects. Positive results on reading achievement were found particularly in students in the lower elementary grade levels and in high school, and positive effects on math achievement were seen in middle and high school students.^{xxxiii}
- Chapin Hall's study of the After School Matters program—a program that provides jobs for high school students in Chicago—found that students who participated in the program missed fewer days of school than their classmates and that students who participated most frequently failed fewer core academic courses, including English, math, science and social studies. Although After School Matters does not consider improving academics one of their main goals, the ability to match students with jobs creates an incentive for them to attend school regularly and giving them something to look forward to after school, researchers concluded that the program helped improve academic performance.^{xxxiv}
- Students who participated for two years in the AfterZone—a network of community-based afterschool programs providing arts, skill building and sports to middle school youth—reported higher grades in a number of subjects compared to students not participating in the program. AfterZone students had higher average math grade point averages (GPA) than nonparticipants, as well as higher English language arts and science GPAs.^{1xxxv}

Conclusion

Despite the evidence that supports afterschool's role in lowering the dropout rate—by exciting students about learning, supporting their social development and building on the lessons they learn during the school day—an estimated 15.1 million children are unsupervised in the afternoon.^{xxxvi} Given current funding for afterschool, only 8.4 million K-12 children participate in afterschool programs. However, an additional 18.5 million would participate if a quality program were available.^{xxxvii}

A greater investment in afterschool programs would help bring much-needed services and supports to communities, schools, families and students that are struggling with the dropout issue, as well as address the factors that lead to dropping out of school. *Roadmap to Afterschool for All*, a report examining public and private investments in afterschool programs, found that parents pay a significant majority of the costs of afterschool, 76 percent, while the federal government contributes 11 percent; state and local accounts for 6 percent; and businesses, foundations and individual donors contribute 5 percent.^{xxxviii} Funding for the 21st CCLC initiative, the only federal funding source dedicated exclusively to before-school, afterschool and summer learning programs, allows for 1.6 million kids to participate. Yet, there are 22 million kids who are eligible to attend 21st CCLC programs nationally.^{xxxix}

Other federal funding sources that support before-school, afterschool and summer learning programs include the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and

¹ Differences in English language arts and science GPAs were not statistically significant

funding for juvenile justice programs. Increased funding for CCDBG can provide child care vouchers to more eligible families, and greater funding for juvenile justice programs can support more youth violence prevention efforts. Through WIA reauthorization, funding for older youth could be available for job training, summer employment, supportive services, and guidance and counseling for older youth who are at risk of dropping out. These combined investments are critical to helping ensure that students have access to quality afterschool programs that can help them catch up, keep up and stay on track to graduation.

The widespread and long-term economic and social impact of the dropout crisis on individuals, communities and the nation underscores the urgent need for intervention. In the words of Dr. Balfanz, “When kids drop out of school, it is not only the kid, but the community [that] is cut out from the 21st century.”^{xi} Investments in afterschool programs can provide the educational, social and emotional supports to students, families and communities who are in need of help, and contribute to breaking the dropout cycle.

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ⁱⁱ Ibid.

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Acknowledgments

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