

Increasing Graduation Rates: Learning To Finish

Introduction and Context

In the United States, every 26 seconds a student drops out of high school. Our country faces a silent epidemic – year after year – where nearly one-third of all 9th grade students and half of low-income and minority 9th graders in the public school system fail to graduate in four years.

And the problem is not shrinking. The Education Trust notes: “The United States is the only industrialized country in the world in which today’s young people are less likely than their parents to have completed high school.”

At the National Summit on America’s Silent Epidemic, Robert Balfanz wrote:

“Decades ago, this would not have been a crisis. Manufacturing and agricultural jobs provided an avenue for employment and upward mobility for young adults without a high school degree. Today, the unemployment rate for young adults without a high school diploma is staggering. As a result, failure to graduate from high school has become a ticket to the underclass. For a single individual this can be tragic, but when the majority or near majority of students from entire neighborhoods and communities fail to graduate, the social and economic costs are profound and far reaching.”

As if these national statistics are not enough to cause concern, the problem is even more pronounced in Louisiana. In the 2008 periodical “High School Counts,” published by the Louisiana Department of Education, the following summary puts the dropout issue in context.

“Every year 15,000 students drop out of Louisiana public schools; more than one in three of our students do not graduate from high school. These individuals leave school unprepared to earn a living wage and are unable to contribute to the economy of the state. High School dropouts of Louisiana’s class of 2006 alone will cost the state \$6.5 billion dollars in lost wages over their lifetime. Dropouts contribute heavily to Louisiana’s burgeoning prison population, high welfare costs, and critical shortage of skilled workers. Our state can no longer afford the high costs of students dropping out.”

Research helps define the problem – who the dropouts are and how to prevent it. While there is no magic bullet or quick fix to the dropout crisis, Louisiana is committed to progress with a combination of hard work and good policy decisions.

A key component of Louisiana’s approach to increasing graduation rates is that whole communities must be engaged. Whatever the issue – economic development, workforce development, reducing the crime rate, reducing welfare costs, expanding the middle class, or reducing poverty – increasing the graduation rate is a means to achieving the goals of Louisiana.



Increasing Graduation Rates in Louisiana Communities

Louisiana's Promise began as a collaborative effort of Education's Next Horizon, America's Promise Alliance, Louisiana Department of Education, Louisiana Governor's Office, Picard Center for Child Development, United Way affiliates, and numerous other public and private partners across the state to focus on developing community-wide solutions to the dropout problem. The ultimate goal of the Louisiana Promise initiative is to help meet Louisiana's legislated goal of increasing graduation rates to 80% by the 2013-2014 school year. Louisiana is investing in community involvement and leadership in this effort because:

- Dealing with the dropout issue is a key to the future economy and quality of life in Louisiana.
- The dropout issue is not a school issue – it is a whole community issue.
- Education is a local issue – each local community is the best place to determine solutions.

Education's Next Horizon leads a communication and advocacy effort to keep dropout prevention a “top of the agenda” issue in Louisiana. Louisiana's education leaders are using best practice research to guide the state's effort to increase graduation rates. The objective of Louisiana's Promise is to create community-wide teams of education, law enforcement, political, business, non-profit and faith community leaders to develop local strategies in one or more proven best practice focus area. These focus areas are:

- Keep dropout prevention at the top of the agenda.
- Develop early detection and community support systems for “at risk” students.
- Reduce truancy and increase attendance rates.
- Bridge the transition of students between 8th and 9th grade and between 5th and 6th grade.
- Promote middle and high school transformation that engages students by connecting school to their future.

In October 2008, Louisiana's Promise held a statewide dropout summit with participation of over a thousand Community Leadership Team members from every school district in the state. In January and February of 2009, eight regional summits were held to accelerate the work of the District Community Leadership Teams with 100-200 people participating in each of the eight regions.

In partnership with United Way affiliates and the Picard Center for Child Development, Louisiana's Promise currently offers direct support to the twenty (20) school districts that have the lowest cohort graduation rates. Support to the districts includes convening and engaging community leaders in community summits to develop local solutions to the dropout problem. In partnership with the Louisiana Department of Education, Louisiana's Promise also provides dropout prevention planning support to targeted urban districts and high schools.

On the Path to Dropout: Identifying the Risk Factors

The first step toward an effective dropout prevention strategy is identifying students on the path to dropout. Louisiana has taken a step in the right direction with the development of an electronic Dropout Early Warning System (DEWS) currently implemented in over two-thirds of Louisiana's school districts. The system increases school and school district capacity to identify students who are at risk of dropping out.

Although the electronic Dropout Early Warning System has been initially “rolled out” in high school, the goal is to expand rapidly into middle and elementary schools. The electronically generated data will be “real time” throughout the school year. This will allow schools to make assessments early (i.e. first month absentee rates) and continue vigilance throughout the school year.

There has been good research on the key indicators predictive of dropping out. Louisiana is using analysis of these indicators to help schools identify students “at risk” of dropping out. These indicators include:

- Failure to be promoted to the next grade.
- Poor grades in core subjects.
- Low attendance.
- Behavioral problems, which often reflect disengagement.

As is noted in the “Ensuring Literacy” section of this report, one of the strongest predictors of “dropping out” is whether a student has repeated a grade in elementary or middle school. This is a significant concern in Louisiana because of the high number of overage students resulting from high retention rates in the early elementary grades and the failure rate of students on the 4th and 8th grade high stakes tests. National statistics indicate that nearly 80% of students held back two or more years in elementary or middle school leave the public education system without a diploma.

The failure of students in core academic courses in middle and secondary school is also a key predictor of dropping out. In multiple studies, grades tended to be a better predictor than test scores. A student receiving more than one F as a semester mark in the 9th grade is highly predictive of student failure to graduate.

Students absent from school tend to fall behind. Attendance rates in middle and high school are key predictors of “dropping out” – with even moderate levels of student absenteeism creating cause for concern. In comparison to students with good attendance, ninth grade students who miss over two weeks per semester have three times the dropout rate. Attendance is an accountability metric in Louisiana but remains a significant problem in the state’s middle and high schools.

Probably the most consistent indicator of high dropout probability is overage status. Recent work by the Louisiana Department of Education has shown that as the age of students increase when they enter 9th grade, their chance of graduating declines significantly. Students who reach ninth grade on age-grade level graduate 81% of the time. Students who are two years older graduate only 19% of the time.

On the Path to Dropping Out: Interventions in Louisiana

When considering ways to increase graduation rates, the best intervention practices fall in the following areas:

- Improving school climate in order to facilitate student engagement.

- Increasing rigor and relevance to maintain high expectations for students.
- Extend learning time and build effective remediation strategies.
- Concentrate on improving school performance in key indicators such as reduced retention, improved attendance, and discipline.

Louisiana’s LA Core 4 diploma pathway sets out high expectations for high school students – preparing them to be college and career ready in the information age. This pathway is based on a revised Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum with a concentration on relevance and the addition of more appealing high school courses like Senior Applications in English, Math Essentials, and Anatomy/Physiology.

Louisiana schools completed their third year of state-funded 9th Grade Initiative that helps students succeed in high school by providing more personal attention and support through 9th grade academies. Starting in 2010-11, there are 82 schools receiving state funding for 9th grade academies and other initiatives through a modified version of 9th Grade Initiative – the Everybody Graduates! Grant program. In addition to these schools, many more continue to implement 9th grade academies without added financial resources from the state.

Greater emphasis is being placed on extended learning time and effective “catch up” and remediation programs. Districts are being supported in implementing the new Accelerated Pathway for at-risk overage students in 9th grade to graduate early.

Online differentiated instruction through the Louisiana Virtual School provides “anytime, anywhere” catch-up opportunities for students. These academic catch-up programs provide extended instruction in reading and math for struggling adolescent learners.

Improving school climate begins with a focus on relevance and greater personalization to meet student needs. Louisiana’s investment in the electronic Dropout Early Warning System (DEWS) is the foundation of a more targeted, student-centered approach to students at risk.

Louisiana invested in the implementation of Positive Behavioral Support initiatives in school districts across the state. This initiative provides research-based support for school districts in dealing with discipline concerns.

Louisiana continues to invest heavily in dropout prevention and recovery strategies that already have an excellent record of success in Louisiana and across the nation. These include the Job's for America's Graduates (JAG) and Educational Mission to Prepare Louisiana's Youth (EMPLoY) programs.

In February 2011, Education's Next Horizon established the **Louisiana Center for Afterschool Learning (LA-CAL)**. Funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and several public and private supporters, LA-CAL serves as Louisiana's primary vehicle to ensure a coordinated and uniform focus on high quality out-of-school time services for children and youth. The Center's goals are:

- Create a sustainable structure of statewide, regional and local partnerships, particularly school-community partnerships, focused on supporting policy development at all levels.
- Support the development and growth of statewide policies that will secure the resources that are needed to sustain new and existing school-based/school-linked afterschool programs.
- Support statewide systems to ensure programs are of high quality.

In the fall of 2011, the Pre-GED/Options Program will no longer be available. To better support dropout prevention, local superintendents and supervisors are working closely with the Louisiana Department of Education to implement the newly developed Connections Process, an initiative designed to ensure that districts have services to successfully prepare overage and academically behind students for college and career success. The Connections Process will include the following elements: academic and behavioral interventions; mentoring; job skills training; committee reviews; parent meetings; individual prescriptions for instruction; individual graduation plans; and exiting pathways (diploma pathways, GED, state-approved skills certificate).

Louisiana school districts will engage the entire community through District Community Leadership Teams in every school district willing to participate. These leadership teams will be dedicated to the key areas of keeping the dropout issue "top of the agenda"; building early warning and school and community intervention systems; improving community school attendance and truancy systems; and improving student engagement through connecting school to the student's future. The work of these teams has already led to changes in state attendance policy to allow fewer unexcused absences starting with the 2010-11 school year and legislation in 2009 and 2010 related to increasing graduation rates.

Increasing Graduation Rates – Next Steps

Increasing Graduation Rates is an important goal – a goal recognized by everyone concerned about education opportunity in Louisiana. Louisiana's goal of reducing dropouts will be an area of intense concentration by the Louisiana Department of Education, Louisiana Legislature, Governor's Office, and school districts across Louisiana.

Key questions that guide the state's effort to increase high school graduation rates include:

- What do we do to keep dropout prevention a "top of the agenda" issue?
- What can whole communities do to help raise graduation rates?
- What systems can be put in place and improved in elementary, middle, and high school to identify "at risk" students and reduce retention rates?
- What strategies should be employed to reduce the number of overage students in Louisiana schools?
- What systems can be put in place and improved at high schools defined by school researchers as "dropout factories" to increase the graduation rate?
- How do we better engage students in middle and high school?
- What can we do to support students in the transitions from 8th to 9th grade and from 5th to 6th grade?