



Making Good on a Promise: What Policymakers Can Do to Support the Educational Persistence of Dropouts

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Executive Summary

In a society that values individual reinvention and multiple makeovers, it seems a given that we should promise a second chance to young people who drop out of high school and then make the effort to continue their education. Yet little discussion has focused on a critical question: *Are pathways available to help dropouts pursue an education and move toward an economically productive adulthood?* This report assesses how far our society is from “making good” on the promise of a second chance and offers a starting point for improving the record.

One of the major barriers to making good on this promise is the broad set of misconceptions framing most discussions of the dropout issue. Too often, both public perception and public policy seem based on the notion that dropping out is confined to a small—and particularly unmotivated—group of young people. A related assumption, although rarely voiced, is that dropping out is primarily a problem of disaffected black and Hispanic central-city youth who have rejected mainstream values, including the

importance of education. Such views have reinforced a third widespread misconception: that there is little anyone can do to get most young people who leave school back on track—earning a high school degree and advancing to higher education.

Making Good on a Promise challenges those beliefs. It paints a new, more accurate picture of the dropout problem facing the nation today, with a detailed look at who dropped out and how much education they had completed by their early adulthood. It analyzes data from the first major national study to follow a representative group of young people over time: the National Educational Longitudinal Study, which tracked the educational progress of approximately 25,000 eighth-graders in 1988 over 12 years, to 2000.

JFF’s findings counter the prevailing views of the dropout population:

- **Dropping out is not confined to a small group of young people.** It is a full-fledged epidemic in central cities and other low-income communities, but it is not just a problem of the poor. About 20 percent of all students drop out. This represents close to 40 percent of students in the nation’s lowest socioeconomic group but also 10 percent of young people from families in the highest two socioeconomic status levels.
- **Socioeconomic status—which is based on parents’ income and education—rather than race is the key indicator for dropping out.** Black and Hispanic youth are no more likely to drop out of high school than their white peers of similar family income and education. That said, the dropout problem hurts black and Hispanic communities more than others. This is because black and especially Hispanic youth are overrepresented in the lowest income groups, while whites are underrepresented in these groups.



Making Good on a Promise was prepared for *Double the Numbers*, JFF’s national initiative to advance public policies that can significantly increase the number of young people who make it to and through college. Funding for this publication was provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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- **Most dropouts are remarkably persistent in their drive to complete a secondary education.** The perception of dropouts as unmotivated and lacking in mainstream values about the importance of education is not born out by the facts. Close to 60 percent of dropouts eventually do earn a high school credential—in most cases a GED certificate. Socioeconomic status continues to play a critical role—43 percent of dropouts from the lowest SES group earn a high school credential compared to 85 percent of dropouts from the highest two SES groups.
- **Many dropouts pursue postsecondary education, but despite their persistence few earn degrees.** Many dropouts have educational aspirations similar to those of high school graduates. Almost half of the dropouts who attain a secondary credential—44 percent—later enroll in two- or four-year colleges. Yet for all their effort, less than 10 percent earn a postsecondary degree.

What Policymakers Can Do

Making Good on a Promise offers several critical lessons for policymakers looking for new ways to give dropouts a second chance:

- **Refocus K-12 education accountability systems to emphasize a dual agenda: higher graduation rates *and* higher academic standards.** For nearly a decade, states have focused energy and resources on raising standards, placing a great deal of weight on how students perform on state assessments. A dual agenda shifts the emphasis from test scores alone to an equal consideration of test scores and graduation and dropout rates. This shift will require states to invest in building data systems that use a uniform four-year cohort graduation rate, as all 50 governors have now promised to do. Such an investment will enhance the capacity of states to move students up to higher standards without losing a significant number of them along the way.

- **Address the equity imperative by creating new pathways to college in low-income communities.** Some students proceed through the traditional pathway: four years in high school followed by two to four years of postsecondary study. But many students do not, especially in high-poverty neighborhoods that are disproportionately black and Hispanic. Closing the graduation gap will mean strategically employing new school development, interventions in low-performing schools, and other reform activities to improve the educational attainment of low-income youth.
- **Redesign dropout “recovery” programs to build on student aspirations and reflect the demands of the knowledge-based economy.** Most dropouts persist in seeking educational opportunities. They have absorbed the message that the economy is sending: seek higher-level skills and credentials if you want a solid foothold in the job market. But the educational system has not responded in kind, with programs that put dropouts on the road to valued postsecondary skills and credentials.

Only with a clear understanding of who is dropping out and the educational choices they make in later life can policymakers develop effective strategies to improve a young person’s second chance for educational—and economic—success. *Making Good on a Promise* provides that foundation—shedding light on key questions about who drops out, who returns to school, and who succeeds in earning secondary and postsecondary credentials.

JFF’s analysis offers a window into issues that deserve a central place in the developing dialogue about high school graduation and dropout rates. By looking at how individual dropouts fare over time, this report shifts the emphasis from how and why students fail *to how and why current educational options fail to effectively recapture young people who drop out and put them back on track to earn secondary and postsecondary credentials.*

