

I.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Keeping students in high school and graduating them is a continuous national challenge. In most city school districts, roughly half of the students who begin ninth grade do not finish high school in four years. Denver is no exception.

This paper is a call to action. Denver Public Schools (DPS) must take the lead in tackling the graduation crisis, and because this issue is so complex, the city of Denver, nonprofits, foundations, businesses, and governmental agencies will need to closely partner with the district to make a significant difference.

To prepare Denver's youth for academic and life success, students must stay in school. When students fail to graduate from high school, their economic life is essentially over. Statistic after statistic points to the negative outcomes for dropouts personally, including low wages and a life of poverty, as well as for society as a whole.¹

To successfully tackle the graduation crisis, DPS must not only recover those students who have left school but also support those students who are at risk of leaving school. With few exceptions, the vast majority of high school dropouts were, at one time, off track to graduation. The focus must therefore center on off-track students, in school and out of school.

This report conservatively estimates there are *at least* 6,000 out-of-school students living in the Denver area still eligible to receive a high school diploma. Furthermore, nearly 3,000 ninth grade students² in Denver Public Schools are off track to graduation based on number of failed semester courses, and more than 7,500 9-12 grade students *in school* are off track by at least one year based on the number of credits they have accumulated relative to their age.³

The significant number of students, in school and out of school, who are off track to graduation – more than 40 percent of the high school student population – demonstrates that existing schools have not met these students' educational needs. Based on interviews with national experts as well as local leaders familiar with dropout recovery in Denver, preliminary analysis reveals:

- 1) Scale and Access: There are an inadequate number of alternative schools designed to help students complete their diploma.
- 2) Quality: The quality of existing alternative schools is of such concern that Denver is at risk of offering a second-class system to those students most in need.
- 3) Location and Mix: Students are not well served by the mix and location of schools currently offered by DPS.

A diversity of student needs requires a variety of options for students to choose from, but the current options in DPS are insufficient to meet the needs of all students.

The good news is better data on students is now available, providing key information to develop effective prevention and recuperation strategies. Data analysis by Johns Hopkins University as well as Colorado Youth for a Change (CYC) suggests we can now identify as early as middle school which students are falling off track to graduation. Systemically capturing and acting on such data can help stem the tide of eventual dropouts.


More research, however, is needed to analyze the patterns of off-track youth in DPS, particularly overaged and undercredited 17-21 year old students who represent 31 percent of all students in school and 47 percent of the out-of-school population. Solid data is needed to inform effective strategies for meeting the needs of this sizable group.

A few steps are being taken by DPS leadership to

1 The Colorado Children's Campaign (2005). *The High Cost of Not Graduating High School*. Retrieved September 7th, 2009 from www.dkfoundation.org.

2 MacIver, Balfanz, and Byrnes (April 2009). *Dropouts in the Denver Public Schools: Early Warning Signals and Possibilities for Prevention and Recovery*. Baltimore, Maryland: (CSOS) Johns Hopkins University.

3 See Appendix B.



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strengthen prevention and recuperation in the middle school and early high school years, and to create a portfolio of new school options while establishing a stronger accountability system. These efforts, however, will be incomplete and inadequate until the district fully understands the trends and needs of its off-track students, in school and out of school, and creates a strategy to attract and create specific, quality alternative schooling options for those students.

In order to adequately address the dropout problem, key actions DPS must take include:

1) Thoroughly Assess Demand: Analyze and understand the dynamics of the Denver graduation crisis by conducting research and a complete analysis of data on the off-track student population

2) Increase Responsiveness:

- *Prevention:* Increase the number of students on track to graduation through implementing an early warning data system and comprehensive interventions starting as early as sixth grade
- *Recuperation:* Assess and improve the capacity of the district to get minimally off-track students back on track to graduation, including supports such as credit recovery, summer school, and effective alternative programs

- *Recovery:* Conduct aggressive outreach to re-engage out-of-school youth; assess and improve options for re-enrollment (including one-stop enrollment centers); and create a streamlined and supportive process to develop new, high quality alternative schools

3) Implement a 100 Percent Graduation Policy: Align district and school policies and practices to ensure a 100 percent graduation rate

4) Learn From Others: Look to other districts who are successfully addressing the graduation crisis – particularly New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Portland – for effective strategies, best practices, and successful school models

DPS must act now. If it fully commits to the steps outlined above, DPS can make serious strides in the next two years to reduce the number of students falling off track, to increase the number of high school graduates, and to set a solid foundation to strive toward a 100 percent graduation rate.

The district cannot do this work alone. Collaboration with nonprofits, foundations, government agencies, businesses, and communities, is critical to helping DPS better understand the educational needs of students, evaluating the district's own capacity to serve these students, and aligning both policies and practices to ensure all students receive a high quality education and reach the graduation goal line.