ISSUE BRIEF

Improving High School Graduation Rates Among Males of Color

Trends, Findings, and Recommendations

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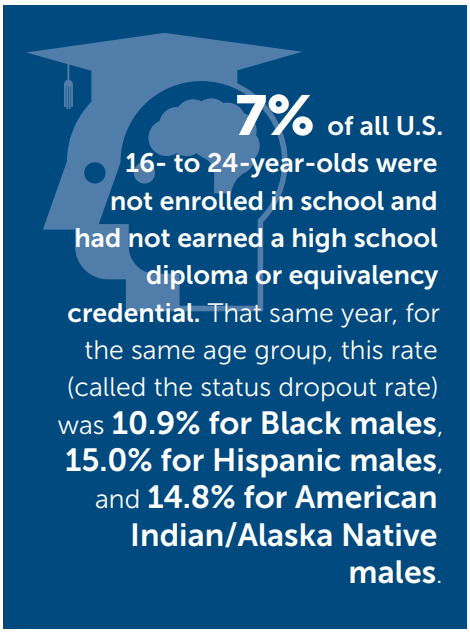
Framing the Issue

Young males of color constitute a disproportionately high percentage of our nation's non-high school graduate population. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey show that in 2012, 7% of all U.S. 16- to 24-year-olds were not enrolled in school and had not earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential. That same year, for the same age group, this rate (called the status dropout rate) was 10.9% for Black males, 15.0% for Hispanic males, and 14.8% for American Indian/Alaska Native males. For each of these ethnicities, the status dropout rate for females was significantly lower (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014, Table 219.80). The U.S. Census Bureau data also show a positive correlation between the incidence of young dropouts and levels of family poverty.



For students of color, primarily comprised of African American, Hispanic, and Native American youth, the percentage range for graduation rates in recent years has been from the high 60s to low 70s, compared to rates for white students around 80%. Conversely, annual event dropout rates for these students of color have been between 5%–7%, compared to rates around 2% for white students (Stark & Noel, 2015).

The Cost of Dropouts

On average, dropouts earn $8,000 less per year than high school graduates (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2015a). The economic cost of nongraduates among students of color is a significant part of the total dropout cost to the nation. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, if there had been a 90% graduation rate among African American students in 2013, these 201,550 additional graduates would have bolstered national annual earnings by $1.6 billion and contributed $1.2 billion to the nation's annual spending. Furthermore, these high school graduates would have generated $200 million in federal tax revenue, an additional $100 million in state tax revenue, 14,350 new jobs, a $3.4 billion increase in home sales, and $300 million in increased auto sales (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2015b). It can be safely assumed that many of these economic benefits would have been directly enjoyed by the African American students who would have generated them.

The personal and societal costs for nongraduates are equally significant. Dropouts are typically qualified for only about 11% of our economy's jobs (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). Their lower income levels result in numerous quality-of-life challenges. Nongraduates are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system and have higher rates of dependence on various sources of public assistance and welfare, including public health services. Conversely, high school graduates are more likely to vote, have better health, and enjoy longer life expectancies (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2013).

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Recent Trends in Outcomes

Although prevailing formulas have changed slightly over the years, the four-year high school completion rate for all students has increased from 74% nationally in 1990 to 82% in 2014 (U.S. Four Year Graduation Rates: 1990-2014, n.d.). "Much of the gain made in recent years comes from increased graduation rates for students of color. 72.5% of African American students and 76.3% of Hispanic/Latino students graduated in 2014. Since 2011, graduation rates have increased by 5.3 percent for Latino students, 5.5 percent for African American students, and 3.2 percent for White students" (America's Promise Alliance, 2015).

Education Week confirms improvements in the graduation rates among students of color, but notes that much is left to be accomplished. "Although a large body of research suggests that Black and Hispanic students have made large gains over the past decade, they continue to graduate at lower rates than Asians and whites" (Yettick & Lloyd, 2015).

Dropout Risk Factors Relative to Males of Color

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) classifies 21 categories of student risk factors that correlate with nongraduation into four domains of a student's life: individual, family, community, and school. To the extent that dropout risk factors are more often encountered by male students of color, graduation outcomes are negatively impacted. For example, the individual risk factor of early adult responsibility may occur with higher frequency among young males of color. The family risk factor of household stress and the community risk factor of disadvantaged community location and quality negatively impact a disproportionately large percentage of males of color. The school factor of fewer school resources impacts those males of color who reside in poorer states and who attend underfunded schools.

Effective Dropout Prevention Strategies Relative to Males of Color

The ways that educators and other practitioners in the field have traditionally weighted and applied dropout prevention knowledge has likely contributed to lower graduation rates for males of color in that strategies have often utilized either a hit or miss approach or aimed to apply specific program applications from one context to a different environment/situation without the supports and modifications necessary for success in that environment or context. The NDPC identified *15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention* (Effective Strategies, n.d.), which are currently utilized in some fashion by at least 32 states and numerous local school systems. Rather than offering specific interventions or programs, the 15 strategies are intended to be a framework for schools, districts, and states to select and apply the most effective interventions to appropriate populations for maximum graduation rate impact. The strategies are interrelated and work to support each other as well, building on a strong foundational approach. The 15 strategies are logically grouped into four categories as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: 15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention

Basic Foundational Dropout Prevention Strategies	
Systemic Approach	Addressing dropouts as a school system-wide issue
School-Community Collaboration	Engaging the greater community in the dropout issue
Safe Learning Environment	Making schools places where students want to be
Early Dropout Prevention Strategies	
Family Engagement	Activating families to support school success/graduation
Early Childhood Education	Early programs to lay foundation for school success
Early Literacy Development	Early grade reading success
Core Dropout Prevention Strategies	
Mentoring & Tutoring	Structured and positive personal/academic relationships
Service-Learning	Service experience integrated with instructional content
Alternative Schooling	Learning differently (pace, setting, schedule, method)
After & Outside School Programs	Instruction beyond the school day and/or year
Instructional Dropout Prevention Strategies	
Professional Development	Educators learning at-risk student issues and strategies
Active Learning	Active (rather than passive) student participation in learning
Instructional Technology	Engaging and student-centric technology to deliver content
Individual Instruction	Instruction beyond the school day and/or year
Career & Technical Education	Instruction linked to careers, the workplace, and technology

The 15 strategies are not linked to particular populations and are not ethnically specific, but must be applied strategically and contextually to be effective with any group or ethnicity. Working with hundreds of schools and districts across all states, the National Dropout Prevention Center finds that the four most often neglected, yet essential, dropout prevention strategies are: systemic approach, school-community collaboration, safe learning environment, and the early intervention of family engagement. Not focusing on these four essential elements of dropout prevention is particularly relevant to low graduation rates for males of color because these four strategies influence and determine the attitudes and drive the behaviors of educators, families, communities, and students about school success and graduation. Without *systemic thinking*, educators at all grade levels will not understand, own, or address the graduation rate gap between males of color and the general student population. Without strong *community engagement* in dropout prevention, the people, media, and messages that dominate the consciousness of young males of color will be either neutral toward school success or detrimental to high school graduation. Without a *safe, respectful, and inviting* learning environment, young males of color will find non-school groups, locations, and activities more attractive than the school. Without *family engagement* in support of school success, young males of color are deprived of an asset that is a powerful predictor of high school completion.

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Recent findings of statistical effect size for various dropout prevention strategies on eventual graduation rates can further explain some of the failure to prevent dropouts among young males of color. Research by Old Dominion University and Clemson University recently established impact measures for ten categories of dropout prevention strategies. The good news is that dropout prevention strategies, applied with fidelity and consideration to cultural context and other factors, can measurably affect both dropout and graduation rates. Researchers found that *career development/training, family engagement, and mentoring,* in particular, produced positive impacts on future graduation rates as reported in published evaluations of programs using these strategies. The low graduation rates among young males of color suggest that educators may have poorly applied or underapplied these high-impact strategies to benefit this population. Research indicates that increased and earlier career development and job training is critical for young males of color, and that, though challenging, families and family-like figures must be found, mobilized, and engaged in support of school success. Moreover, the findings affirm that additional highly effective mentors can help to close the graduation rate gap between males of color and other groups (Chappell, O'Connor, Withington, & Stegelin, 2015).

Examples of Effective Interventions

Broward County Public Schools (FL) recognized the need to systemically consider dropout prevention at lower grade levels and made achievement and graduation rates of African American males a goal of the system-wide strategic plan. The school district implemented the ScholarCentric model of resiliency development in 11 middle schools with 75%+ African American populations and 74%+ poverty rates. The program included weekly instruction in, and schoolwide reinforcement of, six resiliency skills, in addition to teacher training and parent workshops. After one year, 50% of participating students reported reduced stress levels and 48% reported increased academic confidence. One teacher stated, "My students seemed very much refocused on making the right choices...They see a new value in persevering" (ScholarCentric, n.d.).

Public-private partnerships in Illinois, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia are recovering and graduating students of color using strategic application of known effective approaches. A partnership between EdisonLearning, the Magic Johnson Bridgescape Academies, and local school districts in five states currently serves more than 2,000 students, most being youth of color who have already dropped out. Bridgescape Academies achieved a 2015 graduation rate of 86%, four points higher than the national rate. The Magic Johnson Bridgescape Academies provide blended learning (computerized and teacher-delivered lessons) to students in alternative settings that allow for instruction at an individualized pace and at varied times. Core strategies of Bridgescape Academies are relationships with educators, flexibility of scheduling and style, and accountability for one's own learning (Magic Johnson Bridgescape, 2015).

In rural South Carolina, an African American church mobilized families and the community to support graduation rate improvement among students of color. After attending a community dropout prevention discussion at Ware Shoals High School, the Reverend James Davis made high school graduation the theme of the youth ministry at Dunn Creek Baptist Church. Davis invited local educators into his church and organized youth services focusing on school success, youth responsibility, and the moral imperative of school completion. He taught parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles strategies for supporting young people in school. Davis and his church led the Ware Shoals community to voice a consistent message of high expectations and graduation to youth of color (Krise & Addis, 2016). It is noteworthy that Ware Shoals High School's graduation rate improved from 69% to 74% (South Carolina Department of Education, 2015) within the first three years of the Dunn Creek Baptist Church initiative.

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Recommendations

Trends, research, and experience indicate that it is possible to close the current graduation rate gap between young males of color and the general population. The following are recommendations for decision-makers who address this issue.

Recommendation: Identify and directly address the graduation barriers for males of color.

Educators have long known that students who have been retained, are truant, and/or have poor grades are much more likely to drop out than those who have not faced these challenges (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). There are many reasons for retention, poor attendance, and poor grades and there are equally many interventions designed to prevent and remediate each one.

For example, the relationship between student health (including chronic exposure to trauma such as family instability and poverty) and school attendance, as well as school performance, is well documented. In 2011, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation created the Forward Promise initiative within its Vulnerable Populations Portfolio to place strategic emphasis on the needs of middle school- and high school-aged young men of color. Their "Investing in Boys and Young Men of Color" issue brief (Bryant, Harris, & Bird, 2013) points to risk-taking, chronic trauma, and other health and behavior issues particularly relevant to young males of color, and presents facts and recommendations addressing policies and procedures to prevent and/or ameliorate some of these issues. Health issues can range from vision problems, asthma, teen parenting, behavioral issues, eating disorders, ADHD spectrum, and more. A website, www.attendanceworks.org, lists other reports and provides some practical tool kits that educators can use to address other more general absenteeism issues related to health.

Higher graduation rates among males of color will be realized if schools and community-based organizations collaborate to implement intentional strategies to prevent (first) or remediate (second) dropout. The negative impacts of retention, truancy, and poor grades should be a priority when working with young men of color, and the metrics for this population should be closely monitored. The website, www.dropoutprevention.org, has information and more examples of effective strategies to alleviate grade retention, improve attendance, and support academic success. Events that bring practitioners and researchers together, such as conferences and workshops (e.g., The National Dropout Prevention

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Center's annual Reaching the Wounded Student and At-Risk Youth National FORUM events) allow participants to network and learn from each other through the dissemination of information in presentations and related publications. Panel presentations and workshops on awareness and collaboration (e.g., community summits hosted by GradNation, America's Promise Alliance) can be vehicles to galvanize efforts as well.

Recommendation: Select and fully implement research-based foundational dropout prevention strategies for male students of color.

Educators and researchers are familiar with strategies to effectively improve graduation rates for all student groups; however, practitioners have not always strategically selected, or carefully applied, known effective strategies in ethnic and cultural contexts so as to achieve the greatest impact on graduation rates for males of color. It is recommended that practitioners increase emphasis on the most basic research-based foundational effective strategies: systemic approach, school-community collaboration, and safe learning environments. It is further recommended that these strategy categories be conscientiously applied in situational, community, and ethnic contexts in order to address the values and influence the priorities of educators, communities, families, and young males of color toward increased graduation rates.

For example, while not an issue for young males of color only, local gang presence can not only create unsafe school environments, but can also pull students away from school and completion of school. In a recent bulletin, "Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs," the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), summarizes recent research, demographics (more males and multiracial membership, but reflective of local youth population demographics), and causes related to gang formation. The bulletin also identifies some promising and effective programs utilizing community resources to increase school-community collaboration and safety at school and outside of school related to gang issues. A systemic approach is advocated; a tiered prevention/intervention approach is explained; and examples of programs to implement in each tier are presented. For example, several secondary tier (targeted at high-risk youth) prevention program or structures, are presented, such as OJJDP's Comprehensive Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Model and Boys & Girls Clubs Gang Prevention Through Targeted Outreach program. Consistent with a systemic approach, the bulletin recommends a comprehensive assessment of community factors prior to any program implementation. An assessment protocol is available through OJJDP (Howell, 2010).

Recommendation: Emphasize high-impact dropout prevention strategies for male students of color.

Schools and districts serving young males of color can increase their utilization of strategies with the highest impact, particularly career development and job training, family engagement, and mentoring. Recent research reveals that these known effective dropout prevention strategies, properly and contextually applied, can be expected to yield very high returns in terms of graduation rate improvement. In order to achieve increased graduation rates, it is further recommended that these specific strategies be contextually structured and strategically implemented so as to achieve maximum availability to, and participation by, young males of color.

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For example, career development and pathways to employment matter greatly to high school students. This is particularly true for young males of color, particularly those in families that struggle financially. Many students who drop out of school try to enter the job market, which is evidence that they want to work and be productive. A strong career development and career pathway focus in high school, with appropriate guidance and mentoring can serve multiple purposes toward dropout prevention. First, the relevance and personal value of school and learning is heightened and supported through clear presentation of pathways to careers and through relevant coursework. Second, relationships are strengthened through interactions with career guidance counselors (or career-focused teachers), caring adult support and mentors, and community members involved in building career awareness and workplace skills. Third, young males of color are shown pathways to positive futures through relevant career-focused education and given opportunities to build self-confidence, positive self-awareness, and self-sufficiency through career pathways and career training efforts that focus on personal development, leadership, civic responsibility and connections with community development, resources, and support.

Conclusion

Dropping out of school is not usually a decision made frivolously or on the spur of the moment. Often the decision to drop out of school is almost inevitable due to things set in motion years prior. At the point of dropping out of school, that option often seems to a young person to be his/her best choice. Schools, districts, and whole communities need to take a systemic approach to the problem of dropout for all students, and particularly young males of color. Improving graduation rates is one key step to building pathways to economic self-sufficiency for young men of color. As Harris (2010) points out, "the magnitude and complexity of the issues confronting this population of young men require intentional approaches that go beyond any one program model or service agency." Strategies must be implemented today that bring together (a) leadership in the public, private, and community sectors; (b) the expertise of education, workplace, and youth development professionals; and (c) an engaged and supportive community.

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The most successful efforts to combat issues related to young males of color dropping out of school will be those that:

- **are systemically implemented** to cut across the educational pipeline and reach all grade levels and all stakeholders,
- **include the families and communities** of young men of color in programmatic efforts
- **establish collaboration and accountability** across and among institutions and groups vested in the success of young men of color,
- **heighten and highlight the relevancy and value of education** as the means to successful and satisfying postsecondary lives for young men of color, and
- **establish meaningful relationships** between young males of color and the caring adults who guide and support them through positive youth development.

America's schools should take the lead in systemic reform to support all youth, including, and particularly, young males of color, focusing on school-community collaboration, safe learning environments, and family engagement, utilizing in particular strong mentoring and career development strategies to address school attendance, academic performance, and opportunities for success for all.

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