



Double the Numbers: A Jobs for the Future Initiative

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

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About Double the Numbers

Making Good on a Promise is one of a series of *Double the Numbers* publications from Jobs for the Future. *Double the Numbers*, a JFF initiative, is designed to deepen support for state and federal policies that can dramatically increase the number of low-income young people who enter and complete postsecondary education. The initiative identifies, assesses, and promotes new and promising approaches to increasing efficiencies and reducing inequities in secondary and postsecondary education attainment. *Double the Numbers* publications address controversial policy debates. They propose creative ways to break through existing barriers to improved educational and economic outcomes, particularly for students from groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education.



Making Good on a Promise:

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

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 drop out but also 10 percent of young people from families in the highest two SES 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
- **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.*



Making Good on a Promise:

What Policymakers Can Do to Support the Educational Persistence of Dropouts

Introduction

In a society that values individual reinvention and multiple makeovers, it seems a given that young people who drop out of high school should have a second chance. Yet despite growing interest among policymakers and the media in the nation's dropout problem, little discussion has focused on a critical question: *Are pathways available to help dropouts who want to pursue an education and move toward an economically productive adulthood?* This report—prepared for *Double the Numbers*, a national initiative to advance public policies that can significantly increase the number of young people who make it to and through college—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 that continue to frame discussions of the dropout issue. Too often, both public perception and public policy seem based on the notion that the problem is confined to a small—and particularly unmotivated—group of young people. A related assumption, although rarely voiced in public, 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.

This policy brief challenges those beliefs and paints a more accurate picture of the significant dropout problem facing the nation today. We analyze data from the first major national study to follow a large, representative group of young people over time. The National Educational Longitudinal

Study tracked the educational progress of approximately 25,000 eighth-graders over the 12 years from 1988 to 2000.¹

Our findings, based on a detailed look at who dropped out and how much education they had completed by their early adulthood, 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.
- **Black and Hispanic youth in the low socioeconomic groups are no more likely to drop out than their white peers.** Socioeconomic status—which is based on parents' income and education—rather than race is the primary determinant of who drops out.
- **Most dropouts lack neither motivation nor mainstream values about the importance of education.** Most dropouts are remarkably persistent in their drive to complete a secondary education—and many pursue postsecondary education as well.

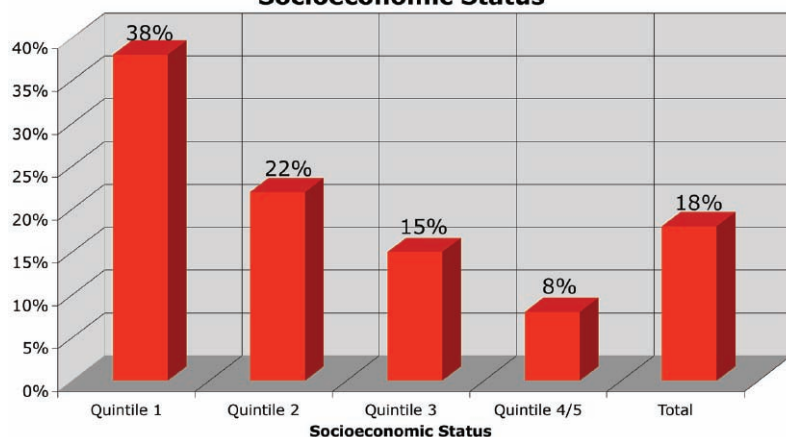
At a time when the dropout problem is rising on the nation's agenda, it is particularly important to revisit the myths that have undercut efforts to address the dropout problem. Only with a clear understanding of who is dropping out and the educational choices they make later in life can policymakers develop effective strategies to improve their chances 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. Based on this new information, we conclude with suggestions for necessary changes in public policy.

What the Numbers Show

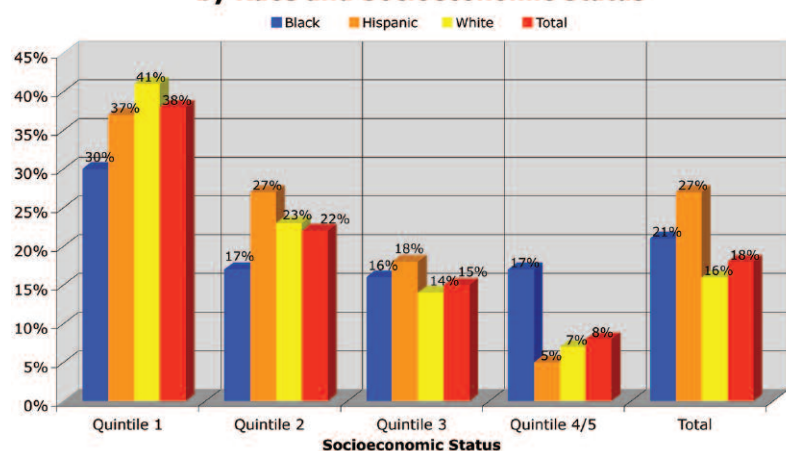
Data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study provide an important window into the world of young people who leave school before completing their secondary education. It also demonstrates what happens to non-graduates when they later try to gain a second chance at earning a high school diploma and a postsecondary credential.

Figure 1
Percentage of All Students Who Dropped Out, by Socioeconomic Status



Source: National Education Longitudinal Study/Jobs for the Future

Figure 2
Percentage of All Students Who Dropped Out, by Race and Socioeconomic Status



Source: National Education Longitudinal Study/Jobs for the Future

I. Who Drops Out

Our analysis of the nation's dropout population shows that the problem is bigger—and differently constituted—than most people realize. Not only are more young people leaving school than is commonly believed, but the dropout population is not the homogeneous group most people expect.

Dropping out is epidemic in our central cities and poor rural communities, but it is not just a problem of the poor.

Large numbers of youth from families of limited education and income are dropping out of high school. Close to 40 percent of students in the nation's lowest socioeconomic group drop out, and about 20 percent of all students drop out.

While dropping out disproportionately affects students from families with low incomes and limited education, our data analysis shows that dropping out is not just a problem of the poor. One in ten young people from families in the highest two levels of income and education also are dropping out (see Figure 1).

Socioeconomic status—not race—is the key indicator for dropping out.

The primary factor associated with dropping out is a student's socioeconomic status—that is, family income and education—not race.² Contrary to the common stereotype, black and Hispanic youth are no more likely to drop out of high school than their white peers of similar family income and education. In fact, blacks in the lowest socioeconomic group are *less* likely than their white and Hispanic peers to drop out. About 30 percent of blacks in the bottom group dropped out, compared with 37 percent of Hispanics and 41 percent of whites, a difference approaching significance.³

The impact of a student's socioeconomic background on the likelihood of dropping out is striking: students from families in the bottom fifth of the socioeconomic ladder are four times more likely to drop out than students from families in the top two-fifths (see Figure 2).

The dropout problem hurts black and Hispanic communities more than others. Although black and Hispanic youth are no more likely to reject the value of education and drop out than their

white peers, the problem of dropping out and its negative consequences do disproportionately affect black and Hispanic communities. This is because black and especially Hispanic youth are overrepresented in the lowest income groups, while whites are underrepresented in these groups. One out of every three black students is poor, as is one out of every two Hispanic students. By contrast, little more than one out of every ten white students is poor (see Figure 3). As we have seen, youth in the lowest income group drop out at much higher rates than their more advantaged counterparts.

II. Who Later Earns High School Credentials

Contrary to popular belief, most dropouts demonstrate remarkable persistence and drive to achieve their education goals. In search of a second chance, they find and enter a wide variety of “second chance” programs in pursuit of a high school credential.

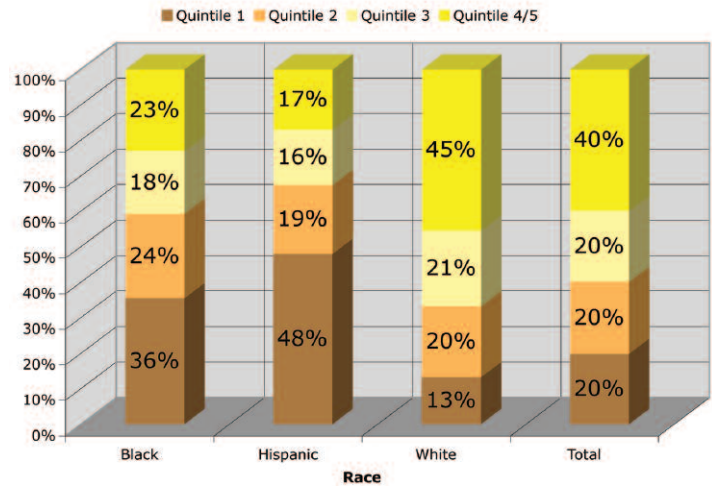
Most dropouts eventually earn a high school credential—and many more try.

Few dropouts return to school quickly enough or get the help they need fast enough to graduate on time with their peers. However, close to 60 percent of dropouts eventually do earn a high school credential—in most cases a GED certificate (see Figure 4).⁴

Here again, a student’s socioeconomic status plays an important role. The likelihood of failure for youth from different socioeconomic backgrounds parallels the likelihood of dropping out in the first place. Dropouts from the lowest socioeconomic groups are far less likely to return to school and earn some kind of a high school credential than their more advantaged peers. While fewer than half of dropouts from the bottom socioeconomic group (43 percent) earn some kind of secondary credential, the vast majority of dropouts from the top two groups (85 percent) attain a high school credential.

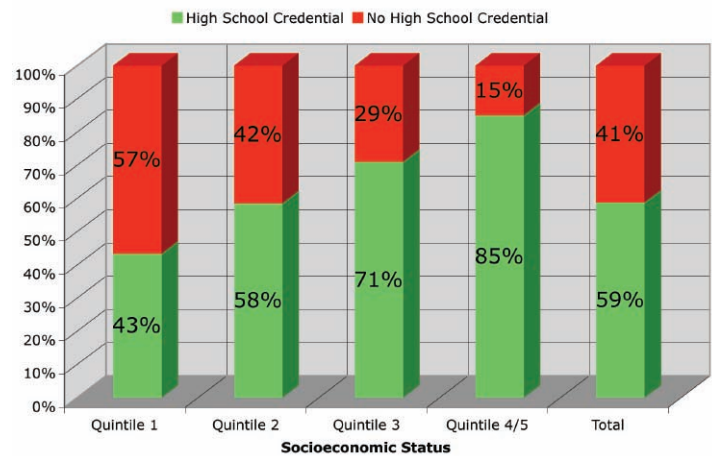
Again, race is not a predictor of who will attain a high school credential. White dropouts are only slightly more likely than black and Hispanic dropouts to eventually earn a high school credential. The high school attainment rates for dropouts hover around 60 percent regardless of race; the small differences are not statistically significant (see figure 5).

Figure 3
Income Distribution of All Students, by Race



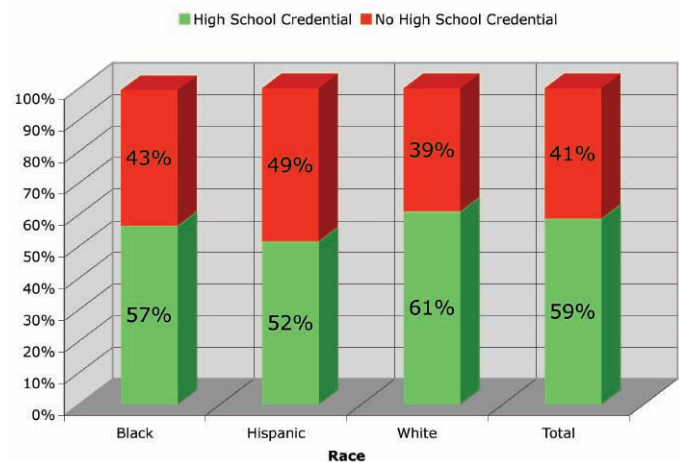
Source: National Education Longitudinal Study/Jobs for the Future

Figure 4
High School Attainment of Dropouts, by Socioeconomic Status



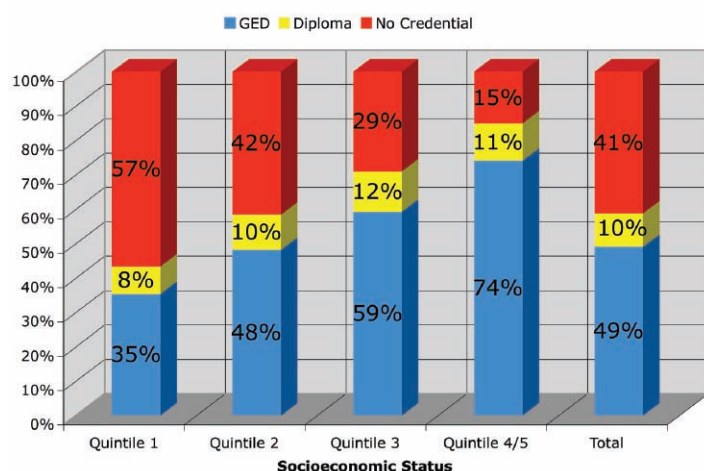
Source: National Education Longitudinal Study/Jobs for the Future

Figure 5
High School Attainment of Dropouts, by Race



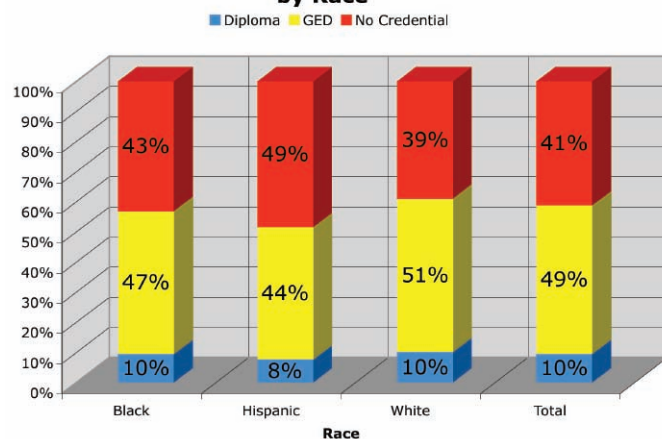
Source: National Education Longitudinal Study/Jobs for the Future

Figure 6
Dropouts Attaining High School Diplomas & GEDs,
by Socioeconomic Status



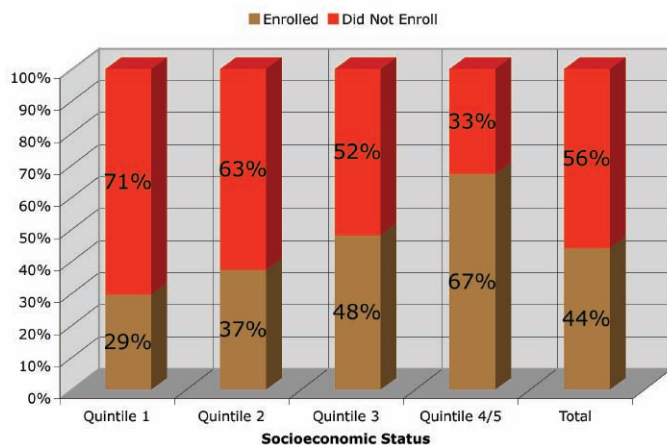
Source: National Education Longitudinal Study/Jobs for the Future

Figure 7
Dropouts Attaining High School Diplomas & GEDs,
by Race



Source: National Education Longitudinal Study/Jobs for the Future

Figure 8
Enrollment Rates in 2- & 4-Year Colleges, by
Socioeconomic Status of
Dropouts Who Attained a Diploma or GED



Source: National Education Longitudinal Study/Jobs for the Future

Most dropouts earn a GED credential; few earn a high school diploma.

Although many dropouts eventually earn some type of secondary credential, only 10 percent earn a high school diploma. The rest—about 49 percent—earn a certificate by passing the GED exam, a credential associated with much lower rates of postsecondary attainment (see Figure 6).⁵

A similar pattern holds regardless of socioeconomic status. Dropouts in the upper socioeconomic groups are far more likely to eventually earn some kind of a high school credential than their lower-income peers, but they are no more likely to earn a high school diploma. The difference is that dropouts from upper socioeconomic groups are far more likely to earn a GED than those from lower groups. In fact, the rate of GED attainment more than doubles, from 35 percent to 74 percent between the lowest and the highest socioeconomic groups.

This pattern is consistent across all racial groups. Dropouts from all backgrounds earn a GED at five times the rate they earn diplomas (see Figure 7).

III. Who Earns Postsecondary Credentials

Our analysis shows that dropouts have educational aspirations that are similar to those of high school graduates. Many pursue a postsecondary education, though their success rates are discouraging.

We examined dropout enrollment in two types of postsecondary institutions: degree-granting colleges and programs offering industry-related certificates.

We first looked exclusively at dropouts who enrolled in two-year and four-year degree-granting colleges because a growing body of research suggests that postsecondary *degrees* are increasingly necessary to open many doors leading to employment with career advancement potential. However, dropouts face many obstacles in pursuing degrees and look to other pathways to obtain postsecondary credentials. Thus, we expanded the traditional definition of postsecondary institutions to include industry-related certificate programs. Certificates are offered by a range of institutions, including two-year colleges, proprietary schools, industry organizations, and not-for-profit workforce development programs; these diverse pathways also represent training programs of varying duration.

Almost half of dropouts who later earn a secondary credential enroll in degree-granting postsecondary education institutions.

Almost half of the dropouts who attain a secondary credential—some 44 percent—later enroll in a two-year or four-year college (see Figure 8). This pattern is similar to that of low-income students who graduate on time. Also consistent with data on high school graduates who follow a more traditional route to a diploma, the rate of college enrollment for dropouts increases with income level. More than twice as many dropouts from the top two-fifths of the socioeconomic ladder enroll in college than from the bottom fifth.

This is one area where race does matter. Enrollment in two-year and four-year colleges differs by race even when socioeconomic status is taken into account. Black dropouts with high school credentials enroll in college at significantly lower rates than their white and Hispanic counterparts (see Figure 9). Only about one-third of black dropouts who complete a high school credential enroll in degree-granting higher-education institutions, compared to about half of whites and Hispanics.

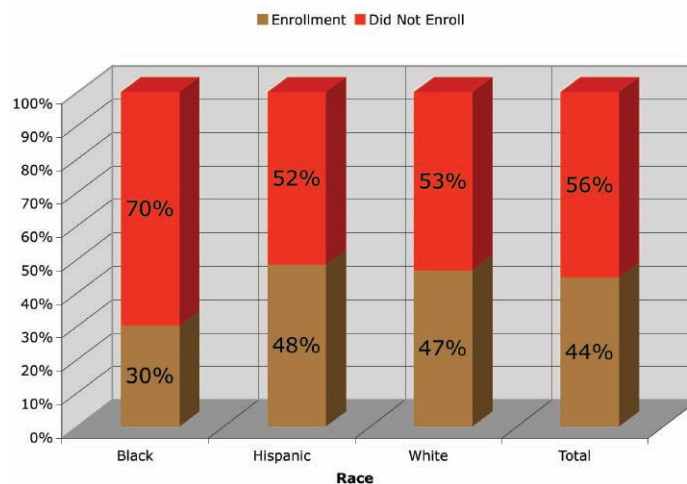
However, the data tell a strikingly different story when programs that offer industry-related certificates are added to the analysis—one of similar persistence across racial groups and much higher enrollment overall.⁶ Taking into account both colleges and certificate-granting programs, almost 60 percent of dropouts eventually enroll in some type of postsecondary institution. And the enrollment rates are similar for all racial groups, about 60 percent for blacks and for their white and Hispanic peers (see Figure 10).

Despite their persistence, few dropouts earn a postsecondary credential.

While the educational persistence of dropouts extends beyond high school to the pursuit of postsecondary credentials, few succeed in attaining postsecondary degrees. Only 10 percent of all dropouts who earn high school credentials and then enroll in college earn a degree. This pattern is consistent at all income levels. While enrollment climbs with increases in income, degree attainment does not (see Figure 11).

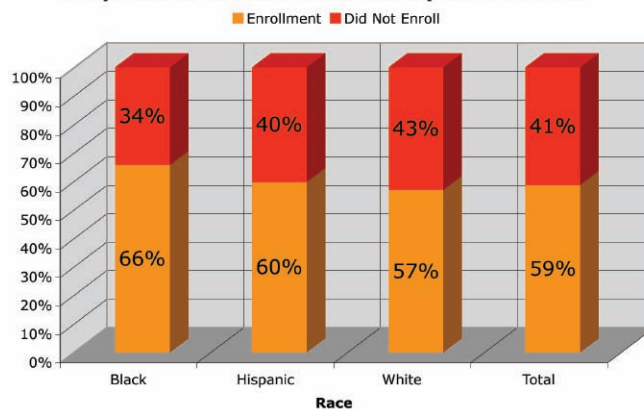
Black dropouts with high school credentials enroll in two-year and four-year colleges at lower rates than their peers from other racial groups, but they attain degrees at similar rates: close to 10 percent of white, black, and

Figure 9
Enrollment in 2- & 4-Year Colleges, by Race of Dropouts Who Attained a Diploma or GED



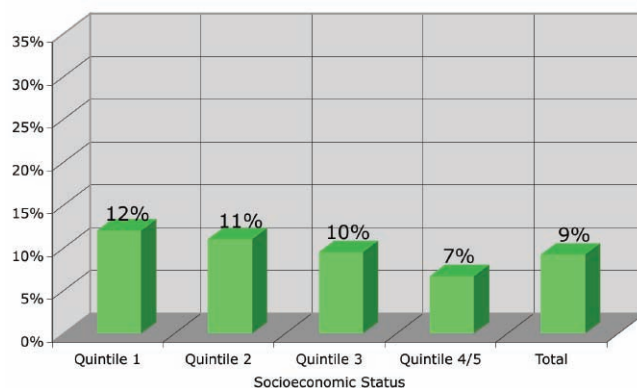
Source: National Education Longitudinal Study/Jobs for the Future

Figure 10
Enrollment of Dropouts in 2- & 4-Year Colleges and Certificate Granting Institutions by Race of Dropouts Who Attained a HS Diploma or GED



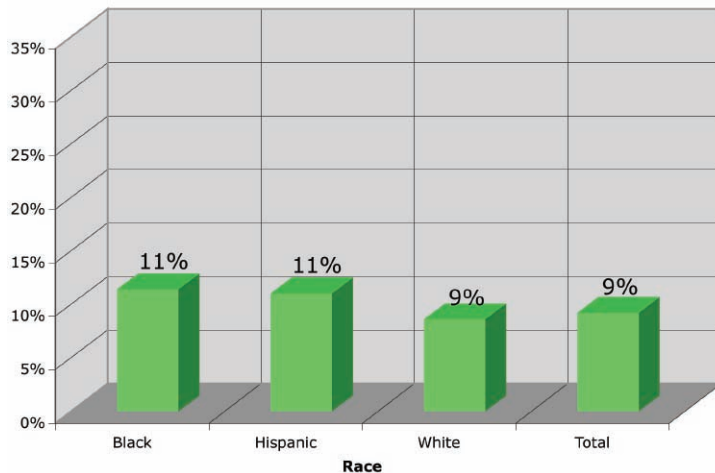
Source: National Education Longitudinal Study/Jobs for the Future

Figure 11
Postsecondary Degree Attainment, by Socioeconomic Status



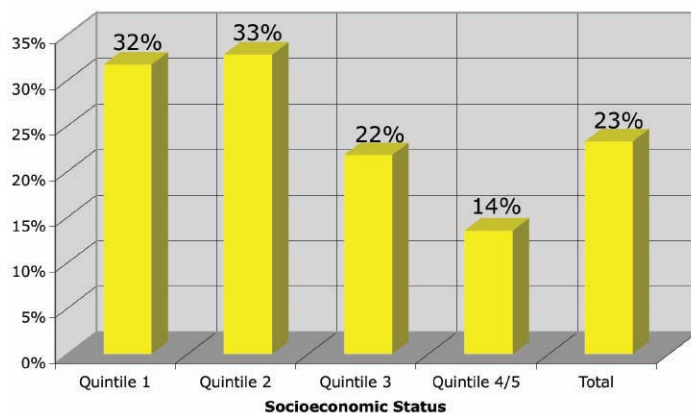
Source: National Education Longitudinal Study/Jobs for the Future

Figure 12
Postsecondary Degree Attainment, by Race



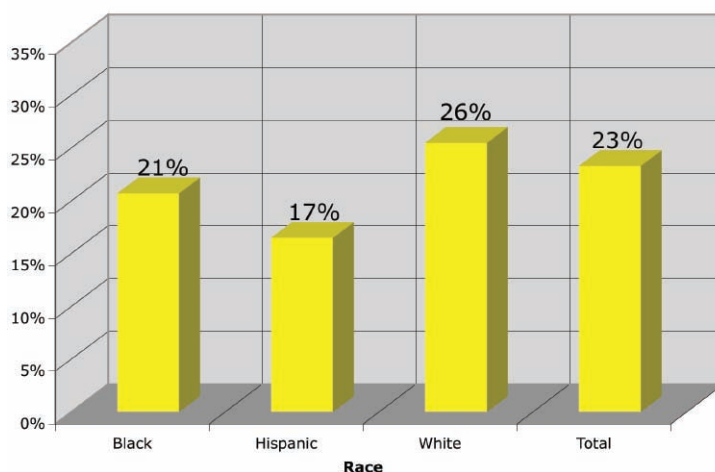
Source: National Education Longitudinal Study/Jobs for the Future

Figure 13
Postsecondary Certificate Attainment, by Socioeconomic Status



Source: National Education Longitudinal Study/Jobs for the Future

Figure 14
Postsecondary Certificate Attainment, by Race



Source: National Education Longitudinal Study/Jobs for the Future

Hispanic dropouts who enroll in college achieve a degree (see Figure 12).

The record of dropouts in earning industry-related certificates is more encouraging. In fact, dropouts earn industry-related certificates at more than twice the rate they earn postsecondary degrees—23 percent for certificates, compared with 10 percent for degrees (see Figure 13). However, it remains unclear what types of certificates dropouts earn and the value of those credentials in today's labor market.

The pattern of certificate attainment is consistent across all income groups, although it is more marked at the lower-income levels. Likewise, dropouts from all racial groups earn certificates at higher rates than they earn degrees (see Figure 14).

Conclusion: What Policymakers Can Do

Contrary to the popular view, dropping out is not a marginal phenomenon; rather, this report demonstrates the epidemic nature of the problem in our cities and other low-income communities. But the analysis also provides significant good news: the young people who drop out are *not* more likely to reject the value of school than their peers. In fact, dropouts exhibit considerable educational persistence. Many young people who do not complete high school with their peers do eventually find their way to a second-chance program where they can work towards a diploma or—as is much more likely—a GED certificate. Although these young people may give up on their high school, most do not give up on their education.

Despite this persistence, only a very few dropouts reach their goal of a postsecondary degree. Although many complete a GED or diploma and pursue postsecondary education, very few obtain either a two-year or four-year degree.

Our analysis of longitudinal data offers a window into a set of issues that deserves a more central place within the developing dialogue about high school graduation and dropout rates. By looking at how individual dropouts fare over time, this study expands the field of vision to allow a new, perhaps more hopeful, look at an old problem. Most important, this analysis 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.

In broadening our view of the dropout problem, this study offers several critical lessons for policymakers looking for new ways to give dropouts a second chance:

1. 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 their educational energy and resources on standards-based reform. The agenda driving state policy for high schools has been the need to increase the value of a diploma, by aligning academic standards more closely with the skills and knowledge required for success in higher education and employment. To this end, state accountability systems have placed a priority on increasing the number and rigor of courses required for high school graduation, and they have put a great deal of weight on how students perform on state assessments.

While improved student performance is important, the broad policy goal should be to raise both performance and educational attainment through a *dual agenda* of higher standards *and* higher graduation rates. A dual agenda requires a shift of emphasis within state accountability systems from test scores alone to an equal consideration of test scores and graduation and dropout rates.

Such an emphasis will require more accurate ways of counting dropouts. For years, states have routinely reported extremely low dropout rates—in the 5 percent range—based on annual data from local school districts. By appearing to confirm the popular notion that dropping out is relatively rare, inaccurate data collection has promoted misconceptions about the nature and urgency of the dropout problem. The lack of effective public policy on the issue has hardly been noted outside of a small circle of advocates.

Recently, responding to national studies⁷ reporting dropout rates three to four times higher than official state data would suggest, all 50 governors agreed to use a new, uniform method of monitoring the problem. Their “Graduation Compact” commits the states to tracking each individual entering ninth grade over time to determine whether they graduate in four years, an approach

expected to yield significantly more accurate information than the variety of methods currently used.

To make this a reality, state policymakers will need to invest in building longitudinal data systems that include unique student identification numbers that can be used to track individuals along the educational pipeline through postsecondary education and into the workforce. The Data Quality Campaign, recently launched by ten leading educational organizations under the management of the National Center for Educational Accountability, will help keep states informed about their progress.⁸ Such policy investments and activities would greatly enhance the capacity of the education system to move students up to higher standards without losing a significant number of young people along the way.

2. Address the equity imperative by creating new pathways to college in low-income communities.

As the data analyzed here indicate, some students proceed through the traditional pathway of 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 high school graduation gap between rich and poor, and white and black or Hispanic youth, will mean targeting high school reform activity, new school creation, and other dropout prevention and recovery strategies to schools and districts with high concentrations of low-income students.

A number of research studies point to the potential of small schools as a central strategy in the quest for better alternatives for this group of youth.⁹ Specifically, small schools appear to improve academic and engagement outcomes for low-income students, who too often fall on the wrong side of the “achievement gap.” Recent research on charter schools, although rife with some divergent definitions and findings, still leads to the conclusion that such schools they are a better alternative for students if they replace low-performing large schools with concentrations of low-income students.¹⁰

Based on this research, a number of districts and states have begun to diversify their portfolio of high schools to include one or more small schools

of choice. States and districts also share the responsibilities to assist, intervene in, and perhaps “turn around” low-performing high schools, many of which are the schools with the highest concentrations of low-income students and the schools that are losing the most students between ninth and twelfth grade. The income-based graduation gap identified in this report suggests the need for further research and development on how new school creation and turnaround interventions can be employed strategically to significantly improve the educational attainment of low-income, black, and Hispanic youth.

3. Redesign dropout “recovery” programs to build on student aspirations and reflect the demands of the knowledge-based economy.

As the data indicate, most dropouts persist in seeking educational opportunities. The problem they face lies in the inadequate nature of the opportunities they find and in their consequent poor post-secondary outcomes.

Many dropouts find and complete GED programs, but this good news is overshadowed by the bad. First, many dropouts are not eligible for or cannot complete such programs. Equally important, the programs do not prepare young people to succeed in further education, despite the belief that a GED is equivalent to a high school diploma. The young people themselves seem to 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 educational programs that put dropouts on the road to valued skills and credentials. In short, the so-called second chance system is not delivering on the promise of a second chance.

Confronted with this reality, several urban school districts, such as New York City and Boston, have combined various resource streams to develop programs that help dropouts attain a high school diploma and college degree or certificate that leads to economic self-sufficiency. These cities are finding that there is no dearth of 17- to 21-year-olds willing to commit to diploma-granting high schools, if the programs are designed with the flexible schedules and curricula needed to address the

family and economic responsibilities and the interests of older learners.

Our analysis supports the wisdom of moving in this direction. Certainly, further research and development will be needed to explore not only diploma-granting alternatives but also “GED plus” models that better prepare young people for college. Such efforts also will need to include the design of “on-ramps” to further education for dropouts whose age, skills, or number of high school credits would otherwise make it difficult for them to access and succeed in such programs.

The accessibility and relative affordability of community colleges make them a potentially powerful bridge into the education system or labor market for older adolescents who have dropped out of high school. But as this report shows, few dropouts make it through such institutions. State policymakers can take important steps to assess the effectiveness of their GED delivery systems and the extent to which GED programs are linked to postsecondary institutions and credentialing programs. Community colleges that offer GED programming on campus are better positioned than stand-alone programs to help completers make a smooth transition into appropriate college pathways. States can create incentives for providing GED programs at and by community colleges and for the development of programs that combine developmental education with vocational or other credit courses, so that students without diplomas can accelerate their learning program and advance quickly.

At the same time, further investigation is needed into the potential role of postsecondary certificate programs in opening up pathways to credentials and advancement for dropouts. The data presented here show that a significant percentage of the dropouts who complete a high school credential enroll in such programs and that black dropouts are much more likely than their white and Hispanic counterparts to do so. The data do not indicate how many of these certificate-issuing programs are credible institutions, offering students pathways to family-supporting wages with career advancement opportunities.¹¹ That is another important area of exploration.

Appendix: Methodology

Making Good on a Promise analyzes data from the first major national study to follow a large, representative group of young people over time. The National Educational Longitudinal Study tracked the educational progress of approximately 25,000 eighth-graders over 12 years, from 1988 to 2000. Data presented in this report was provided by Optimal Solutions Group, which conducted analyses of the NELS student-level data under contract with Jobs for the Future.

The results presented in this report are based on the NELS 88/00 data, with a total sample size of 12,144. A weight is applied to the data such that only respondents who participated in each of the five waves of data collection were included in the various analyses.

For this brief, we use the NELS definition of a dropout: any study participant who reported, at the time of the 1994 follow-up survey, that s/he obtained a GED, was working toward a high school equivalency credential, or did not graduate from high school and was not working toward high school equivalency. The respondent is also defined as a dropout if s/he was reported to have ever dropped out at the first two follow-ups or if the high school transcripts indicated s/he dropped out. This definition captures an additional approximately 10 percent of students who dropped out but returned and graduated on time with their peers; we excluded this 10 percent from the dropout group for the purposes of this brief.

NELS constructs socioeconomic status based on the respondent's family income and parents' education level and occupation. The 20 percent of students with the lowest SES scores are in SES quintile one, the 20 percent of students with the next lowest SES scores are in SES quintile two, etc. The 20 percent of students with the highest SES scores are in SES quintile five. (The cut-off points were computed after applying appropriate weights. As such, 20 percent of all students in the population, as represented by sample members, fall into each quintile.)

Because of the small number of dropouts at highest two quintiles, we collapsed quintiles 4 and 5 for the purposes of this brief.

What is NELS?

The National Education Longitudinal Study was initiated by the National Center for Education Statistics to study the high school students of the 1990s (NCES 2002). The survey followed 24,599 students who entered the eighth grade in 1988 in 1,052 high schools across the United States. The base-year respondents were resurveyed in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000, regardless of whether they dropped out of high school. Additionally, the sample was refreshed twice in the follow-up waves to create nationally representative cross-sectional samples of the tenth graders (1990) and twelfth graders (1992). Based on 1988 demographics, whites represent 71.7 percent of the NELS student sample, blacks 12.9 percent, and Hispanics 10.5 percent.

Where does NELS get its data?

Data was collected through student surveys during the base year (1988) and follow-up surveys or interviews in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000 (NCES 2002). Depending on the year, school principals, teachers, and parents were also surveyed or interviewed. High school and postsecondary academic transcripts were collected in the second and fourth follow-ups, respectively. Cognitive tests were administered during the first three waves of data collection.

How does one get NELS data?

NELS data is publicly available. Compact discs containing data collected from the base year through the fourth follow-up can be requested at the NCES Web site (www.nces.ed.gov). Additionally, NCES' Data Analysis System (www.nces.ed.gov/das) allows the public to create cross tabulations using a number of variables collected through NELS. However, to protect the privacy of the respondents, certain individual-level variables are only available through a restricted data license. Data users interested in accessing the restricted data may submit an application to NCES to request the license. Optima is licensed by NCES to access the NCES restricted data.

What is the Optimal Solutions Group?

Optimal Solutions Group L.L.C. is a non-partisan economic and social policy research firm with offices in Baltimore, Maryland, and Washington, DC. Optimal offers rigorous public policy research and technical assistance to government agencies, corporations, non-profit organizations, and foundations. Its expertise includes education policies, workforce development and social policies, health policies, and housing, economic development, and transportation policies.

What did the research ask of the data?

Bivariate analyses were conducted on the effects of race and sex on the college attendance rates and degree attainment rates of high school dropouts in each SES quintile. Additionally, a series of logit models were estimated to assess the effects of race and sex on college attendance and degree attainment while controlling for SES quintile. Included in the models are the following explanatory variables:

- Race (white, black, or Hispanic)
- Sex
- SES quintile
- Interaction terms of race and sex

Separate models were estimated with the following dichotomous dependent variables:

- Whether the respondent attended any postsecondary institutions
- Whether the respondent attended two-year or four-year colleges
- Whether the respondent obtained postsecondary degree or certificate
- Whether the respondent obtained at least a two-year degree

Additionally, logit models were estimated to assess, while controlling for SES quintile, the effects of race and gender, as well as the interaction of the two on the probabilities of dropping out of high school and, for those who did drop out, the probabilities of obtaining high school diploma or GED.

Limitations

NELS data permit a wide range of research that allows insight into the lives of young people and the role of schools in promoting growth and positive life outcomes. The basic unit of analysis is the student, allowing data from NELS:88 to be used to investigate a multitude of research topics, including high school completion, postsecondary access and choice, and persistence and completion of postsecondary degrees. Fewer than 2,000 of the 12,144 respondents included in the sample for this report ever dropped out of high school. The number of ethnic minority dropouts at the top socioeconomic quintile is particularly small. The small sample size diminished the power of the analyses that we have conducted, particularly the bivariate analyses.

In addition, the NELS sample does not include students who are not proficient in English. English language learners who were selected for the sample were later included as active participants if they became proficient enough in English to complete the interviews. Hispanic youth have one of the highest dropout rates in the country, and many of those who dropout are not proficient in English.

Endnotes

¹ See the appendix for information on the methodology and sample size for this study.

² The NELS sample excludes students who are not proficient enough in English to complete the interviews.

³ Optimal estimated logit models to assess the effects of race on the probabilities of dropping out of high school, while controlling for socioeconomic status quintile. Race was not statistically significant as a predictor of dropping out once SES was controlled for; however, at the lowest quintile, the lower dropout rate for blacks, 30 percent, approaches significance $p=.10$; that is, there is only a 10 percent likelihood that this result happened by chance.

⁴ Given the number of young people without diplomas who drop in and out of GED and other alternative programs, if 60 percent are completing credentials, the number pursuing them is likely significantly higher. For example, even eight years out, 5 percent of dropouts without a high school credential report work toward a diploma or GED (NCES 2004)

⁵ See, for example, National Research Council (2001) and Sum et al. (2002).

⁶ The enrollment data that includes certificate-only programs is based on self-report from follow-up interviews with NELS participants. The two-year and four-year-only enrollment data is based on transcripts. Overall, 8 percent of dropouts who indicate that they attend postsecondary are missing documents, compared to 3 percent of the overall sample. While over-reporting may account for some of the discrepancy, dropouts are also more likely to attend under-resourced workforce development programs that do not offer transcripts, or they leave programs before transcripts are generated.

⁷ See, for example, Education Trust (2003) and Greene (2001).

⁸ See www.dataqualitycampaign.org.

⁹ See, for example, American Institute for Research (2005), Center for Collaborative Education (2006), and Education Trust (2005).

¹⁰ See Lake and Hill (2005).

¹¹ See Jenkins and Prince (2005).

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About the Authors

Cheryl Almeida, Cassius Johnson, and Adria Steinberg are all members of JFF's *Connected by 25* team. The *Connected by 25* initiative is directed at improving options and outcomes for the large group of young people for whom the road to a productive adulthood is interrupted prematurely. Far too often, these young people cannot secure the postsecondary skills and credentials that are essential for citizenship, economic security, and productivity.

CHERYL ALMEIDA, Program Director, directs research for *Connected by 25*. She has over 20 years experience in the fields of education and child development including on research, policy, and program development and evaluation.

CASSIUS JOHNSON, Project Manager, recently joined JFF. Previously, he was chief of staff for a member of the Texas House of Representatives, where he handled legislation addressing the quality of education available to the out-of-school youth populations in Texas. He worked to build a diverse coalition of stakeholders to frame and pursue legislative and policy solutions.

ADRIA STEINBERG, Associate Vice President, leads JFF's work on expanding and improving educational options and outcomes for struggling students and out-of-school youth. Ms. Steinberg has almost four decades of experience in the field of education as a teacher, administrator, researcher, and writer.

The *Connected by 25* team members are authors or co-authors of numerous JFF publications addressing the systemic and policy changes necessary to prepare students who are not on track to graduation to complete high school and advance along pathways to postsecondary credentials. These publications include *The Dropout Crisis: Promising Approaches in Prevention and Recovery, From Large to Small: Strategies for Personalizing the High School, Four Building Blocks for a System of Educational Opportunity: Developing Pathways To and Through College for Urban Youth, Building a Portfolio of High Schools: A Strategic Investment Toolkit*, and *From the Prison Track to the College Track: Pathways to Postsecondary Opportunities for Out-of-School Youth*.



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