

Closing the Graduation Gap

A SUPERINTENDENT'S GUIDE FOR PLANNING
MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO GRADUATION



Youth Transition Funders Group

www.ytfg.org

Prepared by MetisNet

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Executive Summary

Graduation statistics from around the nation continue to lag—especially for low-income students and students of color. In April 2008, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings announced that the Department of Education would take administrative steps to ensure all states use the same formula to calculate how many students graduate from high school on time, and how many drop out. As more states measure four- and five-year graduation data using a longitudinal cohort method, rates calculated under the new formulas are bound to cause a stir across our communities. Superintendents must be prepared to respond to the graduation crisis.

Fortunately, district leaders in cities such as New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Portland (Oregon), and Chicago are creating promising strategies to re-engage students who are slipping off-track to graduation and get them on their way to a diploma. The approach is referred to collectively as **Multiple Pathways to Graduation**. More than a program, this framework represents a new way of envisioning the path towards graduation. Instead of assuming a linear process proceeding step by step towards graduation, Multiple Pathways to Graduation operates on the assumption that districts must focus on early indicators, offering increased responsiveness, flexibility and differentiated levels of support to help all students graduate. These districts have found that they can close the graduation gap when they:

- **Reframe the dropout conversation** to focus on graduation by using language that confronts unhelpful labels and instead refers to “students on- or off-track to graduation, in or out of school” and “transfer schools” designed to help off-track students cross the finish line.
- **Analyze the local dynamics of the graduation crisis** to determine which factors are both predictive and comprehensive in determining which students will not graduate. Recognizing that students that become off-track to graduation have a low likelihood of completing high school, districts are seeking to develop leading indicators to monitor student progression.
- **Increase responsiveness by re-designing school and district operations.** By mapping student needs against actionable solutions, districts are increasing graduation rates. First, districts are increasing the number of students that stay on-track to graduation during the transition to high school through prevention and early intervention strategies. Second, they are increasing the likelihood that off-track students graduate through recuperation and recovery efforts.
- **Strategically manage a portfolio of schools** by developing a set of metrics to maximize student outcomes and plan for the right mix of schools to keep students on track, preparing for college, and able to get back on-track if they begin to slip.

Ultimately, superintendents and district leaders who pursue these strategies will help produce a more balanced reform effort—one that simultaneously seeks to increase rigor and student achievement while meeting the needs of struggling students and those who are off-track to graduation, regardless if they are in or out of school.

This guide, built upon the emerging lessons from successful districts nationwide, is designed to help districts plan a comprehensive reform process to increase graduation rates for all students.

Introduction



What if every school district in the United States—*every district*—was able to deliver on the promise of a high school diploma for each and every student in their care? What if every school was successful at addressing the academic needs of all of their students? What if the graduation rate—stuck now for decades at 70 percent nationally and 50 percent in many of our urban districts—disappeared entirely? How would the policies and operations of our school districts vary if we operated on the assumption that 100 percent of our students would graduate at a minimum prepared for community college without remediation?

Our first step is to think of the dropout crisis as a graduation crisis. By intentionally referring to the dropout crisis as a “graduation crisis,” the focus—and responsibility—is appropriately shifted from students to the adults who lead our schools, districts and communities.

In April 2008, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings announced that the Department of Education will take administrative steps to ensure all states use the same formula to calculate how many students graduate from high school on time, and how many drop out. As more states measure four-year graduation data using a longitudinal cohort method, rates calculated under the new formulas are bound to cause a stir across our communities and will place new pressures on district leaders. Superintendents must be prepared to respond to the graduation crisis.

In addition, declining enrollments weaken the overall strength of a school district and contribute to fiscal concerns. Keeping current students on-track to graduation and reengaging students who have stopped attending school makes educational and financial sense for districts and communities.

Addressing the needs of **all** students, not just those remaining in school, is challenging but achievable. It requires rigorous data collection, systemic planning, honest analysis, strategic collaboration, and willful dedication to doing what is necessary to make schools work. Knowing that African-American and Hispanic males are disproportionately over-represented among those students who never get their high school diploma, we must disaggregate at every decision point to prevent them from sliding off the path to graduation.

Superintendents are in a unique position to make these reforms happen. In fact, reducing the graduation crisis will not happen without superintendent leadership.

Across the country, bold, committed superintendents are engaging in district-wide reform efforts that seek to end the graduation crisis and address the needs of our nation’s most vulnerable youth. These dedicated public servants know that coming generations must have access to an educational system that prepares them for the world they will inherit—one that demands a much higher level of knowledge and skills. They know that a high school diploma is a ticket to college and career opportunities. And they know that we must find ways to serve the needs of the many youth already off-track to graduation or out of the school system entirely.

In places like New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Portland (Oregon), and Chicago, these leaders and their community partners are creating a robust array of strategies to re-engage students who are slipping off the graduation path and getting them back on their way to a diploma. The key efforts from these districts are often referred to as **Multiple Pathways to Graduation (MPG)**.

MPG is a dynamic approach that takes seriously the challenge of educating 100 percent of our students and recognizes that the linear model to schooling doesn't necessarily work best for all students. In essence, MPG represents a new paradigm for high school — one in which districts develop new commitments, new capacities to serve struggling students and those off-track to graduation, and a portfolio of new schooling options to meet the needs of every student.

The promising results are fueling a new sense of optimism. Our students, our communities, and our country are depending on this change.

ABOUT THE GUIDE

This guide is designed to help districts get started on planning a comprehensive process to increase graduation rates. Your district will need to shape the process and strategies that make sense for you. Yet, with the lessons learned from other districts, you can jump-start your process and start getting results more quickly.

The guide includes several useful features, including:

- Narrative descriptions of key ideas and strategies
- Tools to help superintendents and district staff begin planning
- Case studies from lead districts
- Resources for further information

The materials are designed to be useful in engaging district leadership and principals, as well as community leaders. Feel free to adapt the materials so that they are suitable for your community.

For more information on the studies and reports mentioned here, go to
www.ytfg.org/mpgresources.

“Focusing on our students who drop out gave us valuable new insights. Once we realized that we needed to increase our responsiveness at the school level, we began to understand our responsibilities at the district level differently. We began to focus on leading indicators, identifying options for early intervention in high school, and creating more options for extra support services.”

—ARNE DUNCAN, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Revisiting Our Understanding of the Graduation Crisis

Over the past two decades, school reform strategies have focused on establishing academic standards, increasing expectations, and alignment with higher education. And as a result, many schools around the nation are seeing higher levels of achievement: standardized test scores are inching up and more students are taking Advanced Placement exams.

Surprisingly, with so many efforts at the national, state, and district level to improve academic achievement, the national graduation rates are still staggeringly low. Roughly three out of ten American high schools students do not graduate in four years. Among students of color, only 57.8 percent of Hispanics and 55.3 percent of African-Americans graduate with a regular diploma.¹ Of those students who do graduate, one-third are unprepared for college-level academics.² Not only are far too many students leaving school without a diploma, but recent evidence suggests that they are doing so in earlier grades and at lower skill levels—some even too low to be able to take the GED.³

As districts increasingly track student progress through high school, communities are becoming aware of the large “leaks” in their educational pipeline. Recognizing that our secondary education system has a faulty design, superintendents are acknowledging that reforms driven solely by college preparation and high-stakes testing are not proving sufficient to increase graduation rates.

Clearly, a detailed assessment of the “leaks” that are causing the graduation gap is needed if districts and schools are to effectively respond to the crisis. Exactly who are the students who do not graduate from high school, and what are the primary factors that lead to interruptions in their education?

Recent research from around the country reveals substantial diversity among the students who do not graduate. Rather than labeling a young person a “dropout,” educators are reframing the problem, responding to them as students at different points along the pathway to graduation, regardless of their level of engagement in school.

MOVING BEYOND STEREOTYPES TO DATA-DRIVEN STRATEGIES

Much of past research on students who do not graduate has reinforced stereotypes by describing the “dropout” population based on their race, gender, socio-economic status, or circumstances of their lives. Although this is helpful information for advocates, it offers educators little direction for how to make a difference in the graduation rates.

Districts focused on increasing their graduation rates are engaging in detailed analysis of their own district student data to and mapping it against actionable solutions. This begins with understanding the factors that are most **predictive** (closely reflect the graduation rate of students that demonstrate the given risk factor) and **comprehensive** (closely reflect a majority or significant percentage of total eventual dropouts) in determining which students do not graduate from high school.

Although the patterns vary across districts, one of the most important findings is that the graduation crisis is being propelled primarily by students becoming off-track to graduation. Districts are shaping their own definition of “off-track,” usually one or two years behind in completing graduation course requirements. Essentially, our country’s “dropout crisis” is the “off-track to graduation” crisis. Thus, districts are responding with a two-pronged approach, addressing the problem at different points in student’s educational trajectories:

- 1) **Keeping students from falling off-track.** By identifying risk factors or early indicators that are both predictive and comprehensive, districts and schools can focus on **prevention and early intervention** programs. Usually designed to either expand the capacity of schools to prevent students from falling off-track or as individual student interventions, districts and schools can increase the graduation rate by reducing the number of off-track students.
- 2) **Helping off-track students get back on a graduation pathway.** Once students slip off the path to graduation, districts are increasing graduation rates by expanding the availability of schools designed for **recuperation** and establishing **recovery** mechanisms.

To keep students from slipping off-track, districts are focusing on improving leading indicators such as course failure, credit accrual, attendance, and academic performance—areas where schools and districts have direct leverage. These factors point to the importance of looking at dropping out as a process districts can interrupt by identifying and supporting students who are likely to fall off-track to graduation.

For example, recent research in New York City, Philadelphia, Portland, and Chicago shows that school-based leading indicators are indeed powerful predictors of who will fall into the graduation gap.⁴ A 2006 study of Chicago public schools found that two indicators (core course failure and promotion status) can each be used with 80 percent accuracy to predict which students will eventually drop out of Chicago’s public high schools.⁵ Significantly, nearly all districts analyzing these factors have concluded that course failure—especially at the ninth grade—is the single most powerful indicator of students who will fall off-track to graduation. Armed with this data, the district and schools can target effective responses to the right group of students. Chicago and Portland have both implemented intensive strategies to support students in the transition through ninth grade to increase the number of students that stay on-track in the first year in high school.

The patterns of students falling off-track to graduation, disconnecting from school, and finding their way to a diploma or equivalent vary across districts. New York City found that most of their students who don’t

graduate fall behind and leave the system early.⁶ On the other hand, in Portland, students that fall behind in credits continue to attend school for several years before dropping out.⁷

Philadelphia found that students that had disconnected from school had differentiated academic need for completing their diploma. In addition, they could predict “early leavers” (two-thirds of the students dropping out left in ninth and tenth grade with few credits) but not the “late leavers” (students who disconnected from school in 11th and 12th grade even though many were on-track to graduation).⁸ With this data in hand, Philadelphia is expanding schools for students with few credits and expanding outreach efforts to students disconnected from school. Thus, it is important for districts to seek out the opportunities that make the most sense for them to expand the number of students that stay on-track or get back on-track to graduation.

These findings reveal a significant shift in the thinking about dropout prevention. In sum, educators are finding that instead of providing a wide array of dropout programs based on demographic risk factors, they must strategically use their local data analysis to guide them. In many cities, the scale of the graduation crisis is so large that it is critically important to think about what we need to do differently in schools to keep students on-track as well as expanding capacity to recuperate and recover students that have fallen off-track.

A DEEPER LOOK

Framing the Problem with a Multiple Pathways Team

No matter the size of a district, closing the graduation gap through the multiple pathways framework is a challenge that requires a team approach. Each district needs to determine how to bring together an effective and representative group of committed individuals. Cities have varied in their approach: Some have chosen to be district-driven with a cross-departmental team managing the process efficiently, while others have engaged community and cross-system leaders to draw on broader expertise and implementation know-how to the table. Either approach can work, but districts must consider the tradeoffs in terms of costs, efficiency, sustainability, and expertise. The key is to have sustained superintendent leadership throughout, carefully sequencing broader involvement to ensure powerful community engagement resulting in effective implementation, equity and sustainability. Below are some suggestions and questions to consider as multiple pathways teams are created in your district.

TEAM MEMBERS FROM WITHIN THE DISTRICT

It is essential to develop a strong internal team that will guide the process, dive deeply into the data, and drive resources towards strategic solutions. The team may be a cross section of key management staff within the district. Or it may draw from vertical expertise such as district school board members, administrators, teachers, support staff, and students. For some districts, assembling the team will require reorganization of roles and responsibilities. Make sure that a majority of the team has a demonstrated commitment to struggling students. In addition, team members should represent the critical parts of the district so that they can adeptly implement action plans.

Team Development Questions: District Employees

- What skills and capacities are needed on the team?
- Who has a passion for young people who do not graduate?

- What district operations may be impacted by this effort — curriculum, planning, budget, facilities, human resources?
- What schools, programs, grade levels, and services offer valuable insights?
- How large a team can be assembled while still being productive?
- What will the role of the superintendent be?

TEAM MEMBERS FROM OUTSIDE OF THE DISTRICT

There are many reasons why external partners are indispensable to a district's multiple pathways effort. First, outside partners can generate public support for the graduation gap issue in a way that district officials cannot, as they are often involved in networks and conversations beyond the scope of the district. They can also bring much-needed expertise to the team in areas such as public relations, policy advocacy, youth development, statistical analysis, and fundraising. In addition, outside partners from youth organizations can collaborate to create shared strategies for the students with whom they work. For example, local child welfare and juvenile justice partners can join efforts with the district to serve some of the students that are often the most challenging to promote from year to year. Finally, external coalitions can provide the critical public will needed during leadership changes to minimize disruptions to implementation.

Team Development Questions: External Partners

- How will the team include representative parents and students?
- Which local youth-focused community organizations should be included?
- Which local employer partners would be strategic allies in this work?
- What partners bring resources to help community members build expertise in understanding and communicating analytical findings?

“In Philadelphia, we have committed ourselves to halving our dropout rate in five to seven years. To accomplish this goal, we are tapping the wisdom, commitment and strength of partners all across our city. Working together, we are moving from discussions about the dimensions of the dropout crisis to collective actions to resolve it, from characterizing students as ‘in school’ and ‘out of school’ to one that envisions a system capable of accommodating the educational needs of all young people.”

— **MICHAEL NUTTER**, MAYOR, PHILADELPHIA

Talking about the Graduation Crisis

Typically, the assumption about youth who do not graduate is that they are to blame. Building an initiative that takes responsibility for these students requires not only a shift in policy, but also a shift in accepted wisdom and language. First and foremost, increasing graduation rates demands that adults confront and change deeply held beliefs and terminology about young people and education.

NEW WAYS TO THINK: CONFRONTING MYTHS ABOUT THE GRADUATION GAP

District leaders must combat a number of myths in their efforts to remake their school systems. These misperceptions can distract people from the task at hand and undermine the overall policy change efforts.

Sharing new research from other districts can help people challenge their assumptions and create new understandings about the issue. The tool in this section presents a number of commonly held myths and facts that shed new light on struggling students, their aspirations, and the ability of schools to meet their needs.

NEW WAYS TO SPEAK: LANGUAGE THAT CONFRONTS STEREOTYPES

In every arena of life, language plays a powerful role in shaping how people think, the goals they set, and the ways they use resources. Unfortunately, in the debate over how to best solve the graduation gap, the language used is often full of negative connotations and stereotypes. What follows are a few useful new terms to help school leaders reshape the dialogue—and ultimately the thinking—around this important issue.

“STUDENTS OFF-TRACK TO GRADUATION, IN OR OUT OF SCHOOL”

The word “dropout” undermines efforts to increase graduation rates. Not only does the expression place full responsibility on the student—thereby disempowering teachers and principals—but it also ignores the tremendous perseverance that so many young people demonstrate. By intentionally referring to the dropout crisis as a “graduation crisis,” the focus—and responsibility—is appropriately shifted from students to the adults who run our schools and districts.

Another common phrase, “out-of-school youth,” also limits the discussion. Many students stay in school, despite not graduating within four years. Some may take up to seven years to graduate, returning to school after crises in their lives have been overcome or coming to realize the importance of education. Others continue until they age out, too old to legally attend school.

Instead, educational leaders are finding traction by replacing the phrases “dropout” and “out-of-school youth” with “student off-track to graduation, in or out of school.” Additionally, the word “student” conjures up a very different image than “dropout” or “out-of-school youth.” Think of all youth—in or out of school, on- or off-track—as “students.” Refer to students who have left school as having had their education “interrupted,” implying that they will be returning at some point. Most will.

“TRANSFER AND TRANSITIONAL SCHOOLS”

For many, the term “alternative school” conjures up images of students doing rote assignments without learning much, delinquents on their way to jail, or teen mothers. But across the country, there are examples of effective, high-quality alternative schools providing engaging experiences through a combination of academically rigorous, student-centered curriculum and youth development principles. And they’re graduating students with legitimate high school diplomas. Visit the Alternative High School Initiative at www.ahsi.info for more information on different types of student-centered school models.

To move beyond the use of “alternative school” which carries mixed meanings, develop terminology and accountability measures that differentiate among schools and programs based on the desired educational goals. It’s important to be clear about the outcomes to ensure that schools are well-designed. Some examples include:

- **Transfer Schools** – diploma-granting schools intentionally designed to serve students who are significantly off-track to graduation. Upon entering, students are expected to stay in the school until they graduate. Transfer schools will vary in the levels of supportive services and flexibility. Transfer schools are a critical part of establishing multiple pathways to graduation. New York City’s transfer schools are generating graduation rates of close to 60 percent with youth who were graduating at a rate of 19 percent in their former high schools.⁹
- **Transitional Schools** – schools designed to provide education and services for a specialized segment of students—for example, pregnant or parenting teens—during a set period of time, with the expectation that students will return to a comprehensive setting as soon as possible. One type of

transitional schools that are run by districts or by regional entities are disciplinary schools. These schools are designed for students deemed to have behavioral problems or who are involved with the juvenile justice system. It is important that these schools offer academic and developmental supports to ensure that students are able to effectively transition back to school as rapidly as possible. Districts should monitor all transitional schools on academic gains while at the school as well as the degree to which students experience effective transitions back into school.

Superintendents who seek to consistently communicate a positive perspective of students with internal and external audiences will find it much easier to move their reform work forward. The best way to do this is to lead with the educational goals of each type of school.

A DEEPER LOOK

Graduation Gap Myths and Realities

This tool is designed to help leaders confront a variety of misperceptions related to the causes and solutions to the graduation gap. It is an ideal discussion starter and can be easily modified and used as an interactive activity with leadership teams.

MYTH *Initial academic proficiency is the most important issue when it comes to getting students to graduate. If all incoming ninth graders performed at grade level, they would all graduate.*

REALITY *Students can fall off-track at any point in their educational career.*

While academic proficiency is an important factor in many districts, prior test scores and academic skills do not necessarily mean students won't fall off-track to graduation. Many students who eventually become over-aged and under-credited enter high school in ninth grade at an appropriate age and with acceptable academic skills.

In New York City, the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation found that eighth grade proficiency was important but did not tell the whole story. Of the students who became over-age and under-credit, 29 percent had entered with proficient skills and still became off-track to graduation in high school.¹⁰ Clearly something happening during their high school careers was causing these students to fall behind. Understanding the fragility of students' educational careers will enable districts to design safety nets for students across a span of ages and grade levels.

MYTH *Students who drop out are lazy and unmotivated.*

REALITY *Most off-track students are extremely persistent in their efforts to complete a secondary education.*

A recent report by Jobs for the Future tracked approximately 25,000 students over the course of 12 years and determined that nearly 60 percent of youth who drop out eventually earn a high school credential—in most cases, a GED certificate.¹¹ What's more, almost half of those that earn their credential go on to enroll in college. In fact, a recent study by Consortium on Chicago School Research suggests that most youth know that college is important and want to go, but many don't know the practical steps needed to get there.¹²

Almost universally, young people who drop out of school later express great remorse for having left and have a strong interest in re-entering school with students their age. In one study, 81 percent said that, "graduating

from high school was important to success in life.”¹³ True to their word, most off-track students don’t simply give up but rather keep trying to earn a diploma, often cycling in and out of schools and programs several times.¹⁴ Seeing out-of-school youth in this new light can help build support for policy measures designed to provide them with new on-ramps and opportunities.

MYTH *Socioeconomic characteristics such as race and status define who drops out.*

REALITY *School-related indicators are a much better predictor of who will drop out.*

For decades now, researchers have examined the socioeconomic characteristics of students who drop out, reinforcing the notion that poor students and students of color (especially black and Latino students) were the most likely to drop out. However, recent research in New York City, Philadelphia, Portland, and Chicago has found that school indicators, such as course failure, low attendance, and low credit accumulation, are the best predictors of who will not graduate.¹⁵ Predictors based on race and income level are more likely to be wrong than right. Even where socio-economic indicators are relevant, it is extremely difficult to map actionable solutions.

These academic indicators highlight opportunities for intervention. Armed with this new understanding, educators and parents can intervene early if students start to slip off the graduation path and districts and schools can be more cost effective in their responses.

MYTH *Four years is enough time for all students to complete a high school education.*

REALITY *Many high school students need more than four years to finish high school.*

In Philadelphia, the on-time (four year) graduation rate ranges from 45 to 52 percent for the graduating classes of 2000 through 2005. The six-year graduation rate range is higher, from 54 to 58 percent.¹⁶ Some students enter high school with low literacy levels and need additional time to build skills and complete requirements for graduation. Others interrupt their schooling to work, take care of families, or because they fall so far behind in credit accumulation that they temporarily give up on ever earning a diploma.

In New York, Young Adult Borough Centers were developed at high schools to support older students that were lacking the credits needed to graduate. These centers, which operate programs in the afternoon and evening, help students complete specific course requirements, provide career and college counseling, and offer work experience.

Educating students in this way may require shifting from Carnegie units to competency-based credits that allow students to accelerate learning. Additionally, reporting and celebrating five- and six-year graduation rates is important so that educators have an incentive to keep working with students who require more time.

MYTH *Students who don't graduate from high school can always get a GED.*

REALITY *Students who drop out often don't have the skills to prepare for or take GED exams.*

Growing numbers of young people are taking or planning to take GED tests, particularly in the face of heavy marketing by the American Council on Education. But the GED exams are designed for students performing at the tenth grade level, and many young people find that they don’t even have the academic skills to enroll in GED preparation courses.

Additionally, a GED should not be seen as equivalent to a high school diploma. Although important as a stepping stone, the GED does not have the same economic viability as a high school diploma. The most successful districts build pathways that lead to full-fledged diplomas or are re-designing their GED programming as preparation to community college.

MYTH *Differences in dropout rates at different high schools are a reflection of the students they serve, not differences in the quality of the schools.*

REALITY *Schools vary in their ability to get students on track, keep them on track, and graduate those that fall off-track.*

While students enter high school with different skill levels and degrees of connection to school, when characteristics of incoming students are held constant, it is evident that schools do in fact differ in their ability to graduate students.

Both Chicago and New York City have started to focus on promotion power (the ability of a school to promote students to the next grade) to monitor the quality of schools and the progress of students. Of the schools with a high concentration of students with low academic achievement, some are better than others at helping these students graduate.

In addition, some selective schools fail to graduate a high percentage of their ninth grade class due to restrictive credit and transfer policies, shedding new light on their reported graduation rates.

MYTH *Not every student is going to go to college, so schools shouldn't focus on preparing all students for college. Many students are best served by preparing them instead for work.*

REALITY *The skill sets needed today for work and for college entrance are essentially the same, so rigorous preparation is important for all students.*

Tremendous changes in the economy and the labor market have impacted the educational requirements of today's jobs. The skill sets for holding a living-wage job are essentially the same as for college entrance. Geometry, algebra, and four years of English are needed for both college and careers.¹⁷

While different people have different views about what it means to go to college, it is helpful to clarify that focusing on preparing students to be college-ready means, at a minimum, preparing them to graduate high school with the ability to enter community college without needing to take remediation courses. College preparation is critical for students who go on to community college to take vocational courses for a specific occupation, students who enroll in community college with the expectation of transferring to a four-year college, as well as those who go directly from high school to a four-year college.

“Our in-depth analysis of high school students’ outcomes provided critical information for the development of new school and program models that continue to show powerful results in graduating former dropouts and over-age and under-credited students.”

—**JOELLEN LYNCH**, CEO, PARTNERSHIP SCHOOLS ORGANIZATION, NEW YORK CITY

Designing Data-Driven Strategies to Close the Graduation Gap

The notion of data-driven decision making in education is hardly novel. In fact, most districts already gather more data than they have time to analyze and act upon! What is new, however, is the way in which some educators are collecting and analyzing data in order to close the graduation gap. Two complimentary strategies are proving significant: reporting true four- and six-year graduation rates, and applying a data analysis strategy called segmentation.

GETTING REAL ABOUT THE GRADUATION RATE

Understanding the graduation gap requires districts to track and report accurate measures of the real graduation rate. Over half the states still calculate the graduation rate using the “leaver rate” that tends to inflate the graduation rate.¹⁸

To provide a more accurate picture of who is graduating, states must collect longitudinal data on cohorts of incoming ninth graders. In addition to the four-year graduation rate, monitoring an extended graduation rate of five or six years is critically important to create incentives for districts and schools to respond to off-track students. With federal mandates regarding graduation formulas on the horizon, districts need to be prepared to collect, analyze and respond to accurate graduation rates.

SEGMENTING THE STUDENT POPULATION

The practice of segmenting student data uses analytical tools from the world of business, and thus may be new to experienced educators. Just as companies divide up their markets by organizing customers into subgroups that share similar characteristics and needs, districts can better tailor intervention strategies by examining data in terms of meaningful student subgroups. The patterns of each group and subgroup must be understood in order to create critical and cost-effective interventions. In segmenting the students

population, districts try to identify the progression in which students fall off-track. Dropping out does not happen suddenly but over a period of time. The segmentation helps districts begin to see where they are springing leaks in their pipeline. The segmentation allows districts to see the most cost-effective opportunities for prevention and intervention for students struggling to stay on-track to graduation and recuperation and recovery for those who fall off.

To better understand the power of data segmentation, consider the findings of districts already engaged in MPG reforms. For example, different urban areas have found variations in the predictive power of school-based indicators—confirming that each district must conduct its own local analysis. Armed with information specific to their schools, districts have been able to design interventions to target the needs of their particular students.

SOME FINDINGS ARE BROADLY APPLICABLE

Although every district has its own unique data patterns and dynamics, recent findings from cities at the forefront of establishing graduation pathways Multiple Pathways to Graduation clearly indicate that there are some general dynamics that are found across districts.

- **The dropout crisis is driven primarily by students that fall off-track towards completing graduation requirements.** In New York City, 93 percent of dropouts have a history of being off-track and only 19 percent of off-track students graduate from high school.¹⁹
- **Off-track students are not a homogeneous group, thus different segments of students require different strategies and solutions.** For example, students that are only a few credits short of graduation need programming that allows them to complete specific courses in a short amount of time, while students that gained few or no credits in ninth grade may need to enroll in schools that allow them to make up courses over a three- to four-year period.
- **Low credit accumulation during freshman year is highly predictive of four- and six-year graduation outcomes.** In New York City, students earning seven credits or less in ninth grade had a four-year graduation rate of less than 20 percent while students earning eleven or more credits had a graduation rate of 62 percent or above. The same patterns have been found in Chicago and Boston.²⁰
- **Small schools are generally more effective in keeping students on track to graduation.** Research based on Boston, Chicago, and New York City found that compared to large comprehensive schools, newer small schools tend to keep 15 to 20 percent more students on track to graduation. Thus, small schools can be considered a prevention strategy to keep students on-track who otherwise had a tendency to fall off-track.²¹
- **Some students will leave school without a diploma for reasons that cannot be predicted.** In Philadelphia, approximately one-third of the students who drop out are late leavers—they are generally doing well in school but leave in 11th and 12th grade.²² Although more research is needed to understand the underlying causes, it is thought that some type of life change occurs for many of these students requiring them to move, work, or take on adult responsibilities in their households.

For an in-depth analysis of these findings, see *Pathways to Graduation Data-Driven Strategies for Differentiated Graduation Rate Improvements*. The report, developed by The Parthenon Group, as well as the individual segmentation analysis and reports for Boston, Chicago, New York City, and Philadelphia, can be found at www.ytfg.org/mpgresources.

The tool in this section provides specific suggestions for moving forward with data analysis and segmentation. The key lesson here: design your segmentation so that it builds on the dynamics of your district, drawing on the local knowledge of how policies and programs have been implemented.

Districts engaging in this work should answer two important questions:

- Who should guide and participate in the data analysis?
- What tools, strategies, and timeline will be required to help everyone—especially those unfamiliar with detailed quantitative analysis—work effectively with data?

CASE STUDY

DATA-DRIVEN SOLUTIONS FOR NEW YORK CITY

Few districts nationwide have put data analysis to work like officials from the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE). In 2003, NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein launched Children First. As part of the secondary reform work, resources were secured, a new Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (OMPG) was opened, and officials conducted an analysis of how to help more students earn diplomas. Using a rigorous data segmentation process, NYCDOE leaders discovered that their transfer schools were three times as effective in serving off-track students as comprehensive schools, resulting in much higher graduation rates for these students. In addition, they found that transfer schools had more than twice the graduation rate of English language learner students as compared to comprehensive schools, and that they delivered results for students regardless of incoming reading levels. In an attempt to more seamlessly blend youth development and academics, they expanded the array of school options in their districts in four key ways:

- **TRANSFER SCHOOLS.** District officials faced a challenge regarding transfer schools: while data showed that transfer schools were more successful than comprehensive high schools in helping off-track students earn a diploma, they also appeared to be more costly. However, after data analysis revealed that these schools had a high return on investment, the decision was made to expand the number of transfer schools. In New York City, transfer schools are small, academically rigorous, full-time high schools for students who have been enrolled in high school for at least one year and are far from promoting on grade level. Essential elements include a personalized learning environment, rigorous academic standards, student-centered pedagogy, support to meet instructional and developmental goals, and a focus on connections to college. One of the most important design elements was ensuring that the new transfer schools were opened and operated by intermediaries in partnership with community-based partners.
- **YOUNG ADULT BOROUGH CENTERS.** With so many youth still in school but needing some help to get their credits completed, New York City developed Young Adult Borough Centers (YABC). These programs are designed for students who have been in high school for at least four years and are close to graduation—those who have attained a minimum of 17 credits. The instructional model allows students to concentrate on a credit portfolio needed for graduation through a nontraditional block schedule.

Each YABC is operated through a collaborative partnership between the NYC Department of Education and a community-based organization which provides services to students, including youth development support, college and career counseling, and assistance with job placement. Students receive a diploma from their high school of origin upon completing their credits and Regents exams, raising the district's five- and six-year graduation totals.

- **LEARNING TO WORK.** Recognizing that many students need to develop skills to get them through high school and into college and career, New York City designed "Learning to Work" (LTW). LTW helps students stay engaged in school by developing the skills they need to complete high school, gain employment, and succeed in post-secondary education. LTW services are provided by community partners and are integrated across Multiple Pathways schools and programs, including Transfer Schools, GED programs, and YABCs. LTW students have the opportunity to participate in intensive employability skills development workshops, subsidized internships, college and career counseling, and job placement support. The program also includes attendance outreach, individual and group counseling, and academic tutoring.
- **BLENDED GED PROGRAMS.** District data also revealed that many students who were not going to be able to get a diploma also needed skill building in order to successfully pursue a GED. This led district and city leaders to establish the GED Plus initiative. These GED Programs—which are blended with a LTW component—prepare students for the GED and support them in developing meaningful post-secondary connections. In September 2006, OMPG launched Access, a full-time GED program, which includes a youth development approach, integrated thematic units, developmental portfolios, innovative systems for student engagement, assessment, and progression, connections to post-secondary training, and in-depth career exploration. The combined LTW/GED programs use research-based instructional practices, such as a workshop model coupled with high-quality curriculum materials.

It is important to note that with the exception of the GED programs, all of the options discussed above follow the same rigorous diploma requirements used throughout the system. Additionally, New York City has a new school accountability system that establishes a stronger focus on the bottom quartile and tracks five-year graduation rates.

A DEEPER LOOK

Segmenting Your Customers

This tool is designed for use with the team of people that will guide the segmentation analysis. The steps and questions outlined here are a starting point to develop a plan that works for the specific context of your district. You may also want to look at other factors such as cost, geography, and if possible, the implications for students that are served by other systems such as child welfare and juvenile justice.

INITIAL PREPARATIONS

- Set up an advisory team to guide the research. This team should include individuals with different perspectives such as community groups from the areas with the lowest performing schools, community-based organizations that are effective in re-enrolling young people in school, and people with knowledge of English language learners and special education.
- Have a research partner (such as a local university) co-sponsor the research. Think about how external organizations can bring additional capacity and credibility to the work.

PROJECT SCOPE

- Determine the depth and breadth of the research. Each community must navigate the trade off between project cost and depth of analysis. Ideally, the analysis will include cross-system data from organizations such as juvenile justice and foster care, so that the circumstances facing students involved in other agencies can be understood.
- If possible, design an iterative process that allows continued exploration of patterns until solutions are generated.
- Determine the parameters of the processes for examining schools and programs. Try to be as inclusive as possible. If the data are available, consider including transitional schools, charter schools, private schools and GED programs.
- Determine the format of the final report. Think ahead of time about the most appropriate audience(s) for the work.

DATA DEFINITIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

- Clarifying terms from the outset will ensure that consistent messages are communicated to internal and external stakeholders. For example, one key issue is determining how the study will define the terms “on-track” and “off-track.”
- Stay focused on indicators that your schools can have control over, such as credits, grades, and attendance.
- When calculating graduation rates it generally doesn’t make sense to include a GED as a diploma. However, if the district is running GED programs, it may be valuable to examine how effectively the programs are helping students pass the test.

DISAGGREGATING DATA

- Collect data on indicators with the most potential to predict who will and won’t graduate. Philadelphia identified two factors in eighth grade that determined a 75 percent chance of dropping out: 1) less than 80 percent attendance, and 2) failing a math or English class.²³ New York City found that regardless of eighth grade achievement, students who were over-aged and under-credit were in most danger of not graduating.²⁴
- Analyze data to learn more about the groups that have the lowest graduation rates. School data should be differentiated by incoming eighth grade academic levels, English language learner status, and special needs. Within these categories, data should be further broken down to uncover patterns that suggest institutional biases when it comes to race/ethnicity and gender. Special attention should be given to the intersection of race and gender to ensure that African-American and Hispanic young men, often found to have the lowest graduation rates, are adequately supported in district schools.
- Look for high-leverage, school-related data points that are both **predictive** (factors for which the graduation rate of students with that particular characteristic can be calculated) and **comprehensive** (factors that account for a high percentage of total dropouts).
- Determine which schools in the district are most effective at keeping the lowest performing groups of students on track. Celebrate their effectiveness and learn from their practices.

ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING AND REFLECTION

- Create a safe, open environment for people to analyze, ask questions, examine the findings, and then ask more questions. It is especially helpful to have an outside organization facilitating this process.
- The analysis is most effective as an iterative process. Make sure your work plan allows for exploration on new insights that may emerge during the process.
- Once an understanding of the data begins to emerge, develop a report that reflects the advisory group’s perspectives and presents the data in meaningful ways. It may take a long time to write a report that satisfies everyone. Build in ample time to talk through how to position the findings.
- Trends, educational trajectories, and the needs of students will change over time because of changed school policies, external forces in their communities, and how schools respond to demographic changes. To build the agility of your district, consider building in periodic reviews of how the district is doing in addressing the patterns revealed in your segmentation.

- Meaningful data may take a long time to develop; yet the public, as well as external policy makers and the district's own staff, needs to see consistent evidence of growth to build and maintain momentum. Take advantage of opportunities to share portions of the data in the middle of the process, and look for success stories to report along the way. Also, strive to ensure that quantitative data is always shown in visual form so that stakeholders new to the conversation can easily interpret and understand the findings.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO GUIDE THE PROCESS

The following questions can be adopted or adapted for use during the data collection and analysis phase.

What do we know about the students that enter ninth grade, and what happens to them?

- How many eighth graders never even enroll in ninth grade?
- What are the middle school characteristics of entering ninth graders, e.g.: proficiency test scores, GPA, number of courses failed, attendance, number of grade retentions, number of suspensions, number of schools attended?
- What percent of students in a cohort graduated in four, five, and six years?
- What is the annual dropout rate? What is each cohort's dropout rate?
- What is the age-out rate? How many students stay in school for four or more years but do not graduate?
- What is the recovery rate? How many students drop out and later receive a diploma? How many receive a GED?

What school indicators help predict who graduates and who doesn't graduate in four years?

- Are there strong predictors of who will not graduate based on middle school information? Examine seventh and eighth grade test scores, GPA, number of courses failed in eighth grade, average daily attendance in eighth grade, number of grade retentions, number of suspensions, and number of schools attended.
- What is the strongest indicator in high school that predicts whether a student graduates? Consider student's age at entrance into high school, course failure, GPA, attendance, suspension, and school mobility.

Is falling off-track a strong predictor of not graduating? If so, what is known about the students who fall off-track?

- What is the recuperation rate, i.e., of all the students that graduate, how many were ever off-track?
- Of all the students who did not graduate, how many were ever off-track?
- Of all the students who enter school, how many become off-track to graduation?
- Of those who become off-track, how many graduate in four, five, and six years?
- What are the differences between those students that stay on-track and those that fall off-track? Break these data down by demographics, academics, and connection to school indicators.
- What happens to students who wind up off-track to graduation?
- Of all the students who enter school, how many become off-track in ninth, tenth, eleventh grade? When do they drop out?

- How do academic skills influence the degree to which off-track students will graduate?
- Are some students who become off-track more likely to graduate? Break these data down by demographics, academics, and connection to school indicators.

What do we know about the students that do not graduate?

- When do the students leave school? And with how many credits? Is there any variation based on instructional needs or demographics?
- Based on this analysis, what are the characteristics of students who drop out in ninth and tenth grades as compared to those dropping out in 11th and 12th grades?
- How many students drop out in 12th grade with more than 90 percent of their credits?
- How many re-enroll and eventually get a diploma? How many get a GED?
- What are their characteristics when they interrupt their education in terms of skills, credits, age, and number of years in school?
- How many go to a transfer school? How many times do they change high schools?

What schools are beating the odds when it comes to students who are off-track?

- Which schools have higher grade promotion and graduation rates than average for the lowest achieving segments of students? Compare the types of schools (comprehensive, small, transfer), and compare within types of schools.
- Which schools have higher leading indicators (better leading indicators, students who are off-track getting more credits) than average for the lowest achieving segments of students such as on-track indicators, credit accumulation, and attendance? Compare types of schools (comprehensive, small, transfer) and compare within types of schools.
- Which schools accept transfer students (students who have dropped out, been expelled, or been incarcerated), and how do they compare on the leading indicators and graduation rates?
- Which schools are most effective in each of the following:

Transitions – supporting students during major changes in program, especially between eighth grade and high school

Recuperation – supporting students who are off-track to make up courses and credits to get back on-track

Recovery – supporting students who are out of school to return to school and work towards earning a diploma

“A major turning point in Portland was bringing all of the high school principals together, including the alternative schools. The alternative schools brought valuable insights about school structures that can increase responsiveness to student needs and emphasize personalization. Even more important, our entire district became more responsive overall as we began to seek out ideal learning environments for students that were disengaging from school, rather than letting them simply drift away from school.”

— **CAROLE SMITH**, SUPERINTENDENT, PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS, PORTLAND, OREGON

Expanding Graduation Pathways Through Increased Responsiveness

RESPONSIVENESS — THE “FOURTH R”

F

For the past decade, the national high school reform spotlight has focused on the “three R’s” of rigor, relevance, and relationships. While gains have been made through the resulting mix of higher standards, increased graduation requirements, expanded Advanced Placement, and dual enrollment programs, the graduation crisis continues. Now, one of the most significant findings from districts using the Multiple Pathways to Graduation framework is that a “fourth R” is needed: responsiveness.

Responsiveness refers to how quickly and effectively districts and schools can marshal their resources toward meeting the needs of students who are in danger of not reaching graduation. This requires a commitment to ensuring that students get the help they need when they need it, and not a second—or semester—later. Responsive districts don’t wait for data on graduation rates to respond. They use real-time indicators to monitor progress and get students back on track as soon as they start to fall behind.

DISTRICT RE-DESIGN: REDUCING THE LEAKS IN THE EDUCATION PIPELINE

In much the same way that districts are developing new capacity to ensure that students are prepared for the transition to college, the MPG framework requires that districts redesign operations to build responsiveness which can be measured by **transition** power, **recuperation** power, and **recovery** power. Transition power captures the ability to implement prevention and early intervention strategies to reduce the number of students falling off-track to graduation. Recuperation and recovery power refer to a district’s ability to make sure students who are off-track have avenues for them to pursue a diploma. These new capacities essentially are redesigning secondary education to catch students at several stages as they slip off-track and away from school.

TRANSITION POWER: KEEPING STUDENTS ON-TRACK THROUGH PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, of those students not graduating, more are leaving school in earlier grades and with fewer credits.²⁵ These students often become “disconnected youth” with low literacy skills and few employment opportunities. To combat this problem, districts need to attend to every step of the transition process—beginning in eighth grade and continuing through the first day of tenth grade—to ensure that students begin their high school careers on the right foot. Transition power, which can be thought of as two approaches, prevention and early intervention, seeks to ensure that students learn to be effective in high school through the following:

- **Assess and strengthen preventive capacity of schools.** One of the most important things is to compare how effectively schools are preventing students from falling off-track, especially those students that are showing symptoms of struggling in school. Districts should work towards maximizing the number of at-risk students who stay on-track by expanding the capacity of schools to prevent students from falling off-track and expanding types of schools that are effective in keeping struggling students on-track.
- **Create incentives for schools to support successful transitions.** Districts should integrate ninth grade on-track indicators into school accountability report cards so that parents and students can choose schools which are the most responsive to transitional issues.
- **Focus on early identification.** Districts can predict which students will struggle with the jump to high school. The best early warning indicators are both predictive and comprehensive. Findings from leading MPG cities suggest that a large percentage of students can be identified in eighth or ninth grade. Indicators before eighth grade may also be predictive but are usually less comprehensive, thus not reflecting a significant percentage of total eventual dropouts. Districts play a key role in ensuring that schools have information on educational needs of incoming ninth graders as soon as possible to enable greater responsiveness.
- **Develop a customized mix of responses.** Based on the size and needs of the at-risk student population, a variety of programmatic interventions and systemic changes must be delivered to ensure a successful transition to high school. Examples include:
 - ***Bridge programs*** from middle to high school—often offered in the summer before or first semester of freshman year—that focus on skill development, academic enrichment, and building relational support networks.
 - ***Orientation to high school programs*** that begin an acculturation process, introduce an expectation for college preparation, and instill students with a sense of responsibility for creating a supportive peer culture.
 - ***Attendance monitoring strategies*** that ensure students are actually attending school early in the year when they can quickly fall behind.
 - ***Literacy programs*** to develop the reading and writing skills of students entering high school with elementary school skill levels. In some cases, students need reading specialists to help them fill gaps in phonemic decoding and word identification skills.

RECUPERATION POWER: HELPING OFF-TRACK STUDENTS GET BACK ON A GRADUATION PATHWAY

Research from the leading cities indicates that most districts lack the capacity to help students who are significantly off-track to graduation, resulting in dismally low graduation rates. Developing recuperation power, or the capacity to help students make up lost credits and get back on-track to graduation, is the second critical aspect of responsiveness. Districts need to attend to the following issues in this area:

- **Develop a range of options.** A range of recuperation options is needed to ensure that students can accelerate their learning and credit accumulation. Districts are exploring independent study, Saturday school, on-line courses, trimester schedules, creative use of electives, waivers, and dual enrollment.
- **Expand transfer schools to meet diverse needs of students.** While some recuperative strategies can operate within comprehensive high schools, transfer schools that are specially designed to help students make quick and focused credit gains are needed. Many districts are finding that they need more schools to serve students with few or no credits, given the large portion of students leaving in ninth and tenth grade. Districts are most challenged by developing innovative programming for students who are “old and far” (youth who are close to aging out of school but are many credits shy of a diploma).
- **Move beyond seat time.** Although the fear has been that high-stakes exit exams would reduce graduation rates, the primary challenge continues to be the ability of students to accrue necessary credits. This is especially hard for struggling students who may need to use electives to build up skills. Recuperative strategies may require moving beyond the Carnegie Unit seat-time requirements to offer competency-based approaches that focus on mastery of key academic skills and standards.
- **Provide flexibility and incentives for credit recuperation.** Districts that allow school officials flexibility in areas such as budgeting, scheduling, and staffing can stimulate innovation in the development of credit recuperation options. In addition, clear incentives must be in place for schools to continue educating students even after they have fallen off-track to graduation. Publishing on-track data and six-year graduation rates can provide public accountability and encourage schools to persist in their efforts to help all students succeed.

RECOVERY POWER: OPENING DOORS TO OFF-TRACK, OUT-OF-SCHOOL STUDENTS

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of responsiveness is developing recovery power—helping students who have left school return to a meaningful diploma-granting program. A number of factors can make this difficult: student mobility, out-of-date contact information, a sense of failure for students who have chosen to leave school, and new barriers to schooling that arise during their time away. The longer students stay out of school, the more difficult it is to re-engage them. With little use, skills decline. While some students become motivated to return to school after working in an entry-level job, others find themselves in a deeper downward cycle. To reconnect young people to education, districts need to generate recovery power, built through the following steps:

- **Develop collaborative outreach strategies.** Districts need to locate and connect with students who have interrupted their education. Collaborating with community and government organizations that support families and youth can help. The Boston Private Industry Council, working in partnership with the Boston Public Schools, has hired outreach workers who completed their college degree after

previously dropping out of high school. Outreach should be ongoing, accessible, and tailored to meet different segments of the out-of-school student population on their terms. With relationships in place, districts can save critical time and help get students back into school as soon as possible.

- **Integrate increased graduation rates into operations.** As districts begin to reduce the leaks, it will create other pressures on the system. Strong leadership will be needed to stay the course and engage districts and principals towards responding earlier to students before they disconnect from school. District management will need to offer creative leadership in expanding the number of transfer schools, maintaining outreach and re-enrollment efforts, and strategically guiding budgeting, human resource and capital planning. This ensures the capacity to serve increasing number of students through the recuperative and recovery strategies. In many districts, if all school-aged students actually came to school there wouldn't be nearly enough facilities or teachers to accommodate them.

STRATEGICALLY MANAGING A PORTFOLIO OF SCHOOLS

The final phase of the Multiple Pathways to Graduation framework is for districts to create and strategically manage a “portfolio of schools” that responds to local needs. In the portfolio approach, districts develop and maintain an array of educational options that serve and guide all students to graduation. In reality, all multi-school districts already have a “portfolio.” What is new here is the effort to strategically shape and manage the district stable of schools in a way that meets the needs of all students—especially those who are off-track to graduation.

Building on the data analysis and the development of capacity to be responsive discussed earlier, this step addresses the following questions:

- 1) What mix of schools is needed in the community to close the graduation gap and prepare all students for college?
- 2) How will district operations need to be modified to effectively manage and support the portfolio of schools?

OPTIMIZING THE MIX OF SCHOOLS FOR RESULTS

The portfolio of schools tactic requires districts to take a new strategic role in mapping and developing a diverse collection of learning options. This will require a combination of improving current schools, replacing low-performing schools, expanding and replicating effective schools, and starting new schools. It is important to remember that schools run by districts are only one portion of the educational options available to students. Although segmentation work will most likely be based only on district data and schools, all schools serving children and youth residing in the district should be considered as part of the portfolio. Overall, the district will need to cultivate a set of school choices that takes into account a variety of needs, such as:

- Stem the outflow of at-risk students who drop out of school during key transition periods
- Increase graduation rates for students who enter high school already significantly behind academically
- Help off-track students quickly accrue credits and get back on track
- Reconnect out-of-school youth to school and provide them with diploma pathways
- Increase the number of students prepared for college and careers, including greater access to college preparation such as Advanced Placement, dual enrollment and International Baccalaureate curriculum

- Create opportunities for newcomers to engage in schools that respond to language and academic goals
- Increase competitiveness of high-achieving students for top-tier colleges
- Respond to regional economic development strategies through targeted career technical education

As districts continue to improve educational services in earlier grades, thereby increasing the number of students entering high school with adequate skills, more attention will be turned towards college preparation and transition. At this stage of development, the challenge is to balance efforts to increase academic preparedness with the enormous policy shift of designing the secondary education system around positive outcomes for all students.

PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT GUIDEPOSTS

As districts work to develop their portfolios, there are several guideposts that can help them navigate this challenging policy and school redesign work.

- **Make assessments of incoming ninth graders available to schools.** Schools need to know several months ahead of time the educational needs of the students who will be entering their community. In order to maximize the effectiveness of the portfolio, the district plays a key role in expediting information to enable greater responsiveness before school starts and throughout the year. Districts can also use this information and current effectiveness of schools' transition power to manage the necessary capacity in transfer schools.
- **Conduct ongoing, fact-based assessments on effectiveness of current portfolio and student needs.** Getting students to graduation and college readiness requires us to pay attention to four separate but related outcomes with different indicators:
 - Academic skill building: state testing, exit exams, and GPA.
 - Staying on track: completion of specific courses required for high school graduation, including additional requirements for career technical education and other specialized programming.
 - College readiness: completion of specific courses required for college admissions and adequate scores on SAT, ACT, or college admissions exams.
 - College transition: application to college and financial aid applications.

It is imperative that districts use the data segmentation and analysis strategies offered throughout this guide, expand to monitor progress towards college readiness. This determines overall effectiveness of the portfolio and where schooling gaps exist in their community. This is not a one-time event: adjustments will be needed as local dynamics change and students respond to new learning options. An ongoing, data-driven process will ensure the portfolio continues to work for all students.

- **Make gap-filling a priority.** Each district will be faced with different types of gaps. It is expected that one of the first efforts will be to expand transfer schools to recuperate off-track students. Given the heterogeneity of the off-track population, pay close attention to the breadth of transfer school designs. It is likely that districts offer transfer schools for students needing one to two years of credits, yet many districts have large populations of off-track students with little or no credits. It is nearly impossible to create too many transfer schools, and if needed, these campuses can easily be converted to small schools that serve a broader range of students.

Based on the segmentation analysis, districts are also increasing the number of small schools to increase the number of students on-track to graduation. Some districts may find they need to increase the number of newcomer schools to respond to changes in their communities.

Remember to demonstrate a commitment to quality. Gap filling may also require rapid improvements. Improving or closing low performing transfer and transition schools sends the message that the district is not willing to tolerate a second-class, second-chance system.

- **Redesign or replace ineffective schools.** One of the most challenging management tasks is addressing significantly under-performing schools, especially when it is a comprehensive high school serving large numbers of students. It is critical that there are ongoing efforts to work with schools that are showing diminishing results to help them improve. Yet, addressing low-performing schools that appear to be resistant to change may require redesign or replacing them with another school or schools. In trying to optimize your graduation rates, consider placing a mix of schools in the facility, such as a newcomer school, a transfer school, as well as a mix of thematic schools.

Redesign is often an enormous undertaking and that requires at least a year of planning and working with community leaders to effectively manage implementation issues.

- **Build student choice into portfolio enrollment and transfer policies.** The portfolio of schools strategy only works when it is aligned around the notion of schools of choice. Student motivation is a key factor in improving academic outcomes. Allowing students to select from a range of schooling options can help increase their engagement in learning. Students need to understand what their graduation trajectory looks like as they begin to accrue or fall behind in credits. They should be offered the choice to stay in their high school or transfer to a school designed to help them accelerate their learning. Students in transitional schools need support in deciding where they will re-enroll, and transitional services are needed to ensure that students don't fall through the cracks as they move to new settings. Overall, a community-wide commitment to choice and accountability is required, supported by clear district policy.

Recuperative and recovery strategies will also require attention to operational policies. For example, easing the transition process into and between schools is critically important. Remember to eliminate bureaucratic impediments such as demanding transcripts from a student's previous school before allowing them to enroll in a new school.

ON THE HORIZON: NEW MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR PORTFOLIO OF SCHOOLS

As additional districts begin to engage in the redesign of their operations to expand graduation pathways, they contribute to the overall knowledge and vision of a high-performing district. Each are selecting different priorities based on their strengths and opportunities. New York City and Chicago have both learned about the implementation issues of redesigning ineffective comprehensive high schools into small schools, Boston has developed new outreach capacities, Philadelphia has explored accelerated schools designed for students with few credits. The accumulative knowledge and new sets of practices are helping to identify the future direction of the work. A few of the next challenges include:

OPTIMIZING COST EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PORTFOLIO

In order to make more informed, efficient investment decisions and support the ongoing work of their portfolio of schools, districts are looking more deeply at the value of different school models in the context of the overall effectiveness of their portfolio. In evaluating the options, New York City determined that transfer schools were the best option for getting off-track students to graduation day.

It is likely that new cost effectiveness models will be developed. This work calls for the development of sophisticated formulas that move beyond traditional average daily attendance funding calculations to track data such as actual costs per graduate, costs of supporting off-track students all the way to graduation, and cost effectiveness of individual schools in producing graduation outcomes and college readiness. For most districts, this type of analysis will challenge traditional notions of school funding, budget development, and equity. District officials must employ a consistent and transparent approach that maintains focus on the ultimate goal of the success of all students. Assuming that the technology for growth models to assess school performance progresses, the door will open to re-thinking how we place value on schools.

GETTING THE RIGHT INFORMATION TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE AT THE RIGHT TIME

Responsive data collection systems are a necessary part of creating more responsive schools. Instead of designing solely around accountability demands from state, federal, and private funders, information systems are increasingly focused on the customer and how to create high performing schools.

- Parents and students need sets of information to make choices about school selection and transfer options.
- Principals and teachers need information to respond to students and to give them timely feedback so that they can take corrective actions. This may be identifying students with low attendance in the first thirty days, reorganizing the master schedule to offer chances for students to retake a course, or ensuring that students have applied for financial aid for college.

Ultimately, managing a portfolio of schools is a shared responsibility between district and principals, requiring collaboration between middle and high schools and across high schools as students are transitioned to settings that offer a more appropriate and effective learning environment. It is critical that information systems are designed around these relationships.

REVIEWING AND REVISING POLICIES TO SERVE 100% OF STUDENTS

Deep within the operations and policies are assumptions that students will progress through four years of high school without interruptions, and that some students will not graduate at all. For districts committed to closing the graduation gap, a “business as usual” approach to policies will not work. District leaders must evaluate and revise district policies to ensure that they support a portfolio approach aimed at closing the graduation gap.

The following section is designed for a general conversation about the current mix of schools in the portfolio. Further steps require enough data so that the district team can begin to make informed decisions. This general discussion around the current types of schools will help you identify the essential questions that need to be addressed in your analysis.

CASE STUDY

PHILADELPHIA'S CITYWIDE COLLABORATIVE

SEEKING COLLABORATIVE SOLUTIONS

Philadelphia's "Project U-Turn" represents an outstanding model of how one city is implementing Multiple Pathways to Graduation framework strategies. Founded in the fall of 2006 following publication of a major research study ("Unfulfilled Promise," available at www.projectturn.net) that chronicled the scope of the city's massive graduation problem (more than 30,000 students who began ninth grade left school without earning a diploma during the six-year period examined in the study), the citywide collaborative seeks to raise public awareness, expand resources, grow the number of schooling options available for under-credit and out-of-school youth, and ultimately lower the dropout rate. The Philadelphia Youth Network heads the broad coalition, and over 50 different organizations focused on youth have joined in the effort.

The data infrastructure behind this effort is significant. Philadelphia operates a KIDS (Kids Integrated Data System) database that weaves together information from schools, child welfare, juvenile justice, and other sources to allow for in-depth analyses of trends and issues facing youth in the city. As a result, officials were able to identify key indicators related to their specific dropout issues. Specifically, they found that nearly 80 percent of off-track, out-of-school students were either at-risk eighth graders or at-risk ninth graders. Students who stayed on-track and made it to tenth grade were much more likely to graduate. As a result, for Philadelphia, the effort is focused on targeting support prior to and during tenth grade.

THE ACCELERATED SCHOOLS MODEL

Another of the key research findings pointed to a gap between what the district offered in terms of transition schools and the needs of the city's students. Based on this finding, and the subsequent mapping of citywide learning alternatives, the district invested in innovative "accelerated schools," designed especially for over-aged and under-credit students.

Philadelphia's new accelerated schools are built on their successful model piloted at Fairhill Community High School (FCHS) since 2003. Fairhill is an alternative, project-based school for students ages 16 through 21 who have accumulated fewer than 25 percent of the course credits needed for graduation. The program, which operates year-round and offers an extended school day, allows students to earn a district diploma within 30 months, depending on how many credits they bring from their previous schooling.

Key elements of the FCHS design include its small school setting (225 students), a small learning communities approach (smaller groupings of students based on skill level), eight-week long learning modules, and a pedagogical approach that emphasizes project-based learning. In addition to structured, school-wide reading program, Fairhill offers an independent study option to students who have failed one of their module courses.

PROMISING STEPS

The early results of Project U-Turn are impressive. In the initiative's first year alone, over \$10 million in resources were secured to help address the issue, over 1,400 new seats were opened up in various transition schools and programs that serve off-track and out-of-school youth, and more than 150 students who had stopped attending school, were reconnected to meaningful pathways to graduation. While much remains to be done, educators and youth advocates in Philadelphia are excited by the positive early steps and accomplishments of this innovative program.

A DEEPER LOOK

Designing a Portfolio of Schools

This tool is designed for use with a mix of district and community leaders. Begin by understanding to what degree the current schools are under- or over-performing in terms of serving struggling students, graduation rates and college readiness. Then use the segmentation analysis and the five dimensions outlined in this section to strategically identify the types of schools needed. This will help create a portfolio of schools that meet the needs of the high school population, including the students who are off-track to graduation.

BUILDING THE PORTFOLIO: FIVE DIMENSIONS TO CONSIDER

The most important information to review is the effectiveness of the current portfolio of schools on a number of different metrics. Keeping an eye on the academic skills of the students entering ninth grade, consider the effectiveness in helping students transition to tenth grade, to graduate, and to be prepared for college. As districts begin to strategically plan for a balanced set of schools that will optimize student outcomes—academic skills at time they leave school, graduation rates, and college readiness—they need to reflect on five dimensions of schools.

1. ENTRY POINT

Students enter different schools at different points in their educational lives. Some schools can be defined by their entry points:

- **Articulated schools** have a link to a previous level of schooling. At a traditional nine through 12 comprehensive school, the entry point is grade nine.
- **Transfer schools** are designed to help students complete their diplomas after having difficulties in a traditional comprehensive high school. Examples include schools in which students enroll only after falling off-track, or can re-enroll only after formally dropping out of school.
- **Transitional schools** re-direct students back into transfer or articulated schools. Examples include disciplinary schools for students who are reacting to stress through disruptive behavior, substance abuse, or violence; schools for pregnant and parenting teens; or schools for court-involved youth.

It is critical that transfer and transitional schools be fully integrated into the portfolio of schools with appropriate funding and oversight.

2. ADMISSION CRITERIA

Like point of entry, schools are also defined by criteria for admission, or the profile of students who are welcome to enroll. Some common admissions approaches include:

- **Competitive schools**, which require that students pass entrance exams to be admitted.
- **Selective schools**, which admit only those students who meet explicit eligibility criteria, such as grade point averages or academic skill levels.
- **Open schools**, which allow for any student to enroll, regardless of their prior educational backgrounds, profiles, test scores, or trajectories. Encouraging students to apply, but using a lottery to decide who attends, is a good way of blending the motivating elements of school choice with maintaining open admissions.
- **Placement schools**, which admit students who are required to enroll due to problems at a prior school, such as truancy, behavior, or lack of academic progress.

3. SCHOOL DESIGN

The overall design of schools is a critical component of portfolio building. Most schools are designed to fit within one or more of the following categories:

- **Comprehensive schools** are usually big schools in terms of both building size and student enrollments and generally offer a wide variety of curricular and extra-curricular programs.
- **Early college high schools** provide opportunities for high-school aged students to earn credits towards a college degree.
- **Thematic schools** are organized around a specific theme, such as the arts, careers, science, or technology. Make sure that the mix of career and technical schools are balanced among the needs of current occupations, expanding occupations, and emerging industries tied to economic development.
- **International** or **newcomer schools** are designed to help immigrant and refugee students make healthy transitions to the United States.
- **Student-centered schools** are generally small, flexible programs that cater to the individual learning needs of students. Independent study programs fall into this design category.
- **Transfer schools** are designed for students who are off-track to graduation and offer the flexibility to shape instruction, curriculum, and experiential learning around the interests and needs of students.

Within each of these designs, the size of the school is a critical element as well. Research indicates schools with 800 students or less will produce higher graduation rates for low-income students and students of color.²⁶ Yet very small schools may be unable to provide the spectrum of course offerings and programming needed to meet the needs of all learners. Districts must balance these competing needs to offer a sufficiently diverse instructional program within a portfolio of schools that meet interests and needs of all students.

4. INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL

Schools usually reflect explicit or implicit beliefs about teaching and learning through their instructional model. Common approaches include:

- **Traditional models**, which are teacher-centered and feature a didactic presentation of content to students.
- **Competency-based models**, which are designed to prepare students to demonstrate specific competencies and/or learning outcomes through performance tasks or projects.
- **Problem- and project-based models**, which have students explore real-world problems and create exhibitions to share what they have learned. The combination of exploration and presentation helps students develop the habits of mind valued in school and the workplace.
- **Experiential models**, which blend school-based learning with real-world experiences. Common activities may include field trips, community service learning, and internships.
- **Integrated language and content models**, which blend language instruction with subject-area content for students needing basic English. This kind of model is generally designed for non-native English speakers.

It is important to note that the learning needs of struggling readers, English language learners, and special education students must be integrated into the instructional model from the outset of the school design process.

5. MIX OF SERVICES

Schools vary a great deal in how they deliver student support services. Each school's mix of services can be examined through a series of lenses:

- **Structure and flexibility:** A school's design will reflect its understanding of, and attention to, the needs of its students. For example, some schools offer independent study or evening courses to meet the needs of students who are working or have demanding family responsibilities. Other schools are organized to provide explicit structure for students who require sustained supervision and safe places to learn after school.
- **Early intervention and acceleration:** One of the most powerful factors in students' persistence toward graduation is their accumulation of academic credits. Schools vary tremendously in their recognition and responsiveness to students' educational deficits. A focus on accelerated learning and/or credit accumulation can help students move through high school at a faster pace, or start generating college credits.
- **Developmental supports and opportunities:** All adolescents have significant developmental needs, and schools vary in the level and types of support they offer in response to those needs. Examples of supports and opportunities within high schools include work experiences to support students' career aspirations, counseling or mental health for students working through trauma or substance abuse, and college and career counseling services to help students transitioning to employment or college after high school graduation.

Leading Towards Balanced Reform



Getting serious about the graduation gap is hard work. As this guide indicates, the Multiple Pathways to Graduation framework demands that superintendents and their districts engage in demanding new tasks as they take on the serious challenge of increasing school completion rates—from changing the nature of the dialogue to using data in new ways, to designing a diversified portfolio of schools.

In addition to helping off-track students secure diplomas, high schools must still simultaneously prepare all students for college acceptance and success at the post-secondary level. The demand for higher academic achievement across the board won't—and shouldn't—go away.

Facing this challenging task, superintendents today are looking to the notion of leading a **balanced** reform effort—an effort that works for all students and avoids the unintended consequences of a one-sided approach. In the final analysis, getting all students to the graduation day requires districts to manage and integrate multiple reform strategies to ensure higher graduation rates and increased college readiness. Advocates who promote specific reforms need to become creative partners with districts to seek out opportunities to blend and streamline reforms so that they are balancing both of these critical student outcomes.

As superintendents push forward in this work, they will inevitably run up against misaligned state policies that make the work more difficult. While not insurmountable, these barriers may require that superintendents expend additional political capital in order to achieve the desired results.

The following policies help facilitate the Multiple Pathways to Graduation work. States should:

- Measure and communicate four- and five-year graduation rates using a longitudinal cohort method.
- Fully implement student identifiers and longitudinal databases to help districts monitor what happens to students if they transfer out of or otherwise leave a school.
- Establish clear policies to accelerate learning and credit accumulation through competency-based curriculum and assessment.
- Modify accountability policies for transfer schools and schools in which a significant portion of the student body enters off-track to graduation to ensure high quality services for the students entering with the greatest academic challenges.
- Address cash flow problems districts confront when re-enrolling students and establish mechanisms for schools to receive funding for students who enroll part-time.

Resources

YOUTH TRANSITION FUNDERS GROUP

www.ytfg.org

The Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) is a network of grantmakers whose mission is to help all youth make a successful transition to adulthood by age 25. YTFG focuses its work in three strategic areas: foster care, juvenile justice, and struggling and off-track students.

Visit www.ytfg.org/MPGresources for examples of how cities have designed their analysis, information on different models of alternative high schools, and policy issues and accomplishments.

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

www.jff.org

Jobs for the Future is a nonprofit research, consulting, and advocacy organization which believes that all young people should have a quality high school and postsecondary education, and that all adults should have the skills needed to hold jobs that pay enough to support a family. Jobs for the Future works to strengthen our society by creating educational and economic opportunity for those who need it most.

On the JFF website, see “youth transitions” under “projects.”

Recommended reading: “Making Good on a Promise: What Policymakers Can Do to Support the Educational Persistence of Dropouts.”

ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL INITIATIVE

www.ahsi.info

The Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI) is a network of youth development organizations committed to creating educational opportunities for young people for whom traditional school settings have not been successful. AHSI was launched in 2003 as a response to the growing national trend of diminishing graduation rates affecting this country’s low income, African-American, and Latino youth. AHSI brings together organizations working with local communities to generate and sustain safe, top-quality high schools for vulnerable youth. Together these organizations present families, districts and policy stakeholders with a portfolio of small, alternative high school options. These student-centered schools strive to have youth voice, project-based learning and leadership development drive the learning process.

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES, INSTITUTE FOR YOUTH EDUCATION AND FAMILIES

www.nlc.org/iyef

Recommended reading: “Setting the Stage for New High Schools” and “Beyond City Limits: Cross-System Collaboration to Reengage Disconnected Youth,” for suggestions how to build cross-system efforts which support multiple pathways to graduation.

THE ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUCATION

www.alliance4ed.org

The Alliance for Excellent Education has prepared statewide estimates of the cost of dropout rates in each state.

AMERICAN YOUTH POLICY FORUM

www.aypf.org

The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) is a nonpartisan, professional development organization for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers working on youth and education issues at the national, state, and local levels. AYPF's goal is to enable participants to become more effective in the development, enactment, and implementation of sound policies affecting the nation's young people. AYPF provides information, insights, and networks to better understand the development of healthy and successful young people, productive workers, and participating citizens in a democratic society.

Recommended reading: "Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities Are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth."

NATIONAL YOUTH EMPLOYMENT COALITION

www.nyec.org

The National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) is a membership network that strives to improve the effectiveness of organizations that seek to help youth become productive citizens. Toward this end, NYEC sets and promotes quality standards; tracks, crafts and influences policy; provides and supports professional development; and builds the capacity of organizations and programs.

Recommended reading: "Financing Alternative Pathways: Profiles and Policy 2005."

CITY RESOURCES

BOSTON

BOSTON PRIVATE INDUSTRY COUNCIL

www.bostonpic.org/youth/g.htm

Special report: "Too Big to Be Seen: The Invisible Dropout Crisis in Boston and America"

Also see: "Strategic Planning to Serve Off-Track Youth: Data Review and Strategic Implications," available at: <http://boston.k12.ma.us/bps/news/news-9-26-07.asp>

CHICAGO

CONSORTIUM ON CHICAGO SCHOOL RESEARCH (CCSR) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF

www.ccsr.uchicago.edu

Recommended reading: "What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools"

NEW YORK CITY

THE OFFICE OF MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO GRADUATION

<http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/DYD/OMP/default.htm>

The Fund for the City of New York's Youth Development Institute, www.fcny.org/portal.php/syd/ceps

PHILADELPHIA

PHILADELPHIA YOUTH NETWORK

www.pyninc.org

www.projectturn.net

PORTLAND, OR

CONNECTED BY 25

www.connectedby25.org

SAN JOSE

THE GREATER SAN JOSE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION COLLABORATIVE

www.getbacktoschool.org

Special Thanks



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Christine Sturgis, MetisNet

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For more information go to
www.ytfg.org/mpgresources

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