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POLICY

COMING SOON . . .

DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY:

An Assessment of State Policy and How to Improve It

Deep concern about low graduation rates continues to spread among governors, state legislators, city mayors, and civic leaders. One measure of this is significant recent legislative activity focused on dropout prevention and recovery. Since the 2002 passage of No Child Left Behind, 34 states have enacted laws directed at lowering dropout rates and increasing graduation rates.

The combination of the seriousness of the dropout problem and the possibility of new solutions has created an environment conducive to state action. To analyze the dimensions and potential impact of legislative activity addressing the dropout crisis, Jobs for the Future has surveyed the authorizing legislation in the 34 states that, since 2002, have enacted laws aimed at dropout prevention, intervention, or recovery.

A SENSE OF URGENCY

A number of factors are heightening the sense of urgency among state policymakers about low graduation rates. President Obama recently highlighted the dropout crisis: his first address to a Joint Session of Congress linked the nation's economic competitiveness to graduation from high school and the attainment of a postsecondary degree or credential. As President Obama pointed out, America has fallen behind many other developed countries in the graduation and postsecondary attainment rates of young adults.

Since that address, the Obama Administration has further delineated a national strategy that emphasizes the importance of early identification of students at risk of dropping out, systemic and transformational reform of the nation's lowest performing schools, and the development and scaling up of effective models for dropout prevention and recovery, such as transfer or alternative schools that reengage and recover young people who have disengaged and disconnected from school.

Another key development is the emergence of more accurate methods for collecting and analyzing data on the scope and dimensions of the dropout problem and new regulations from the federal government requiring cohort measures. To date, 18 states have reported on their cohort graduation rate; many more are in process of developing their data systems to enable them to do so. A smaller number of states have also embraced new research on early "on track" indicators as the basis for "early warning systems" that schools and districts can use to inform dropout prevention, based on a small number of school-based measures that have proved highly predictive of future dropping out.



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE



At the same time, the development of effective prevention, intervention, and recovery strategies in a handful of cities with high concentrations of dropouts has helped to build the confidence of state policymakers that this problem can be addressed. In the big cities that are the ground zero of the dropout crisis, educators, youth developers, and social entrepreneurs have begun to invent solutions that are leading to “beat the odds” results. The availability of seed funding, much of it from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has also been a significant factor in opening the space for invention and innovation.

Ideally, dropout policy would address prevention, intervention, and recovery, incorporating the most recent and rigorous research about effective strategies and models. To conduct an analysis of current and recent policy, JFF identified five model policy elements that together frame a sound legislative strategy for dropout prevention and recovery (see box). We then looked at how well new versions of state dropout policy align with these elements.

MODEL POLICY ELEMENTS

COUNTING AND ACCOUNTING FOR DROPOUTS

States should set public goals for making substantial improvements in their graduation rates and use a cohort methodology to report publicly on their progress.

USING GRADUATION AND ON-TRACK RATES AS A TRIGGER FOR SIGNIFICANT REFORM

States should help districts with low graduation rates move beyond incremental and piecemeal improvement approaches to more transformative strategies, including the redesign of high schools losing the most students and new options for off-track youth.

REINFORCING THE ENTITLEMENT TO A PUBLIC EDUCATION

States should ensure that districts and schools deliver on the promise of an entitlement to a free public education through graduation or to age 21. Simply raising the compulsory attendance age is not enough.

ACCELERATING PREPARATION FOR POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

States should explicitly include underrepresented and at-risk students in their strategies for accelerating students to high school graduation and postsecondary success.

INVENTING NEW MODELS

States should have a designated vehicle for the development of recuperative models, through a competitive grant system or other means that encourages innovation and expands on successful models.

For more information on JFF’s forthcoming dropout policy brief contact Cheryl Almeida, calmeida@jff.org.