



# NATIONAL YOUTH EMPLOYMENT COALITION

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## **Recommendations to Improve the Elementary and Secondary Education Act for Struggling Students and Disconnected Youth**

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The long term economic health of our nation depends on investments we make in young people, especially those aimed at increasing their participation in a knowledge-based economy. We must engage all of our youth, including those who at times become disconnected from school and community, in high quality educational experiences in order to maintain and grow America's competitive edge in the global economy. There has been much recent federal and state attention on low high school graduation rates and the need to redesign high schools, but there has been little attention paid to the large number of students who have dropped out and whose needs, in many cases, traditional high schools simply cannot address. The number of students who fail to graduate is astounding—one-quarter of our nation's youth do not complete high school in four years, with approximately 1.2 million students dropping out each year.<sup>1,2</sup> More than half of these are young people of color. In fact, schools fail to graduate about forty percent of African-American, Latino, and Native American students.<sup>3</sup> Without the higher level of skills demanded by employers in the current labor market, opportunities for employment at a living wage, and, ultimately, self-sufficiency, are dismal for young people lacking a high school diploma. Without an adequate education, many young people lack the basic skills necessary for even minimum-wage jobs. A staggering 6.2 million 16- to 24-year-olds (about 16 percent) have dropped out of high school, putting each of them in the position to earn \$400,000 less over their lifetime than those who have a high school diploma.<sup>4</sup> When comparing the estimated fiscal benefits of graduating a former dropout (\$250,000 including taxes paid and savings in social costs) with the cost of an effective two-year dropout recovery program (\$20,000), the economic value of re-engaging disconnected youth becomes clear.

The National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) encourages Congress to recognize and prioritize the nation's dropout crisis by giving youth who are behind or disconnected from school a chance to get back on track on a pathway to a diploma. In line with this aim, NYEC offers the following recommendations to be considered in reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), previously authorized as No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

## Recommendations

1. **Dropout Recovery & Reengagement:** Provide incentives to states to promote dropout re-engagement in addition to dropout prevention strategies with rewards for increasing graduation rates of all students, including former dropouts. Dedicate sufficient funds to support initiatives authorized in the Dropout Prevention Act and related initiatives that aim to increase graduation rates.
2. **Appropriate Accountability Measures:** Incorporate four-, five- and six-year adjusted cohort graduation rates into accountability reporting requirements to capture progress made by all students. Expand the use of growth models to document progress of students who are significantly academically behind.
3. **Multiple Education Pathways to Earn a High School Diploma or Equivalent:** Encourage states to promote or support districts in providing multiple education options that include accelerated learning, twilight academies, programs for parenting teens, credit recovery, GED Plus, juvenile justice re-entry, employment preparation, apprenticeships, and career and technical education to support struggling students and disconnected youth in achieving a secondary education credential so they are prepared for college, career, and life.
4. **Competency-based Credits:** Award students school credit based on demonstrated mastery or competency.
5. **Collaboration and Coordination with Community Partners, WIBs, Business Leaders, and Youth Councils:** Encourage local education agency (LEA) collaboration with community-based organizations, workforce investment boards, local and county government agencies, youth councils, labor unions, and business leaders to devise strategies for and provide the comprehensive services needed to effectively teach all young people.
6. **Postsecondary Access and Success:** Encourage secondary schools to provide connections to postsecondary pathways, including one-, two-, and four-year degrees, and career and employment training leading to industry recognized credentials and employment.
7. **Improved Use of Data Across Sectors and Systems:** Encourage the development of robust longitudinal statewide data systems and professional development to enable stakeholders to make data-driven decisions and policies that foster improvement. Encourage state education agencies (SEA) and LEAs to coordinate data systems with workforce, community colleges and other postsecondary systems, nonprofit service providers and other relevant stakeholders so data can be shared across youth-serving systems.
8. **English Language Learners (ELL):** Replace all instances of the phrase “limited English proficient” or “LEP” in the legislation with the phrase “English language learners” or “ELL.”

## Discussion of Recommendations

### 1. DROPOUT RECOVERY & REENGAGEMENT

**Recommendation:** Provide incentives to states to promote dropout re-engagement in addition to dropout prevention strategies with rewards for increasing graduation rates of all students, including former dropouts. Dedicate sufficient funds to support initiatives authorized in the Dropout Prevention Act and related initiatives that aim to increase graduation rates.

**Discussion:** The economic viability of our nation depends not only on graduating students who are at risk of school failure, but also on re-enrolling students who have already left school and facilitating their access to high quality high school completion programs. ESEA should build on the principles outlined in the Dropout Prevention Act<sup>5</sup>, authorized under NCLB but never adequately funded. ESEA should incorporate an emphasis on both on dropout prevention *and* dropout recovery, and Congress should appropriate targeted funds to support this work at a level significant enough to enable states to execute comprehensive dropout prevention and recovery efforts. State efforts to increase graduation rates for *all* students, including former dropouts, include a variety of components and strategies—some of which are described in the following sections—and include an improved use of data, multiple education pathways, cross-sector collaborations, and connections to postsecondary education and training.

### 2. APPROPRIATE ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES

**Recommendation:** Incorporate four-, five- and six-year adjusted cohort graduation rates into accountability reporting requirements to capture progress made by all students. Expand the use of growth models to document progress of students who are significantly academically behind.

**Discussion:** NYEC supports efforts to hold schools and districts accountable for *all* students by bringing uniformity to the calculation of graduation rates, which will assist education and other systems serving struggling students and disconnected youth in the provision, planning, and design of services that are better aligned with student needs. At the same time, it is essential that local education agencies are given incentives to offer second chances to students who have dropped out of school. Current policies, which only count graduates who finish high school within four years, provide no reason for local education agencies to attempt to re-enroll students who fall off track. Yet, there is a disincentive for local education agencies to enroll former dropouts because of the risk that their Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) will be negatively affected by students whose test scores may be low. Given this disincentive, there exists a significant risk that traditional high schools will transfer at-risk or low-performing students to alternative schools simply in order to maintain AYP. ESEA should incorporate the four-year cohort method for calculating graduation rates, as well as five- and six-year graduation rates that reflect schools' ability to graduate students who have fallen behind academically and former dropouts.

Schools and districts should be commended for working to ensure all students are making progress toward proficiency and earning a high school credential. An educator instructing a student who is three grade levels behind at the beginning of the school year but is only one level

behind at the end of the year—making a gain of two grade levels in one year’s time—should be recognized as a success in spite of the fact that the student is still one year behind academically. Education providers who face the challenge of working with students who are significantly behind academically should have their students’ growth recognized for purposes of accountability. Currently, fifteen states are participating in a pilot program for growth models (established in 2006), which track individual student achievement from one year to the next and give schools credit for student improvement over time.<sup>6</sup> NYEC recommends expansion of the use of growth models to all states with sufficiently sophisticated data systems in place to document this growth.

### **3. MULTIPLE EDUCATION PATHWAYS TO EARN A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA OR EQUIVALENT**

**Recommendation:** Encourage states to promote or support districts in providing multiple education options that include accelerated learning, twilight academies, programs for parenting teens, credit recovery, GED Plus, juvenile justice re-entry, employment preparation, apprenticeships, and career and technical education to support struggling students and disconnected youth in achieving a secondary education credential so they are prepared for college, career, and life.

**Discussion:** In order to reduce the achievement gap across student subgroups (such as students living in poverty, English language learners, and students with disabilities) and increase the rates at which students graduate from high school prepared for college and careers, it is necessary to recognize that students in traditional education settings need additional services and support services. Students fail to be successful in school and/or drop out for a variety of reasons, including personal crisis, learning style, learning disabilities, lack of motivation, poor school climate, and homelessness.<sup>7</sup> Traditional education settings do not offer the flexibility needed to enable struggling students and disconnected youth to overcome these barriers to educational success. Students who have failed to thrive in a traditional education setting need greater attention, support, and a variety of pathways to achieving a secondary education credential. Secondary education reform and dropout prevention and intervention measures should include a range of options within and outside of traditional school systems that lead to a secondary education credential, and are responsive to students’ varied needs, life circumstances, and learning styles. Multiple education pathways and credit recovery programs should include high-quality alternative high schools, transfer schools, and career- and work-based experiences to help students get caught-up and back on track toward earning a diploma. Other examples of education options to be included are accelerated learning, credit recovery, twilight academies, programs for pregnant and parenting teens, GED Plus, juvenile justice re-entry, and career and technical education. A school that provides access to a Web-based curriculum, for instance, and enables students to take courses for credit recovery can get them back on track to graduate. Students for whom obtaining a GED may be the most viable secondary credential can benefit from GED Plus models that prepare them not only for passing the GED, but also for future postsecondary education and training opportunities. High quality and rigorous education options such as these are critical to increasing the number of young people who earn a secondary education credential.

#### **4. COMPETENCY-BASED CREDITS**

**Recommendation:** Encourage LEAs to award school credit based on students' demonstrated mastery or competency.

**Discussion:** While some states are moving toward a system of awarding credit based on competency, the vast majority continue to award credit based on the Carnegie unit, or time spent in the classroom. Those states that do allow this option often require a school to request a waiver from the state, which can create unnecessary barriers to moving off-track students toward graduation. One way to support students who are returning dropouts or are over-age and under-credited is to offer options that enable them to proceed through a program at their own pace, graduating when they have successfully completed requirements and can demonstrate mastery of core subjects.

#### **5. COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS, WIBS, BUSINESS LEADERS, AND YOUTH COUNCILS**

**Recommendation:** Encourage LEA collaboration with community-based organizations, workforce investment boards, local and county government agencies, youth councils, labor unions, and business leaders to devise strategies for and provide the comprehensive services needed to effectively teach all young people.

**Discussion:** States should be encouraged to create a seamless P–20 route for students, with coordination across and within systems to improve instruction, service delivery and communication. LEAs alone cannot be expected to provide instruction and services for all high-need students and re-engagement strategies for school dropouts. Rather, LEAs should be encouraged to build relationship with community partners who have demonstrated success providing comprehensive services to struggling students and out of school youth, including career and education counseling, extended-day programs, and wrap-around social services. Community-based organizations (CBO) can and should play a key role in assisting youth both at the secondary level and as they transition to postsecondary education. Federal policy should follow the lead of states and communities that have established policies, funding mechanisms, and other incentives for partnerships between LEAs and community providers. For example, Oregon encourages school districts to establish both alternative education options that are district-run and to contract with qualified providers who receive district funding for each student enrolled. Community providers operating alternative schools in Portland, Oregon have subsequently been able to use data to demonstrate their ability to decrease the dropout rate for the community overall. New York City's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation has established partnerships between public schools and a number of CBO partners to provide over-age, under-credited students with opportunities to participate in college and career counseling, internships, employability skills training, and job placement.

## **6. POSTSECONDARY ACCESS AND SUCCESS**

**Recommendation:** Encourage high schools to provide connections to postsecondary pathways, including one-, two-, and four-year degrees, and career and employment training leading to industry recognized credentials.

**Discussion:** All students should graduate from high school with the skills necessary to succeed in postsecondary pathways and career opportunities. States and LEAs can accomplish this is by engaging community, postsecondary, and industry partners to provide rigorous and relevant instruction aligned with state standards, and helping students graduate high school with the skills necessary to succeed in college, community, and career opportunities. NYEC recommends encouraging states and LEAs to incorporate strategies that support postsecondary access and success, including career and education counseling, dual enrollment in postsecondary institutions, career academies, pre-apprenticeship programs, job training programs with an educational element, General Education Development (GED) test prep combined with postsecondary planning (“GED Plus”), and options that lead to industry-recognized credentials or certifications.

While having all students earn a high school diploma must be the priority, ESEA should also recognize passage of the GED test as a legitimate goal for some students who want to pursue postsecondary education or training. A GED may be the most viable secondary credential for a number of students who are at risk of “aging out” of the K-12 system because they are over-aged and under-credited. To ensure these students have an option for a secondary school credential, GED should be included as one of the multiple education pathways offered to students as a crucial vehicle for entrance into postsecondary education options. GED Plus programs are academically rigorous programs that prepare students to not only pass the GED test, but also provide enriched academic experiences and postsecondary planning for future education and employment opportunities. Some of the “Plus” services include career exploration and development, academic support, college preparation and counseling, and internship opportunities. These additional components facilitate student development of the skills and competencies needed to make a successful transition to postsecondary education or training.

## **7. IMPROVED USE OF DATA ACROSS SECTORS AND SYSTEMS**

**Recommendation:** Encourage the development of robust longitudinal statewide data systems and professional development to enable stakeholders to make data-driven decisions and policies that foster improvement. Encourage SEAs and LEAs to coordinate data systems with workforce, community colleges and other post-secondary systems, nonprofit service providers and other relevant stakeholders so data can be shared across youth-serving systems.

**Discussion:** Data systems should provide robust information that enables stakeholders to inform practice to better serve youth. NYEC supports efforts to improve data gathering to create early warning systems that identify students who are at risk of school failure, aid in the transition to high school and postsecondary experiences, as well as identify schools that are failing to graduate students. Stakeholders should be able to document and monitor the progress of youth

(in terms of credit accumulation, mastery of competencies, graduation, and postsecondary matriculation and graduation) regardless of the educational pathway or provider. Data systems should include a way to track young people who have become disconnected from traditional education systems and who may turn to other systems and options, such as the workforce development system and alternative education options. These programs often offer a secondary education equivalent credential, GED Plus programs, dual enrollment options as well as employment, skills training and support to move into a postsecondary pathway. Congress should also encourage coordination of state longitudinal data systems among other human service sectors, including workforce, health services, juvenile justice, foster care, and other public systems.

## **8. ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELL)**

**Recommendation:** Replace all instances of the phrase “limited English proficient” or “LEP” in the legislation with the phrase “English language learners” or “ELL.”

**Discussion:** We believe that the term “English language learner (ELL)” reflects a more asset-based approach rather than “limited English proficient (LEP).” Using the term “English language learner helps focus on a student’s capacities as a learner.

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<sup>1</sup> The Education Trust. (2009, April). *2009 education watch state reports*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/USA\\_0\\_0.pdf](http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/USA_0_0.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education. (2009, February). *Fact sheet: High school dropouts in America*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.all4ed.org/files/GraduationRates\\_FactSheet.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/files/GraduationRates_FactSheet.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The Education Trust. (2009, April). *2009 education watch state reports*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/USA\\_0\\_0.pdf](http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/USA_0_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Center for Labor Market Studies. (2009, May). *Left behind: The nation’s dropout crisis*. Boston: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.clms.neu.edu/publication/documents/CLMS\\_2009\\_Dropout\\_Report.pdf](http://www.clms.neu.edu/publication/documents/CLMS_2009_Dropout_Report.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Title I Part H – School Dropout Prevention. Available at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg15.html>

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2009, January 8). *Secretary Spellings approves additional growth model pilots for 2008-2009 school year* [press release]. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2009/01/01082009a.html>

<sup>7</sup> Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J., Morison, K. B. (2006, March). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises, LLC. Retrieved from <http://www.civicerprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-06.pdf>