



# CAMPAIGN FOR YOUTH

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CONTACT: Linda Harris, 202-906-8012, [lharris@clasp.org](mailto:lharris@clasp.org)  
Sally Prouty, 202-737-6272, [sprouty@nascc.org](mailto:sprouty@nascc.org)

## The Dropout Debate

### For the Record:

“In my world the dropout crisis is definitely not a myth. Across the country Service and Conservation Corps are enrolling 23,000 young people each year, many of whom are dropouts. These Corps members are restoring their communities, while they are also earning their GEDs or high school diplomas. Our research shows that the combination of service, academic learning, job training and individual counseling is the right combination for many young people to move forward with their lives.

The sad fact is there is a huge dropout problem in this country. Given the magnitude of this problem, we should be focusing our energy on re-engaging these young people rather than arguing about the percentages.”

**Sally Prouty**, President and CEO, National Association of Service and Conservation Corps, co-chair of the Campaign for Youth  
666 Eleventh St., NW, Suite 1000, Washington, DC 20001  
202.737.6272; [sprouty@nascc.org](mailto:sprouty@nascc.org)

“I appreciate the attention that Mishel-Greene debate has generated around high school graduation rates, but I worry that we are losing focus on the real issue. While their calculations may differ, both Larry Mishel and Jay Greene agree that far too many students fail to graduate high school with the skills needed for postsecondary education or the modern workforce. Without that discussion, this debate is like going to the Saturday night professional wrestling matches. The graduation rate debate might make for an interesting first match, but it is not the main event, which is the quality of the education behind the high school diploma.”

**Bob Wise**, President of the Alliance for Excellent Education  
Governor of West Virginia 2001-2005  
1201 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 901  
Washington, DC 20036  
202-828-0828

“Wherever Mishel looks at actual student record data that he deems reliable, he too finds a dropout crisis. This is contrary to his own conclusions based on surveys with admitted problems of years surveyed, sample design, and undercounts. Specifically, Mishel's survey-based estimates of the national rate graduation rates are 15% to 35% higher than the actual record data he argues are accurate in Florida, Chicago and New York City, the places he looked at more directly.

"Mishel finds that Florida's four year graduation rate for Blacks is about 55%, and Hispanics about 60%, and these rates Mishel admits are inflated by counting GED recipients as graduates. In Chicago, Mishel finds that Black 19 year olds have a graduation rate of 39% and Hispanics 51%. In New York City Mishel points to an extended 7 year completion rate for all students of just 60%. The New York City rates he cites are actually about 44% for the 4 year graduation rate according to the State of New York. Mishel ignores the fact that only the 4 year rate meets the requirements for evaluating schools and districts under the No Child Left Behind Act.

“Mishel's own numbers indicate a crisis. There is an urgent need to address the crisis facing minority youth. Improving the data collection should be part of these efforts rather than cause for further delay.”

**Daniel J. Losen**, Senior Education Law and Policy Associate, Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, co-author of *Losing our Future: How Minority Youth are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis*  
[http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/410936\\_LosingOurFuture.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/410936_LosingOurFuture.pdf)  
dlosen@law.harvard.edu

“Regardless of how we analyze graduation rates and trends, the key issue is that there is a dropout crisis --- especially in low-income urban and rural communities. Significant research supports the correlation between educational attainment and earnings. Youth who drop out are most likely destined to a life of poverty.”

**Mala B. Thakur**, Acting Executive Director, National Youth Employment Coalition  
1836 Jefferson Place, NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
202-659-1064  
mt@nyec.org

“Very good researchers, working with different data sets, are finding real contradictions in their results. This underscores the fact that we now lack adequate data to reconcile the discrepancies.

“Despite disagreements over the numbers, all agree that the problem is substantial and needs national attention. The Mishel/Roy book points out, for example, that the various estimates of completion rates for Chicago are from 50 to 55 percent, and that the completion rate for Black males by age 19 is just 38.5 percent.

“What we need is longitudinal data, tracking the same students, over time, at the state level, and aggregated at the national level.

“My take on the situation is that we must look behind the administrative data, put more investment in the Census Bureau interview approach, and also make a serious start in what will be an expensive program of getting regular state longitudinal data – using ‘student identifiers’ and following students from entering high school (or earlier) for a number of years after regular graduation age.

“Until we have this we are not likely to see contradictions resolved among current ways of estimating graduation rates. I expect that the early results this summer from the new Educational Longitudinal Survey will be the best measure we have so far.”

**Paul E. Barton**, Senior Associate in the ETS Policy Information Center, and author of One-Third of a Nation: Rising Dropout Rates and Declining Opportunities ([http://www.ets.org/Media/Education\\_Topics/pdf/onethird.pdf](http://www.ets.org/Media/Education_Topics/pdf/onethird.pdf)), [paulebarton@aol.com](mailto:paulebarton@aol.com)

“The real challenge is making sure every young person has a real chance to complete his or her education and get a good start on adulthood. The sad fact is there is a huge dropout problem in this country. Given the magnitude of this problem, we should be focusing our energy on re-engaging these young people rather than arguing about the percentages.

There are many successful programs for re-connecting youth, and these should be featured, funded, and expanded.”

**Dorothy Stoneman**, President, YouthBuild USA  
58 Day Street  
Somerville, MA 02144  
617-623-9900; [dstoneman@youthbuild.org](mailto:dstoneman@youthbuild.org)

“Normally, research about complex statistical data is subjected to careful and extensive peer review, well in advance of making incendiary claims to the mass media and scheduling conferences at the National Press Club. Mishel and Roy's methodology may ultimately be found to yield better numbers, but whose interests are served by dismissing the magnitude of the national dropout tragedy as a "myth?" Maybe instead of a million or more dropouts annually, there are "only" 80 % as many. "Only!" The thousands of educators and community leaders whose life work is reclaiming endangered lives deserve public support. But EPI 's implied message, picked up in a superficial newspaper headline, is that we need, not urgent remedial action, but better longitudinal research.”

**Samuel Halperin**, Co-author of Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth (<http://www.aypf.org/publications/WhateverItTakes/WITfull.pdf>)  
[shalperin@aypf.org](mailto:shalperin@aypf.org)

“The dispute over graduation rates must not obscure something all the researchers agree on--that dropout rates are much higher than many states and districts have been reporting and are truly disastrous in many big cities.

“Most researchers have relied on actual enrollment statistics to show losses over the years and produced the findings showing a terrible national crisis for minority students. All of the data sources have weaknesses but we believe Lawrence Mishel, a talented

student of labor markets, is wrong in thinking surveys with some obvious limitations are a "gold standard" that proves that the rate is substantially lower.

"In any case, the urgent need right now is not to get lost in a statistical debate but to get to work to reduce this terrible loss of students while also putting in place systems that follow students better than any existing data."

**Gary Orfield**, Professor of Education and Social Policy at Harvard University and author of *Dropouts in America* (<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hepg/dropoutsinamerica.html>)  
[orfield@gmail.com](mailto:orfield@gmail.com)

"There are communities across this country where 50% of the youngsters are not graduating on time – we can name communities where we are losing our kids. Fortunately there is a growing recognition among community leaders, governors concerned about the future of their state's economy, policy makers, and the federal Departments of Education, Labor, and Justice that these youth can not remain invisible. We recognize the urgency of elevating this problem and finding ways to improve high school learning and dropout recovery programs across the country. I commend all of the researchers on the efforts to date to bring this issue to the forefront.

"The fact that the analyses all confirm the fact that in many communities, in many school districts, young people are being left behind at alarmingly high rates should strengthen our resolve to implement solutions that will restore opportunity and promise to these youth and these communities."

**Linda Harris**, Senior Policy Analyst at the Center for Law and Social Policy and co-chair of the Campaign for Youth, 1015 15th Street NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20005  
202 906 8000  
[lharris@clasp.org](mailto:lharris@clasp.org)

#### **On the Record:**

##### ***Education Secretary Margaret Spellings***

In 2005 Education Secretary Margaret Spellings cited the dropout crisis in her testimony before Congress:

"Unfortunately, 5 out of 10 minority students – and 3 out of 10 overall -- don't even finish high school on time!"

<http://edworkforce.house.gov/hearings/109th/fc/spellingsnclb092905/spellings.htm>

##### ***Governor Mark Warner***

In the introduction to *Graduation Counts, 2005*, former Governor Mark Warner spoke about his high school reform and dropout recovery initiative as head of the National Governors Association:

"The quality of state data on graduation and dropout rates is such that many states cannot account for the status of their students as they progress through high school or beyond. Further, states calculate and report this information in such different ways that comparisons are nearly impossible. To address this problem, the National Governors Association assembled a task force of governors' advisors, state education officials, education research and data experts, and representatives of organizations of state

officials. The task force developed consensus on a series of recommendations—including a common formula for calculating high school graduation rates—which a significant number of governors have agreed to begin implementing.”

<http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/0507GRAD.PDF>

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