

**Taking the Next Step: Helping Philadelphia High School Students
to Realize their Aspirations for Post-Secondary Success**

Executive Summary

The Challenge: Current research points to a gap between aspirations and outcomes when it comes to high school students and their post-secondary plans:

- According to several recent studies, as many as 80 percent of current high school students report that they expect to go to college.
- Data from the American Community Survey show that only 25% of Philadelphia high school graduates enter postsecondary education
- And if the American Diploma Project methodology is adjusted to reflect dropout rates for the School District of Philadelphia, barely 15% would be expected to earn an on-time college credential
- According to the Brookings Institute, this puts Philadelphia in the bottom 10% of major cities whose citizens hold a 4-year college degree.
- The costs of failing to earn additional educational credentials have been well documented with a 2007 study by Paul Harrington from Northeastern University showing bachelor's degree holders earn almost \$1.8M over a working lifetime, twice as much as a high school graduate and four times more than a high school dropout.

The Opportunities: Research over the past decade points to some key areas of intervention to close this gap between aspirations and outcomes. In short, while academics, teaching and college-going school culture are essential to prepare students for college success, there is ample room for partners to support the work of professional educators by providing contextual learning and mentoring opportunities; supporting efforts to reduce dropout rates; and participating in efforts to monitor and support students through the complex processes of college application, selection and enrollment. Key interventions can be divided into sub-categories including:

1. Creating a college-going culture

- A “college-going culture” builds values conveys the belief that college is a realistic expectation for every student in every aspect of the school experience.

2. Ensuring that students stay on-track for graduation

- Support for youth exhibiting early indicators
- A successful ninth grade transition
- A caring adult or primary person, such as a graduation coach

3. Building Institutional Structures that Connect Secondary and College Learning

- Dual enrollment and innovative variations that focus on underserved students

4. Promoting access and exposure

- Workplace exposure
- Career Academies
- Mentoring

5. Conveying college knowledge

- Support the college search and application process
- Provide information and opportunities for exposure and relationship building
- Provide well informed financial aid guidance and support

Conclusion: While the essential components of any successful strategy must include attention to academic preparation and a school-wide culture that promotes college-going, there are a number of other strategies that can contribute meaningfully to the goal of increasing college enrollment and success, including support for the financial aid, application and selection processes; exposure to college and careers; mentoring and role modeling; and related supports that promote youth development.

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I. Summary. This issue brief summarizes key research findings regarding steps and strategies believed to have efficacy when preparing high school students for college and career success. The brief divides college and career preparation strategies into five broad categories: (1) *creating a college-going culture* – i.e. offering rigorous academic coursework with innovative pedagogies and consistently demonstrating that the school values and promotes college-going for all students; (2) *ensuring that students stay on-track for graduation* – e.g. early identification and support for struggling students; (3) *building secondary-postsecondary organizational connections* – i.e. dual enrollment and other blended approaches; (4) *promoting access and exposure* leading to high school and college success – e.g. connections to employers, workplace exposure and mentoring; and (5) *conveying college knowledge* that students need to know in order to enroll and participate successfully in college – e.g. support with the application process; financial aid and school selection. The brief also references two documents that relate to high school reform in Philadelphia, including initial findings and recommendations of the School-Based Study Groups involved in planning for the Philadelphia Secondary Education Blueprint; and a data analysis of outcomes for students participating in Student Success Centers in several Philadelphia neighborhood high schools.

II. Overview. Current research points to a gap between aspirations and outcomes when it comes to high school students and their post-secondary plans. Several studies indicate that aspirations are high, with as many as 80 percent of current high school students reporting that they expect to go to college. This hope is shared by their parents. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “9 in 10 students (91 percent) in grades 6 through 12 had parents who expected them to continue their education beyond high school” and “65 percent had parents who expected them to earn a bachelor’s degree or higher.”

Based on current trends, many of these hopes for postsecondary educational success go unfulfilled. A recent study by the Consortium for Chicago Schools Research indicates that, of the 83% of Chicago Public School students who reported that they wanted to earn a bachelor’s degree, only 41% actually enrolled in a four-year college. In Philadelphia, data from the American Community Survey show that barely 25% of Philadelphia high school graduates enter postsecondary education. And if the American Diploma Project methodology is adjusted to reflect dropout rates for the School District of Philadelphia, barely 15% would be expected to earn an on-time college credential. According to the Brookings Institute, this puts Philadelphia in the bottom 10% of major cities whose citizens hold a 4-year college degree.

The costs of failing to earn additional educational credentials have been well documented with a 2007 study by Paul Harrington from Northeastern University showing that Pennsylvania’s economy is particularly unforgiving when it comes to job seekers without

college credentials. In fact, Harrington's Philadelphia analysis (2008) shows that bachelor's degree holders earn almost \$1.8M over a working lifetime, twice as much as a high school graduate and four times more than a high school dropout.

The decided mismatch between college aspirations and actual college attendance suggests the need for urgent action to help young people in their quest to gain the kinds of additional educational opportunities they will need to become economically self-sufficient and socially engaged citizens. Fortunately, considerable research has been published during the last decade that describes a range of strategies and approaches that appear to boost the chances that students, particularly those in economically disadvantaged, urban schools, can realize their dreams of a college education. These strategies can be divided them into four primary areas:

1. Cultivating a college-going culture in high schools.
2. Keeping students on-track for graduation and college.
3. Building institutional connections between secondary and postsecondary learning.
4. Connecting academics, college and career success through contextual learning; and
5. Conveying "college knowledge."

III. Categories of Research.

A. Cultivating a College-Going Culture. A "college-going culture" is an oft-used term in the literature to characterize schools that do three things well: (1) provide rigorous, college-prep curricula to all students; (2) employ teachers who use innovative pedagogies that challenge students to expand their horizons; and (3) build values throughout every aspect of the school experience conveying the belief that college is a realistic expectation for every student. Research indicates that, especially for minority students, "the foundation of a college-going community is initiated, formed, and reinforced in the context of the high school classroom." Further, to create a school with a college-going community, "teachers must first adopt a more positive approach regarding college attendance for their students (and) then engage students in rigorous academic work." (Schneider, 2007)

Rigorous Coursework and Innovative Teaching. Academics are, of course, the heart of the matter. The American Diploma Project argues that "all high school graduates should take challenging courses that actually prepare them for life after high school." (ADP – 2004). The Alliance for Excellent Education, another DC-based advocacy group, insists that teachers must believe that all students can master high standards and that work assignments must consistently challenge them to do so. Furthermore, to ensure course rigor, teachers must "know their content at a college level," and "update their knowledge regularly." (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). The Education Trust and the American College Testing Program (ACT) echo these findings, arguing that "all student should be provided with a rigorous, college-oriented curriculum," and "should have the benefit of teachers qualified to teach these rigorous, college-oriented courses." They also

tout “flexible pedagogical styles” that promote informal rapport with students and also assist in the understanding of difficult concepts (ACT and the Education Trust, 2005).

This insistence on high academic standards is essential because, according to CCSR, increasing qualifications is the most important strategy for Chicago Public School students to improve college participation, access to four-year and more selective colleges, and ultimately college graduation rates” (CCSR, 2008).

Thus, the essential keys to preparing students for college are rigorous high school coursework, and teachers who are prepared to convey that information effectively.

A School-wide Culture of College-Going. Finally, rigorous academics and innovative pedagogy are most effective for college-going when braided together in an environment in which all students are expected to attend higher education. For example, CCSR reports that, for Chicago high school students, “the single most consistent predictor of whether students took steps toward college enrollment was whether their teachers reported that their high school had a strong college climate; that is, they and their colleagues pushed students to go to college, worked to ensure that students would be prepared, and were involved in supporting students in completing their college applications.” Schneider (2007) echoes these findings, arguing for “a whole school-based design that provides an integrated program of academic, social, and college preparation and planning activities.” This integrated approach, embodying a “culture of college going,” results in “strong interpersonal connections among students, their parents, and school staff that reinforce high educational expectations and the requisite steps to attain them.”

B. Keeping Students On-Track for Graduation and College. In order to increase the numbers of young people who pursue postsecondary education and training, it is first necessary to ensure that they finish high school in the first place. As Jobs for the Future, the Boston-based national intermediary for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, expresses it, we need a “dual agenda” that increases *both* the quality and quantity of college-ready high school graduates. However, given the current trends in Philadelphia and other major urban centers, that will be no mean feat.

A Focus on Early Indicators. The good news is that considerable energy is now being dedicated to the dropout crisis both nationally and in Philadelphia. Balfanz and Herzog (2004) have demonstrated that it is possible to predict as many as 50% of eventual dropouts based on indicators that present as early as sixth grade. Further, cohort analyses of Philadelphia dropouts by Neild and Balfanz (2006) suggest that 80% of eventual dropouts can be identified by academic and attendance factors in the 8th and 9th grade. Such analyses make possible the development of an early indicator system that could identify and intervene with students at demonstrated risk of dropping out.

Ninth Grade Transition. Transitions from 8-9th grade are often identified as critical periods for many potential dropouts. Students find themselves in typically large, comparatively anonymous schools where academic expectations are often much more

demanding. Unless they prepared for these challenges, many youth who are at-risk of dropping out – and others who do not yet show risk factors – will experience difficulty. Research findings also suggest that the first 9th grade marking period is particularly important, for once a student falls behind it is extremely difficult to catch up.

Most major reform efforts aimed at keeping students on-track for graduation are, of necessity, focused on classrooms. For example, Kerr and Legters (2005) suggest a series of reforms targeted for ninth grade, including smaller learning environments; interdisciplinary teams; homeroom/advisories; and extra periods (“double doses”) in reading and mathematics along the lines of the Hopkins Talent Development model.

Kerr and Legters suggest that summer transition programs, where students can learn about their new school, meet their teachers, understand their coursework and get a sense of its rigor, are effective strategies for easing the movement into 9th grade. Summer programs could also be particularly important for young people who are already demonstrating risk factors for dropping out, discussed above.

According to Legters (2005), ninth grade transition programs typically involve strategies in three broad areas: personalization, motivation and skill-building; designed to help educators tackle the sources of failure among ninth graders and lay a firmer foundation for success in high school. According to MacIver (1990), a high school transition program includes a variety of activities that (1) provide students and parents with information about the new school, (2) provide students with social support during the transition, and (3) bring middle school and high school personnel together to learn about one another's curriculum and requirements.

Graduation Coaches. The State of Georgia is a pioneer in the establishment of graduation coaches, state-supported positions that are responsible for identifying and working with at-risk students and helping them get back on the graduation track before they drop out. Graduation coaches also identify, recruit and engage concerned organizations and agencies to help provide applicable resources and programs to the students. Since the establishment of graduation coaches in 2003, Georgia's graduation rate has improved by eight percentage points.

New High Schools. Innovative approaches to dropout prevention and recovery often focus on the creation of new schools that address specific needs of at-risk youth. For example, New York City's “multiple pathways” schools are recognized as national models in providing high quality educational options for struggling students and out-of-school youth. In particular, New York's “transfer high schools” offer opportunities for over-age and under-credited students to overcome academic deficits and graduate ready for college and work. Philadelphia's “accelerated high schools” offer similar programs that are designed to help students with as few as 0-4 high school credits graduate within 27 months.

Cross-system Collaboration. Beyond structural approaches to reconnection and re-engagement, research conducted through the Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG –

2003) proposes a community collaboration model as an effective vehicle to build support for high-quality educational options for struggling students and out-of-school youth. In Philadelphia, one of five national YTFG demonstration sites, the Project U-Turn Steering Committee and Collaborative have been extremely effective in bringing much-needed attention to the dropout crisis, and in leveraging significant amounts of new funding.

C. Building Institutional Structures that Connect Secondary and College Learning.

Institutional connections between high schools and postsecondary institutions are increasingly popular, with growing numbers of states offering support for such arrangements, and a corresponding growth in students who participate (Bailey, et. al., 2003). Traditionally, these opportunities have been available to those students deemed “college ready,” but more recently innovative variations (e.g. Early College High Schools, Middle College High Schools and Gateway-to-College) are also being touted as strategies to re-engage struggling students and even those who have dropped out. Known variously as “credit-based transition programs” (CBTP), Secondary-Postsecondary Learning Options (SPLO) or simply “dual enrollment,” reasons for their popularity include the beliefs that these institutional connections have the potential to:

- Prepare students for the academic rigors of college;
- Provide more realistic information to students about the skills that they will need to succeed in college;
- Help high school faculty prepare their students for the college experience;
- Expose traditionally non-college-bound students to college;
- Provide curricular options to students;
- Improve motivation through high expectations;
- Lower the cost of postsecondary education for students; and
- Promote institutional relationships between colleges and high schools. (Bailey, 2003)

Some researchers are equivocal about the impacts of dual enrollment. For example, Hughes, while allowing that “enhanced comprehensive” programs – i.e. those that “make explicit attempts to promote the motivational and psychological effects that are believed to be crucial for the effectiveness of these programs for less-prepared students” – are the most likely to address the wide range of student needs, in the main he states that “we know little that is definitive about the overall characteristics and effects of these programs.”

However, more recent research by Hughes’ colleagues at Columbia Teachers College has found that participation in such programming does help to improve student achievement and pave the way for postsecondary success. For example, Karp and Hughes (2008) report that “middle- and low-achieving students may benefit from participation in CBTPs if they are properly prepared for and supported in their college courses.” Also, based on analyses of dual enrollment programs in Florida and in New York City, Karp (2008) found a number of benefits, including positive links to earning a high school diploma;

enrollment in college; and statistically significant higher postsecondary GPAs one year after enrollment. Studies from the American Youth Policy Forum echo these positive findings, indicating that, on average, college-going rates for SPLO participants, especially middle- and low achieving students, were higher than for non-participants. Further, high school students participating in these programs typically did as well or better than their traditional-aged classmates, and students with some experience with college-level courses are able to make an easier transition into higher education (Lerner and Brand, 2006).

D. Connecting Academics, College and Careers through Contextual Learning. As the Cheshire Cat famously said to Alice, “If you don’t know where you are going, any road will lead you there.” The problem for many young people, particularly those who live in impoverished urban neighborhoods, is they are often unable to envision their “future selves” (Bailey and Hughes, 2004), and are therefore unlikely to understand the links between academic and career success. To address this problem of limited exposure to careers and the importance of academics to future prospects, advocates of contextual and other forms of “real-world experience” argue that providing young people with opportunities for work-based learning and mentoring are effective ways of helping students understand these connections.

Workplace Exposure. Carnevale (2005) argues that “high schools are the right place to start in aligning education and careers.” High schools are the “mediating institution between education, postsecondary education, training and careers,” where “individual education and career expectations begin to motivate behavior.”

However, research documents the challenges young people often face in understanding the relationships between academic success, postsecondary preparation and future earnings. Schneider notes that “students often have unrealistic impressions of how much education is required for desired jobs,” and “low-income minority youth have particular difficulty identifying the type of adult work they would like to pursue and potential career opportunities.” On the other hand, students with what Schneider terms “aligned ambitions,” developed through exposure to adults in different occupations, “were able to learn first-hand about the challenges, responsibilities, and educational requirements of specific jobs.”

Bailey and Hughes at Columbia Teachers College have written extensively on the effects of work and workplace exposure on the attitudes and knowledge of young people. They conclude that work-based learning has the potential to promote positive youth development by providing students with entre into the adult world, enabling them to “experience both the challenges and rewards of confronting new experiences, and to forge positive relationships with adults.” They also note that appropriate connections between the workplace, which engages students in a variety of “situated experiences,” and the schools, that provide opportunities for reflection, “have the potential to strengthen the transfer of knowledge and skills from one context to another.”

Work-based learning has also been found to be positively correlated with academic performance in higher education. The Educational Policy Institute surveyed college

freshmen in eight institutions about their work-based learning experiences during high school, and subsequently performed transcript analyses of these students' academic progress. The study found that students who participate in high school work-based learning activities achieve at the four-year postsecondary level as well or better than students who do not participate in these activities. Furthermore, almost three-quarters of all postsecondary students believed they learn better through hands-on projects — the type of learning that occurs in work-based learning activities — than traditional, lecture-style practice. Other research demonstrates that sixteen and seventeen year-old African Americans and Hispanics who worked less than 20 hours/week were significantly more likely to have at least some college by the age of 30 than their peers who did not work. (Monthly Labor Review, 2000).

But despite the potential of work experience to promote future positive education and workplace outcomes, teens in low-income families have the least access to employment opportunities, especially jobs that are geographically convenient enough to allow combining part-time work and school (Lerman, 2000). Furthermore, young African Americans begin to fall behind young whites in the accumulation of work experience at very early ages, which contributes to slower wage growth over time. (Holzer, 2000).

Career Academies. One of the most powerful examples of research in support of workplace internships and career-connected education is the continuing study of high school career academies. Beginning in 1993, the Manpower Demonstration and Research Corporation (MDRC) undertook a long-term, longitudinal, random assignment evaluation of academies. This landmark study has produced several reports, most recently *Career Academies: Impacts on Labor Market Outcomes* (Kemple 2004), which builds on earlier studies that chronicled school outcomes, and goes on to examine labor market characteristics of former academy students 48 months after high school graduation. Findings from the study include:

- Academies have a clear beneficial impact for high-risk students, who were more likely to stay through the 12th grade, show improved attendance and increase credit accumulation toward graduation.
- Academy students reported higher levels of interpersonal support from teachers and peers.
- Academy students were substantially more likely to be exposed to a range of career awareness and development activities, and to work in jobs that were connected to school.
- Academies produced overall positive and sustained impacts on a range of labor market outcomes, including months worked, hours worked/week and hourly wages. These impacts were concentrated on young men, who earned \$10k more over the 48-month period than the control group, and on individuals who entered the Academies at high- or medium-risk of dropping out.
- At the conclusion of the 48 month period, approximately 50% of former Academy students had completed or were pursuing a postsecondary credential.

The MDRC eight-year follow-up study of academy students is due to be released in June, and is expected to show additional positive impacts.

Mentoring. Schneider advocates the development of a multi-tiered mentoring program as an effective means to advancing student knowledge of college and careers. Particularly in high schools where students have few opportunities to access role models and college experiences, it is important to provide mentorship programs that follow 9th graders through their high school careers and into postsecondary education. In Schneider's view, such a multi-tiered program should have three components: (1) proximal peer mentorship, which involves establishing relationships between 11th and 12th grade mentors and 9th and 10th graders; (2) distal college mentorship, that establishes relationships between college students and high school students; and (3) career mentorship, where young professionals are recruited as mentors to engage with students in their places of employment and in various recreational activities.

Schneider notes the particular value of college mentors, who can promote outreach beyond the high school environment by helping high school students to visualize the goal of college through a combination of discussion and experience (including shadowing college students at their home institutions).

E. Conveying College Knowledge. High school counselors work hard to support students in their efforts to gain admission to postsecondary education. However, the extremely high ratios of students to counselors and the competing demands on counselors' time mean that students and parents will have to do considerable work on their own to complete the college application process and make the best decisions possible about college selection. Lower income students, particularly those who are first-generation college attendees, are likely to need more support in order to put themselves in the best position for college success.

CCSR's study of the college application process, which focused on four-year schools, suggests two essential steps: (1) students must submit applications on time, apply for financial aid, gain acceptance, and ultimately enroll; and (2) throughout this process, beyond hitting benchmarks, students must also be fully engaged in the often overwhelming task of finding the right college for them. CCSR notes that it is important to distinguish between these two ideas: taking the steps to enroll in college and engaging in the process of finding the right college.

The Alliance for Excellent Education (2007) expands on the practical skills for getting into and succeeding in college, which are referred to as "college knowledge." These skills include "understanding the admissions process, placement testing, financial aid, and the academic norms and expectations of college life, such as how to communicate with professors and peers in an academic setting." These kinds of skills are not generally the responsibility of classroom teachers, but they are key to a successful college transition, and disadvantaged students are less likely to possess them (Venezia, et al. 2003; Conley 2005). The Alliance also notes the importance of motivation, which may be particularly

important for disadvantaged students for whom college has not been presented as a real option.

But while these steps are extremely important for gaining admission to the best possible postsecondary options, completing them is much easier said than done. Returning to the Chicago experience, Roderick and her CCSR colleagues found that, while more than 83% of students said that they wanted to earn at least a bachelor's degree, only about 40% of students actually were admitted and matriculated. The 60% attrition rate was attributable to "constrained access" across several dimensions, including constrained access due to qualifications; constrained participation in the college process; constrained college search; and financial capital explanations. In short, many students who aspire to a four-year degree enter two year institutions; many who aspire to attend college never apply; and many who are accepted do not enroll.

CCSR found that Chicago students of all levels of qualifications had difficulty taking the steps to enroll in a four-year college, with Latino students having the most difficulty managing college enrollment. Furthermore, across all students, about two-thirds attended a college with a selectivity level that was below the kinds of colleges they would have most likely been accepted to, given their level of qualifications. This mismatch was identified as an issue among Chicago Public School students at all levels of qualifications.

In addition to identifying these problems, CCSR also posits specific ways that educators and supportive partners can improve college access for students, helping to ensure that those who aspire to attain a four-year degree are able to get the help they need to make appropriate decisions about college.

In short, educators must realize that preparation will not necessarily translate into college enrollment if high schools do not provide better structure and support for students in the college search, planning, and application process. In particular, special attention must be paid to structuring the college search and application process during junior and senior years; early awareness can only take you so far.

CCSR proposes three steps to building better support for successful college search: (1) building strong systems of support for the college search and application process during junior and senior years; (2) creating strong college-going cultures that set norms for college attendance and provide information, relationships, and access to concrete supports and expert knowledge to build bridges to the future (discussed in section IVA); and (3) providing access to information and guidance in obtaining financial aid, information about how to afford colleges, and the true costs of different college options.

Schneider also touts the value of financial incentives, particularly for lower-income youth. Incentives can be of varying types, such as waivers of college application fees and/or college entrance exams; or blanket tuition supplements, providing students graduate, are enrolled, and successfully complete a semester.

IV. Conclusion. This issue brief attempts to summarize relevant research on strategies to increase college preparation, enrollment and success, with particular emphasis on lower-income, urban students. While the essential components of any successful strategy must include attention to academic preparation and a school-wide culture that promotes college-going, there are a number of other strategies that can contribute meaningfully to the goal of increasing college enrollment and success. In short, while the schools are essential partners in this work, there is ample room for supportive community partners to support the work of professional educators by providing contextual learning and mentoring opportunities; supporting efforts to reduce dropout rates; and participating in efforts to monitor and support students through the complex processes of college application, selection and enrollment.

And while academic concerns are paramount, they will never tell the entire story. As Carnevale states, “grades, test scores and degrees may be the best predictors of education and career success, but they are even better measures of our collective failure to provide an equal opportunity to learn.” The challenge before us now is to make college a real and compelling opportunity for all of our students, particularly those who, for far too long, have been left behind.

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