THE SCHOOL DROPOUT CRISIS

Why One-Third of All High School Students Don't Graduate
What Your Community Can Do About It

LEARNING TO FINISH

A National Initiative of the Pew Partnership for Civic Change

Founded in 1992, the Pew Partnership for Civic Change is a civic research organization that provides consulting and program support to communities, governments, foundations, and nonprofit agencies. We help our partners identify solutions that work and implement the strategies crucial to making communities thrive. Our nationally recognized LeadershipPlenty® program has helped thousands of people worldwide develop the skills they need to make their communities successful. Visit us at www.pew-partnership.org.

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Learning to Finish™

A National Coalition of Communities Working Together to Respond to the School Dropout Crisis

Suzanne W. Morse, President of the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, is author of the acclaimed book "Smart Communities"

> "Despite repeated assertions on the part of leaders in all sectors about the importance of addressing the dropout situation, the problem today is more acute than ever."

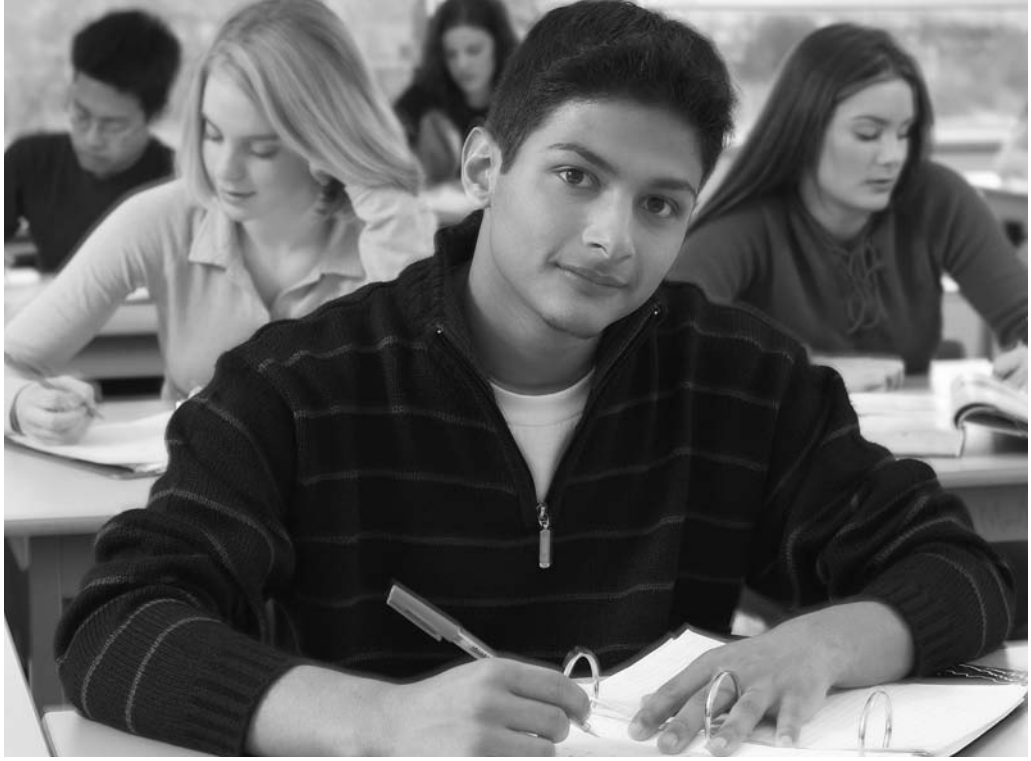
Welcome to the Learning to Finish™ Campaign, a national community-based effort established to respond to one of our most urgent public problems – the high school dropout crisis. Despite repeated assertions on the part of leaders in all sectors about the importance of addressing the dropout situation, the problem today is more acute than ever. Recent reports indicate that nationally about one-third of all students who enter high school do not graduate on time if ever. Some 2,500 students leave high school every day.

For the one million or so students who drop out each year, the prospects are dire. For the communities in which they live, the dropout rate is very bad news indeed. Each year, the toll of lost wages, taxes, and productivity that can be attributed to dropouts comes to more than $200 billion for the nation as whole. That does not take into account the fact that more than two-thirds of the inmates in state prisons are school dropouts.

This community discussion guide is the first in a series of steps in a multiyear effort led by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change to assemble a nationwide network to address the dropout problem. Since 1992, the Pew Partnership has been working with communities across the country to devise effective and sustainable solutions to some of our toughest public problems. Drawing on that experience, we have begun collaborating with communities in the new Learning to Finish campaign.

The Pew Partnership will help build this network by serving as its national voice, providing technical assistance to participating communities, managing the evaluation component, and offering a conduit for best practices – efforts that are succeeding and deserve to be replicated and expanded elsewhere. The main intent of this booklet is to provide an introduction to the dropout problem, an overview of what communities can do about it, and an invitation to join this nationwide effort.

In recent months, I have crisscrossed the country talking to community leaders who share our concern about the dropout problem and a sense that, if we work together, we can do something about it. I am struck by how many people are eager to join this effort. They want to know what has worked in other communities and how to join forces with concerned individuals and civic groups, both in their own communities and in a national effort. Working together, the partners in this national coalition are committed to helping America's teenagers complete at least a high school diploma.



> “Our goal is to bridge research and practice by providing a user-friendly guide that identifies key elements in successful community-organized efforts to deal with the dropout problem.”

As I talk to people about the Learning to Finish campaign, these are some of the questions people ask about the national network and the Pew Partnership’s role in it:

Q: What do you envision for the campaign in its next steps and over the next few years?

In its initial phase – in 2006 and 2007 – the Pew Partnership will identify communities that are ready to take this on as a community-wide concern. We will start working with pilot communities and with others who are preparing to join the effort, providing them with the information, assistance, and tools they need, as well as assessment in monitoring their progress. The effort will be guided by a Blue Ribbon panel consisting of prominent and influential people who care about this problem and are ready to lend their support and expertise to help this national effort.

By 2008, we will have engaged a broad-based group of citizens and organizations in this effort in about 25 communities. Each community will move ahead with its own initiative, corresponding to its unique interests, resources, and capabilities. As a key feature of their efforts, many communities will engage in the signature initiatives of the Learning to Finish campaign, including an emphasis on high school transition programs.

Q: How is “Learning to Finish” different from other efforts to address the dropout problem?

In recent years, many school systems, educators, and educational researchers have focused their efforts on dropout prevention. Fortunately, there are a lot of success stories as well as chastening reminders of the difficulty of this problem.

Many of these efforts are primarily school-based. In some cases, they involve restructuring the schools, providing supplemental services for at-risk students, or creating alternative programs for kids who are not well suited to a traditional academic approach. Other initiatives, such as the military-style Youth Challenge academies for dropouts that have been organized in 26 states, are autonomous programs that do not typically involve local communities.

Our emphasis is on dropout prevention as a community-wide concern and a community effort. For this reason, we have not featured the kinds of initiatives that are primarily or exclusively school-based, or those that do not permit or invite much community involvement. We salute the key role of teachers, researchers, and professional educators in dealing with the dropout problem, and we recognize the success of autonomous initiatives. However, we believe more must be done. Our distinctive emphasis is on what successful communities can do when concerned citizens, local

employers, and civic groups work together.

Accordingly, our main audience for this discussion guide is people who are concerned about the schools as citizens. Our goal is to bridge research and practice by providing a user-friendly guide that identifies key elements in successful community-organized efforts to deal with the dropout problem. Drawing on program evaluations and assessments as well as examples from dozens of communities, our intention is to offer a discussion guide which citizen groups can use to weigh alternatives strategies and decide how to work with the schools in successful partnerships that help more students complete their high school experience.

Q: Is there evidence showing that the kinds of initiatives mentioned here reduce the dropout rate?

Like others who have consulted the research on dropout prevention and evaluations of the impact of various programs, we are well aware that it is a daunting challenge. There are deep-seated reasons why dropout prevention programs do not necessarily achieve the desired results. Chief among these obstacles is the fact that at-risk students are disproportionately from low-income and minority families. According to Paul Barton in an ETS report, "A combination of three factors – socioeconomic characteristics, number of parents living in the home, and a history of changing schools frequently – are associated with 58 percent of the variation in completion rates among states." Also, dealing with teenagers who, in many cases, are repeatedly truant, have low test scores, fall behind grade level, and have a history of chronic misbehavior is a formidable challenge. Researchers have shown convincingly that there is no single dropout prevention strategy that provides a one-size-fits-all formula for success. We must look in and outside of the schools. Organizations like Communities in Schools and others have seen this first hand.

While there is no foolproof prescription, much is known about the kinds of efforts that make a difference and key elements of successful dropout prevention programs. Many of the initiatives undertaken in specific communities have been ingenious and effective. They deserve to be widely adapted and replicated. This community discussion guide features dozens of such examples. It also points to sources and resources that provide more information and detailed descriptions. Throughout this guide, we have drawn on the work of educational researchers to describe characteristics of programs that are both promising and effective.

Q: What are the main values that motivate people to take action about the dropout crisis?

There are several shared convictions among those of us who are coming together in the Learning to Finish campaign. For starters, we are convinced that dropout rates at their current level are by no means inevitable. We believe that every teenager who drops out represents not just an individual failure to achieve what is widely regarded as the minimum educational credential but also a community failure. A dropout number of roughly 1 million per year is a national disgrace and a call to action.

In our individual communities and in this nationwide network, we start with the conviction that losing one out of three high schools students is unacceptable – and that there is much we can do about it. The Learning to Finish campaign begins with a shared belief that much more can and should be done for at-risk young people, that this needs to be a priority concern, and that much of what needs to be done can be done best by community partnerships, working with the schools.

Keeping kids in school can change the future of our communities – and it is a shared problem that we must all do something about.

For more information about the Learning to Finish campaign, supporting research, and ways to get involved, go to www.learningtofinish.org or contact us at mail@pew-partnership.org.

Suzanne W. Morse
President, Pew Partnership for Civic Change
Founder, Learning to Finish™

INTRODUCTION

The Dropout Epidemic

Imagine a nationwide epidemic so severe that it strikes one in three teenagers and so malignant that few ever recover from it. The epidemic results in cascading costs for communities and for the nation as a whole—an estimated $200 to $300 billion to cover the cost of those struck by this affliction each year. If such an epidemic existed, you would assume it would be front-page news, a top-of-the-agenda item for public action.

Such an epidemic already exists. Although it is apparent in most communities, it is, in the words of *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert, "an under-recognized, underreported crisis in American life." The problem is that large numbers of students drop out before finishing high school, with devastating consequences for them personally and for their communities.

A recent report from the Educational Testing Service (ETS) entitled *One-Third of a Nation* is one in a series of sobering assessments which underline the extent of the problem. For the nation as a whole, only about two-thirds of all students who enter 9th grade graduate with a regular diploma four years later. Among poor, black, and Latino youngsters, the likelihood that they will graduate is even smaller. In 2004, according to a report co-authored by the Urban Institute and the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, only 50 percent of black students, 51 percent of Native Americans, and 53 percent of Hispanic students graduated from high school. Among African-American, Hispanic, and Native American males, the rates are even lower.

The public schools are intended as a ladder of opportunity, a way of gaining the knowledge needed to make one's way in a society that doesn't have much to offer those who are uneducated and unskilled. Unlike the situation that existed until several decades ago, when uneducated but energetic young adults could

work their way up to decent jobs and satisfying lives, almost all businesses today need workers with skills that presume at least a high school diploma. Individuals without a high school diploma aren't regarded as prime recruits for the US military, and they typically don't qualify even for low-wage positions in fast-food restaurants.

In the words of educational researchers Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters, "From Benton Harbor to Los Angeles, from Akron to San Antonio, from Chicago's south side to rural North Carolina, close to half of the students in these communities do not graduate from high school, let alone leave high school prepared to fully participate in civic life. It is no coincidence that these locales are gripped by high rates of unemployment, crime, ill health, and chronic despair. For many people in these and other areas, the only real and lasting pipeline out of poverty in modern America, a solid high school education followed by postsecondary schooling, is cracked and leaking."

There is some dispute among educational researchers about the extent of the problem and whether it is getting worse. To determine precisely how many students graduate, it would be necessary to assign lifetime ID numbers to permit researchers to track students, follow them when they move, and determine how many actually complete a diploma. Since that has not been done, no assessment of the dropout problem is entirely accurate, and there are significant differences depending on who you ask. By some indications, graduation rates have not changed much in recent years.

Most recent reports, however, tell a different story. Whether you consult research that examines schools with "weak promoting power" or overall assessments such as the ETS report, many reports show that the problem is worse than it was generally recognized to be, and that the situation has deteriorated in recent years. It appears that high school completion rates have declined in most states since 1990. Even at a time when there has been sustained attention to improving school performance and accountability, remarks Paul Barton, author of the ETS report, "this is a story of losing ground."

For all the good intentions behind a much-discussed federal education act called "No Child Left Behind," the fact is that many students in the United States are still left behind and never catch up. Part of the reason we continue to lose ground is that the dropout problem attracts nowhere near the attention it deserves. Roughly one million American teenagers walk away from high school each year before they graduate, setting out on a path that for most of them is a dead end.

Selective Epidemic

While dropouts are a problem almost everywhere, even in communities that pride themselves on having a high percentage of college-bound kids,

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> “Because of the loss of their efforts in the labor force, the loss of their taxes, plus the burden of paying for public assistance and prisons, every dropout represents a costly public liability.”

this epidemic does not affect all communities equally. Completion rates vary from one state to another, from a high of 88 percent to a low of 48 percent as a state-wide average. The Midwestern states and the Northeast have the highest graduation rates, while the dropout rate is highest in the South.

Males drop out somewhat more often than females, but gender differences are not very large. Males and females do, however, tend to give different reasons for dropping out. Young women most often drop out due to pregnancy and marriage, as well as academic difficulties. Young men more often drop out because of behavioral problems or because they are seeking employment.

The pattern of school dropouts – like many social problems – tends to reflect the economic and racial make-up of communities. Graduation rates for white and Asian students are higher than the national average, with completion rates for the two groups at 75 and 77 percent respectively. In their own right, these statistics are troubling since they show that even among the most advantaged groups, one in four students drops out.

The dropout problem is most serious among blacks, Hispanics, and American-Indian students, barely half of whom graduate from high school. In Bob Herbert’s words, “Far from preparing kids for college, big-city high schools in neighborhoods with large numbers of poor, black, or Latino youngsters are just hemorrhaging students. The kids are vanishing into a wilderness of ignorance.”

Some researchers use the phrase “weak promoting power” to describe high schools with a severe dropout problem – the 2,000 or so schools where fewer than 6 in 10 students graduate. These schools are more vividly and accurately characterized as “dropout factories,” to use Robert Balfanz’s phrase. Representing about one-fifth of all high schools nationally, these schools – typically located in large cities, in nearly every state – are where the dropout problem exists in its most concentrated form. Students who enter many of these schools – attended by nearly half of the country’s African-American students and 40 percent of its Latino students – are more likely to drop out than they are to receive a diploma.

Risks and Rewards

Reports about the nation’s schools often refer to “at risk” kids who are on the verge of dropping out. When you look at what happens to those who drop out, you realize how real the risk is –

both in the years immediately after they leave school and as they get older. The headline on dozens of studies of teenagers who leave high school is that dropouts have only a slim chance of succeeding, earning a decent wage, or achieving a stable and productive life.

Even dropouts who manage to get work are on a downhill slide. Because few job openings exist for those who don't have a high school diploma, the economic prospects for dropouts are much bleaker than they were several decades ago. Most are unable to get jobs that pay enough to keep them out of poverty. They earn about $150 a week less, on average, compared to high school graduates, and are three times more likely to live in poverty.

That is more than a short-term problem. Years after they leave school, dropouts are far more likely to be stuck in low-wage jobs or chronically unemployed. One study that looked at 20- to 24-year olds who had not completed high school – people who are in the early marriage and childbearing years – found that fewer than 6 in 10 are employed.

With no good prospect for decent paying work, it is not surprising that dropouts are far more likely – compared to those who finish high school – to be unmarried or divorced, and more likely to be on public assistance. They are also far more likely to end up on the wrong side of the law. Drawing on Department of Justice data, the author of a 2003 study found that more than two-thirds of all inmates are dropouts, and that almost half of all African-American men who drop out of high school have a prison record by the time they are in their early 30s.

If you think dropping out is mainly an individual choice and that those who left school are paying a personal price for a bad decision, think about the consequences for the community. Because of the loss of their efforts in the labor force, the loss of their taxes, plus the burden of paying for public assistance and prisons, every dropout represents a costly public liability. At a recent conference at Columbia University's Teacher's College, educational researchers gathered to compare studies of the public impact of the dropout problem. They noted that dropouts comprise nearly half of the heads of households on welfare, and that each year's new class of dropouts will cost taxpayers more than $200 billion over the course of their lifetimes in lost earnings and tax revenues, not to mention the cost of the social services they require.

Reasons for Leaving

Considering the dire personal consequences of leaving school, you might wonder why so many teenagers make this fateful decision. Several years ago, researchers who prepared the National Education Longitudinal Study asked former students why they dropped out. The answers weren't surprising. Many teenagers said they didn't like school. They were failing many of their courses. They couldn't get along with their teachers. Compared to those who gave school-related answers, about half as many gave family-related reasons: they had become a parent or were

"If you think dropping out is mainly an individual choice and that those who left school are paying a personal price for a bad decision, think about the consequences for the community."

The Cost of Dropping Out

For individuals

- Seventy-four percent of dropouts say that they would stay in school if they had a chance to do it all over again.
- The average high school dropout makes 27 percent less income per year than the average high school graduate. Over a lifetime, this adds up to over a quarter-million dollars in reduced personal capital.
- High school dropouts live a decade less than graduates and are disproportionately affected by heart disease, diabetes, and obesity.

For communities

- The children of dropouts are more likely to drop out and to live in poverty.
- A one percent reduction in dropout rates would reduce the number of crimes by 100,000 annually. Increasing graduation rates by 10 percent would correlate with a 20 percent reduction in murder and assault rates.
- The lower wages of dropouts mean $36 billion dollars in state and local funding is lost each year.

For the nation

- Nearly 80 percent of dropouts depend on the government for health care assistance.
- Lower annual earnings of dropouts cost the federal government an estimated $158 billion or more in lost revenue each year.
- Each youth who drops out and enters a life of drugs and crime costs the nation between $1.7-2.3 million dollars in crime control and health expenditures.

Sources: Bridgeland, et al. 2006. "The Silent Epidemic." Civic Enterprises, Washington, D.C.; Moretti, 2005. "Does Education Reduce Participation in Criminal Activities?" and Muenning, 2005; "Health Returns to Education Interventions." Papers presented at Symposium on the Social Costs of Inadequate Education, Columbia University, New York, NY. Day and Newburger, 2002. "The Pig Payoff: Educational Attainment and Estimates of Work-Life Earnings." Current Population Reports P23-210, US. Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C.

> “Studies show that dropping out is literally an epidemic and it is highly contagious.”

planning to get married. Some said they had to take a job to support their families.

Whatever reasons individuals give for leaving, dropping out is often not so much a decision as it is a long process, the end of a downward spiral that includes personal factors, a history of low performance, an inclination not to think about long-term consequences of leaving school and, in many cases, a misplaced faith that they can beat the odds.

Having family members or friends who encourage you to stay in school makes a difference. However, for many students who are on the verge of leaving school, most of their peers have already dropped out. Studies show that, in this respect, dropping out is literally an epidemic and it is highly contagious. When teenagers have siblings or friends who have dropped out, it is far more likely that they will drop out too.

Debate has long raged about who is to blame for high dropout rates. The schools get much of the blame. Most teachers readily admit that schools are poorly equipped to respond to kids who have trouble with their classes and chafe at the restrictions school imposes. Some measures taken to improve educational achievement by raising standards have created a perverse incentive for schools to push out students who are struggling. In the words of Debra Duardo, public services coordinator for a local district in the Los Angeles school system, “No school really wants to have these children who bring their test scores down, and who bring their attendance rates down.”

What Can Be Done?

There is nothing preordained or unavoidable about the dropout situation. But what needs to happen to convince high school students to stay until they graduate? Across the country, many people have started to ask what it would take to reverse this trend, where we should start, what looks promising.

Many things might be done: The schools could offer intensive instructional programs to

struggling students. Teaching staffs could be beefed up to provide more personal attention to those in trouble. The school-to-work connection could be strengthened. More attention could be paid to the crucial transition from eighth grade to high school, one of the main points at which at-risk kids get disconnected from the schools they are attending.

Looking around at what is already happening, there are clues about what works and what doesn't. A recent study of the Chicago schools found fairly conclusively that the dropout problem in low-performing schools cannot be solved by encouraging teachers and students to put more effort into existing practices in traditional public high schools. What's necessary is nothing less than radically reinventing the most dropout-prone schools, while becoming more proactive everywhere else in identifying potential dropouts and giving them the help they need.

In many cities, substantial resources are being devoted to replacing large, comprehensive high schools with smaller facilities – typically designed for 300 or fewer students – that are better able to provide personalized attention and customized instruction.

Various studies suggest that what parents do – or fail to do – in monitoring the activities of their high school age kids makes a difference. To no one's surprise, when parents are supportive and involved in the educational experience, their kids are less likely to drop out.

Students who are likely to drop out are not hard to identify. School attendance patterns, chronic behavior problems, and low or failing grades are distress signals that are hard to ignore. The hard part is not identifying students who are about to slide into failure, or even thinking of ways to help them, but making the commitment to provide additional services and support to high-risk teenagers who need special assistance.

The question is whether communities across the United States are prepared to regard school dropouts as an urgent public problem, and whether we are willing to invest the resources necessary to make the educational experience a success for a far larger percentage of the nation's teenagers.

In 1990, President George H. W. Bush and the nation's governors listed six priority goals for the schools over the next decade. One of them was to raise the high school completion rate to at least 90 percent by the year 2000. What happened over the next few years, despite that proclamation of good intentions and public concern, was just the opposite. In the absence of a systematic plan and the commitment of additional resources, the dropout problem has gotten worse.

It is a fundamental challenge, and not just in communities where dropout rates are highest. "Until the nation's dropout factories are reformed or replaced," in the words of Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters, "the promise of the American high school as an engine of economic growth and social transformation will not be met… These high schools act as a wedge that is driving the country further apart. Transforming the high schools that produce the majority of the nation's dropouts is a daunting challenge that current reform efforts have not even begun to confront."

In part, dealing with the dropout crisis is a matter of allocating sufficient resources and recognizing what is at stake when students drop out. As educational researcher Gary Orfield notes, "It is depressing to realize that many of the 'dropout factories' that send hundreds of students off a figurative cliff each year don't have as much money to spend on dropout intervention as it will cost to keep even one of their dropouts in prison for a year."

It is also, as Orfield points out, a matter of how we choose to regard high school dropouts. "If we start thinking about students who drop out as people who have potential instead of as threats to society, we will have to recognize the challenges they are facing and the incredible losses sustained in communities where most of these people have no future. If we are to benefit from their talents, we must help them finish school and give them a chance to succeed as adults in this society."

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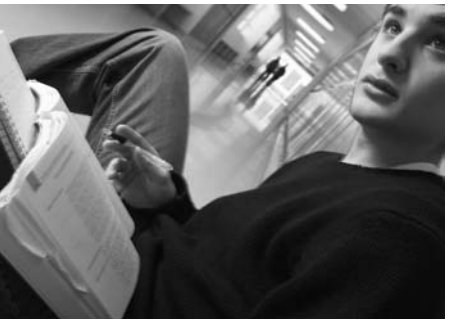
Coming Together to Deal with the Dropout Problem

Shelbyville, Indiana, a community of 18,000 people on the outskirts of Indianapolis, is an ordinary-looking town with a problem that many American communities share. At Shelbyville High School's spring 2006 commencement ceremony, 197 students marched in the graduation parade. That is a lot fewer students than the 315 freshmen who started with the same class four years earlier. Some of the 118 teenagers who started with the class of '06 moved. But many dropped out. They are a reminder that the dropout problem is not confined to a few inner-city schools. Across the United States, dropouts are a problem almost everywhere, and a serious problem in hundreds of communities. For all of the bright hopes and aspirations voiced in high school graduation ceremonies each spring, few bother to notice the meager options and bleak future facing teenagers who make the fateful decision to leave school before they graduate.



ROB AMBERG

What is remarkable about Shelbyville, and the reason this town was featured in a recent *Time* magazine cover story, is that community members and school administrators recognized the severity of the problem and came together to make dropout-prevention a priority concern. This is a story of a community coming together to deal with the dropout problem and beginning to see progress as a result of their efforts.

Like most effective dropout-prevention efforts, Shelbyville's strategy consists of a package of initiatives. It includes carrot-and-stick measures to convince kids not to drop out, agreements with local employers not to tempt high school kids with jobs until they graduate, the creation of an alternative high school for kids with different learning styles and needs, and other efforts. More impressive than any single aspect of Shelbyville's efforts is the energy and sustained attention that have gone into crafting a comprehensive community-wide strategy.

Communities Taking the Lead

Shelbyville's initiative is a notable example of what needs to happen in many communities nationwide. Educational researchers have examined the causes and effects of the dropout problem in hundreds of studies. Think tanks and foundations have produced dozens of reports on the topic. Leaders and elected officials have repeatedly underscored the seriousness of the problem and the need to commit additional resources to combat it. But little is likely to change until communities all across the country make dropout prevention a priority concern and decide to tackle it themselves. We cannot wait for more money – we must use all the resources at hand.

Much is known about what makes a difference in helping kids complete their high school education. The point is to draw on successful interventions and best practices and use them as a starting point in dozens of communities that have decided to make dropout prevention a priority. The Learning to Finish campaign starts with the conviction that much can be done about this problem, and that the community's role is a key element in coming to grips with it.

Teachers and other professional educators have a frontline responsibility for guiding the educational process and helping students succeed. But it is a mistake and a missed opportunity to assume that they can deal with it by themselves. The key is not only a shared belief that every student is capable of learning, but also the

recognition that a partnership between schools and the community is a necessary element in attaining this goal.

Top-of-the-Agenda Concern

Across the country, many people are beginning to see why the high school dropout problem must be considered a top-of-the-agenda concern. Citizens are joining teachers and school administrators, local employers, civic organizations, social service agencies, news media, community foundations, and elected officials to do something about it.

Consider, for example, what has happened in Tukwila, Washington, where since the early 1990s the school district has been involved in an active collaboration involving schools, family, and the community as whole, including social service providers, community agencies, nonprofits, and state and federal agencies. In the course of building this partnership, the district has enhanced student achievement and raised the completion rate by offering supplemental services such as mentoring, tutoring programs, and internships. It has also linked students with special needs to social service agencies. A longitudinal study that tracked the effects of this effort found that it made a significant difference in helping students successfully complete their high school course of study.

Although efforts to assist at-risk kids in Phoenix, Arizona, have taken a different form, the bottom line is much the same regarding the importance of a broad effort involving the whole community. Phoenix, the largest city in a state that has in recent years had one of the worst dropout rates in the country, has made serious efforts to deal with it. The Bostrom Alternative Center – which features personal attention to students, including anger management and individual tutoring – is a showcase of the Phoenix Union School District's efforts to retain students. Another impressive example of Phoenix's focus on the dropout problem is the Suns-Diamondbacks Education Academy, which serves about 100 at-risk students. The creation of the facility was made possible by a series of private sector donations from the Honeywell Corporation, the Arizona Diamondbacks, and the Phoenix Suns, among other sponsors.

As a result of these efforts, the 23,000-student Phoenix Union school district has trimmed its dropout rate by roughly half in recent years – an impressive example of what a coordinated effort can achieve. "What you see in Phoenix Union," says Tom Collins, a spokesman for the Arizona Department of Education, "is a district that is taking a broader approach by empowering everybody – from teachers and staff members to the whole community – to get involved in these kids' lives."

> "Little is likely to change until communities across the country make dropout prevention a priority and decide to tackle it themselves."

ROB AMBERG

Community Problem-Solving

The focus of dropout-prevention efforts varies from one place to another, reflecting the unique mix of local concerns, resources, and energies. However, there is a common element in communities that are coming to grips with the dropout problem, a series of recognitions about how to deal with difficult problems:

"It's our problem and it deserves to be a priority concern."

Communities that work together have a shared awareness of the seriousness of this issue, a conviction that it is their problem, and that it is a serious matter both for individuals who drop out and for the community as a whole.

"We have to do something about this as a community."

Communities that work together start with a shared responsibility for doing something about it. Teachers and educational officials can deal with this more effectively if the schools and the community work in tandem.

"What we do can make a difference, and we have a strategy that makes sense."

Communities that work together have a shared conviction that specific actions will make a difference in helping kids complete high school and move into productive roles in the community. They are committed to a strategy consisting of key elements that are the building blocks of their efforts.

"We have a unique set of resources to help make our initiative a success."

Communities that work together have a talent for identifying and drawing upon diverse resources, public and private, and the energies of a variety of community groups, social service agencies, news media, and community foundations.

"We're prepared to periodically ask how we are doing, and we plan to celebrate our success."

Communities that work together periodically assess their efforts and share the results community-wide. They celebrate their successes. And they regularly recalibrate their efforts as they plan next steps in their ongoing efforts to combat the dropout problem.

"The Learning to Finish campaign starts with the conviction that much can be done about the dropout problem, and that the community's role is a key element in coming to grips with it."

Key Elements

Efforts to deal with the dropout problem take many different forms. Some focus on bolstering academic skills of low-achieving students. Others address the behavioral problems of troubled teenagers, or they strengthen the nonacademic track. Dropout prevention efforts in some places provide carrots and sticks to persuade kids not to drop out, while others try to convince teenagers who have dropped out to come back. That's just the beginning of a long list of interventions intended to reduce the dropout problem.

However, several key elements appear repeatedly in successful efforts to reduce dropout rates. Program evaluations and educational research provide clues about why these elements are important in helping teenagers succeed in high school and why they help deter would-be dropouts. These key elements are the building blocks featured in the Learning to Finish campaign. The following pages describe what community groups can do, with these key elements in mind, to make dropout-prevention efforts a success.

The Learning to Finish campaign is a catalyst and resource for a nationwide network of local and national groups joining together to come to grips with the dropout problem. When communities join this nationwide effort, they share tools, resources, and the support of a national network. Drawing on these key elements and using the resources and tools provided by the Pew Partnership, they create dropout-prevention strategies tailored to the unique needs, assets, and energies of their community.