

Unfulfilled Promise:

The Dimensions and Characteristics of
Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 2000–2005

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ruth Curran Neild, Ph.D.

Robert Balfanz, Ph.D.

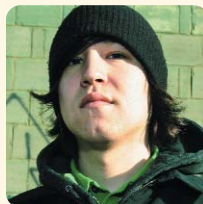
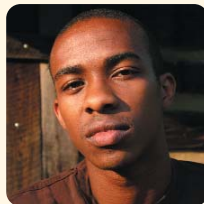
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A young person in the United States who embarks on adulthood without a high school diploma faces a grim economic future: an annual income that is likely to be insufficient to support a family, a greater likelihood of long stretches of unemployment, and restricted opportunities for occupational advancement. Cities with large percentages of youth who lack high school diplomas suffer as well: they can take advantage of fewer economic development opportunities, garner less tax revenue, and experience higher social service costs, more crime, less civic participation, and high levels of concentrated and inter-generational poverty. A city of the 21st century cannot prosper when large numbers of its young people lack this basic academic credential.

Despite the serious individual and collective costs that result when youth fail to complete high school, until now we have not had a clear picture of how many students in the Philadelphia public schools earn their high school diplomas and how many drop out of school. Data are critical for assessing the numbers of dropouts and their characteristics, and ultimately for determining whether we are succeeding in our efforts to retain students in school and to reconnect dropouts with educational opportunities.

This Study

This report uses a unique set of data obtained from the Kids Integrated Data-System (KIDS), which is housed at the University of Pennsylvania's Cartographic-Modeling Laboratory. The KIDS system merges individual-level data on young people from the School District of Philadelphia and the city's social service agencies, including the Department of Public Health, the Department of Human Services, and the Office of Emergency Shelter and Services. The resulting deidentified data allow us to follow cohorts of students over multiple years, examining their educational outcomes as well as the predictors of graduation and dropout.



This report addresses three central sets of questions:

- How many students in grades 6 through 12 drop out of Philadelphia's public schools in a single year? What are the key characteristics of these students, including their age, grade, race/ethnicity, gender, type of school attended, and neighborhood of residence?
- What percentage of 9th graders graduates within four years, five years, or six years of starting high school? What has been the trend in these cohort graduation rates over the past 5 years? What are the trends in cohort graduation rates for males and females and for students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds?
- Which student characteristics, knowable or potentially knowable by school personnel and agency staff, can identify students as being at high risk of dropping out of high school?

Findings

Dropout During a Single School Year: 2003–2004

- During the 2003–2004 school year, approximately 6% of the students in grades 6–12 in the city's public schools (including charter schools) dropped out of school. An additional 4% of students in grades 6–12 were technically enrolled but were absent from school more than half the time; we call these students “near-dropouts.” In all, over 13,000 students became dropouts or near-dropouts during 2003–2004.
- Almost two-thirds of the students who dropped out of school in 2003–2004 were in grade 10 or lower; about one-third were in grade 9 or lower. However, there is no grade at which high school students are immune to dropping out: over one-third of the students who dropped out were in 11th or 12th grade. Despite being considerably younger than the legal school-leaving age, more than 500 students in grades 6–8 were officially listed as having dropped out of school.
- During 2003–2004, 20% of the Latino students at the city's publicly supported high schools were either dropouts or near-dropouts, as were 18% of African American students, 15% of White students, and 12% of Asian students. Males were more likely to be dropouts or near-dropouts than females. Despite differences in severity, high school dropout in Philadelphia is a serious problem in each of the above racial/ethnic groups, and it is a problem for both males and females.

Trends in Cohort Graduation Rates

- For cohorts of first-time freshmen who form the Classes of 2000 through 2005, the four-year (“on-time”) graduation rates range from 45% to 52%. For the four cohorts for which we have six-year graduation data, the percentage of students earning a high school diploma ranges from 54% to 58%. If we include all of the dropouts from the Classes of 2000 through 2005, about 30,000 students who began 9th grade in Philadelphia's public high schools left without earning a diploma.
- In the six cohorts for which we have data, not a single racial or ethnic group had an on-time graduation rate greater than 71%. Consistent with the annual dropout rate for 2003–2004, Asian students were most likely to graduate on time, followed by Whites, African Americans, and Latinos.
- For the Classes of 2000 through 2003, only about 40% of Latino males earned a high school diploma within six years; only about half of African American and White males finished high school; and about 65% of Asian males graduated. Among females, just over half of Latino females graduated, about 65% of African Americans and Whites graduated, and 75% of Asians earned a diploma.

Predictors of Dropping Out

- Two 8th grade factors gave students at least a 75% probability of dropping out of school: 1) attending school less than 80% of the time in 8th grade (that is, missing at least 5 weeks of school), and 2) receiving a failing final grade in mathematics and/or English during 8th grade. Of those 8th graders who attended school less than 80% of the time, 78% became high school dropouts. Of those 8th graders who failed mathematics and/or English, 77% dropped out of high school. Importantly, gender, race, age, and test scores did not have the strong predictive power of attendance and course failure.
- A second group of dropouts, who were not classified as at-risk in 8th grade according to our definition, were at-risk 9th graders. These students 1) attended less than 70% of the time during 9th grade, and/or 2) earned fewer than 2 credits during 9th grade, and/or 3) were not promoted to 10th grade on time. A ninth grader with just one of these characteristics (who was not at-risk in 8th grade) had at least a 75% probability of dropping out of school.
- About half of the dropouts in the city's public schools can be identified in 8th grade, prior to their entrance to high school. Eighty percent of the students who dropped out of school were either at-risk 8th graders or at-risk 9th graders.



Implications for Policy

- The probability of dropping out decreases dramatically for students who arrive at 10th grade on time after entering high school. It is more difficult to predict who will drop out among upper-grades students, suggesting that the factors that precipitate later dropout may be more personal and idiosyncratic than those affecting dropout in earlier grades.
- Agency-involved students had especially high rates of high school dropout. Fully 90% of the students who had a juvenile justice placement during their high school years ultimately dropped out. About 70% of the students who had a substantiated case of abuse or neglect during the high school years, had a foster care placement, or who gave birth within four years of starting high school, became out-of-school youth.
- A broad-based coalition needs to be mobilized to meet the challenge of high school dropout in Philadelphia. This coalition needs to be able to sustain itself for the long term. Because the overwhelming proximal cause of dropping out in Philadelphia is failing in school and student disengagement, the public schools of Philadelphia must be the locus of the campaign to end the dropout crisis. But the school system alone cannot be expected to solve this problem. Getting adolescents to come to school and to work hard to succeed will require a substantial effort from the community, as well as families.
- Along with continual improvements at the elementary school level and an expansion of early childhood education, it is necessary to have an integrated and coordinated effort to reform education in grades 6–12. During the onset of adolescence, substantial numbers of students begin to disengage from school, stop attending school regularly, and fail their courses. Because students who are at highest risk of dropping out are concentrated in the highest poverty middle grade and high schools, these schools will require additional reforms, supports, and resources beyond system-wide efforts.
- Even the most effective school-based reforms will not prevent all students from dropping out of school. About 20% of Philadelphia's students drop out late in high school, when they are relatively close to obtaining their diploma. Moreover, it is more difficult to predict which students in the 11th or 12th grade are likely to drop out and, as a result, it is more difficult to target them with needed support. An effective system of credit recovery, second chance schools, and alternative means of securing a high school diploma will be required.
- The agencies that provide social services to the city's youth need to be deeply involved in the effort to stop the dropout crisis in Philadelphia. Currently the adolescents who are in their care drop out in alarming numbers. For high-school students who have been abused and neglected, are in foster care, or receive an out-of-home placement in the juvenile justice system, the probability of dropping out is 75% or even higher. Similarly, two out of three females who give birth within four years of the start of high school drop out. Social service agencies will need to determine how the sources they have at their disposal can be most effectively marshaled to help ensure that adolescents in their charge graduate from high school.

About the Authors

Dr. Ruth Curran Neildis is a Research Scientist at the Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University. During the academic year when this research was conducted (2005–2006), she was an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education

Dr. Robert Balfanz is a Principal Research Scientist at the Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University.



The full report can be downloaded at: www.projectUturn.net