

Prepared Testimony of Courtney Collins-Shapiro
Director of the School District's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation
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Good afternoon Councilwoman Blackwell and Members of the committee on Education. My name is Courtney Collins-Shapiro and I am the Director of the School District's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation. I appreciate the opportunity to speak before you today to discuss some of the specific ways the School District is creating a host of options to help out of school youth and those most at risk of dropping out earn a high school diploma.

You heard Mr. Vallas speak earlier about the dire need for increased slots in prevention programs that work to help drop outs return to school and graduate. I would like to briefly highlight the **five (5) most promising new programs** the District has created or retooled in the past 18 months to address the needs of this group of promising youth:

- **Accelerated High Schools** –Accelerated high schools focus on meeting students where they are academically, remediating literacy and math deficiencies, and moving students through the coursework required for graduation at an accelerated pace. These schools focus on high school drop outs ages 16-21 who are at least one full year behind in school. This year, 775 students from all sections of the city are enrolled in four accelerated high schools. Right now, we have more than 800 students on voluntary waiting lists for these schools and we get more than 20 phone calls every day from students and parents looking to get into an accelerated high school. *With new funding earmarked for accelerated school expansion, the members of the Youth Transitions Collaborative believe we could fill 2,000 seats in these schools within 30 days of opening. This is the most significant thing we can do to get drop outs back into school and on the path to success.*
- **Educational Options Program:** Today we are serving 2,000 youth and adults ages 17-65 in this afternoon and evening program, all with a goal to earn a high school diploma. Last year, 800 students graduated through EOP. Low literacy remains a key issue for students in this program and we are currently working with the Center for Literacy and the William Penn Foundation to create "literacy hubs" that infuse new resources at these sites. This program operates in 10 different areas of the city and the District is currently looking to find funding to increase seats in this program for drop outs who only need a few classes to earn their diploma.
- **Gateway to College:** This new program offers dropouts a chance to earn both a high school diploma and an associate's degree simultaneously. The program is funded primarily by the District, with support of the Gates Foundation and Community College of Philadelphia. Philadelphia is one of only 7 cities nationwide chosen to start a Gateway program, serving an example of one of many ways the national dropout prevention community is recognizing our city's ability to serve as a leader on this issue and their willingness to invest in our youth. We have enrolled 100 former high school dropouts so far this academic year and our goal is to have more than 400 Philadelphia youth actively re-enrolled in school year-round in the Gateway program by summer 2009.

In all three of the above programs, we know the potential applicant pool to be much larger than the current combined program capacity of 2,800 seats. Using Dr. Neild's research and current School District data, the current student pool includes the roughly 8,200 students who drop out each year and the 7,100 students ages 16-19 who are enrolled right now in high schools citywide, but who are overage for their grade and at least one full year behind in credits needed to graduate. These students are the next class of dropouts if we do not act now to help them find ways to be successful.

The remaining two strategies are for students who are currently on the verge of dropping out:

- **Student Success Centers:** With help from the William Penn Foundation, the District created these one-stop centers inside 8 high schools with some of the highest dropout rates in the city. By leveraging resources and staff from the District and other partner agencies, we have been able to provide comprehensive college, career, academic and social support services for all students within these schools. These Centers are a logical hub for dropout prevention services and are easily replicable in accelerated and other neighborhood high schools with additional resources. For students who are considering dropping out, the promise of assistance with college preparation, a trained adult to help them address personal problems, and linkages to paid employment through internships are strong incentives to stay in school. Included in the Youth Transitions Collaborative request for additional funding to support internships for youth, is the funding to bolster the workforce development aspects of this model and to connect the students most at risk of dropping out directly to the workforce. This effort will support the Success Center model already in place, expand similar student employment models to our Accelerated High Schools. ***I strongly urge Council to consider funding a portion of the citywide youth internship and workforce development program that is linked to accelerated and neighborhood schools as a significant way to attract drop outs and at risk youth back to school.***
- **Dropout Prevention Specialists:** Social workers with a background working with at-risk teens began working in 7 neighborhood high schools with high dropout rates just this month. These specialists will target the students most at risk of dropping out in these schools with a focus on increasing student attendance and academic performance. In addition, they will be charged with creating a support network of caring adults in the building for each youth to help increase each student's chances of on-time graduation. A similar program in Boston is showing promising early results in helping students return to school, stay in school, and connect to the services many students need outside of school in order to remove barriers to participating in education. ***I am joining other members of the collaborative in asking Council to consider our request to provide funds to put at least one Dropout Prevention Specialist in every neighborhood high school to stem the tide of dropping out as soon as possible.***

In closing, I would like to share that Philadelphia is being viewed as one of the leading cities nationally on the issue of dropout prevention and recovery. The District and the members of the Youth Transitions Collaborative are doing everything we can within our limited fiscal means to create new, viable educational pathways for this important group of youth. We are now asking the City to join us by providing some of the fiscal

resources needed to turn the dropout problem around and to really become the national leader on this issue. These youth live in every councilmatic district and they are out there in our communities asking for more educational pathways to success. ***Tangible things like more slots in accelerated schools, dropout prevention specialists in neighborhood high schools, and internships for at risk youth are immediate ways the City can invest in its future and make an immediate impact on the lives of thousands of young Philadelphians.***

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this morning regarding this important issue.