

Testimony to City Council - Ruth Curran Neild

February 6, 2007

Good morning. My name is Ruth Curran Neild. I am a Research Scientist at Johns Hopkins University and an Assistant Professor on leave at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. I am one of the authors of *Unfulfilled Promise*, a report on dropouts in Philadelphia released by the Philadelphia Youth Network in October.

I would like to tell you about some of the highlights of this research. We used data from the KIDS data infrastructure, which merges information on students' school records and agency involvement and creates de-identified data sets that preserve students' confidentiality. These data have allowed us to learn new things about dropouts – things that we have never known before in Philadelphia because it has been difficult to share data between agencies.

We found that during a single school year about 10% of the students in grades 6 through 12 either become official dropouts, or they attend so infrequently – that is, less than half the time – that even though they are technically enrolled, they are for all practical purposes dropouts. Some of these students return to school in a subsequent year, but most do not. In none of the 6 cohorts that we examined did we find that more than 60% of the freshmen who started high school together had graduated 6 years later. Over 6 cohorts, from 2000 to 2005, about 30,000 of Philadelphia's youth dropped out of high school and never returned.

We found that while there are differences in the rate of dropout among Philadelphia's neighborhoods and among council districts, high school dropout affects every neighborhood and every council district. It also affects every ethnic group in the city, and it affects both males and females. In many cases, the similarities are more striking than the differences.

Contrary to what many people might have thought, most high school dropouts were not in foster care during high school, did not have a substantiated case of abuse or neglect, did not receive the juvenile justice system's most severe sanction (that is, an out-of-home placement), and did not give birth to a baby within 4 years of starting high school. They may have had many struggles and difficulties in their lives, but as a group they would not rank as the city's most severely troubled and difficult-to-reach youth. For example:

- Only 3% of dropouts had a substantiated case of abuse or neglect in high school
- 7% of the dropouts had a foster care placement during high school
- 23% of the male dropouts had an out-of-home juvenile justice placement during high school
- 33% of the female dropouts gave birth within 4 years of starting high school.

While those who are agency-involved are not the majority of high school dropouts, there are some who were under the care or supervision of city agencies like the Department of Human Services while they were in high school. We found that dropout rates for these students were extremely high:

- Of those who had a case of substantiated abuse or neglect during high school, 70% dropped out.
- Of those with a foster care placement, 75% dropped out.
- Of those with a juvenile justice placement, 90% dropped out.
- Of those who gave birth within 4 years of starting high school, 68% dropped out.

I want to be clear that we are NOT saying that being involved with an agency CAUSED high school dropout. Young people who become involved with city agencies often already have many characteristics that put them at high risk of dropping out of school. What the data do tell us, however, is that the current level of support being offered to these students is not sufficient to allow them to earn a basic academic credential that they will need for economic survival.

We also found that about half of dropouts – agency-involved or not – were giving strong signals of their path to dropping out prior to entering high school. More than half of the students who eventually dropped out had earned a failing grade in either math or English and/or had attended school less than 80% of the time when they were in 8th grade. An additional 30% of the eventual dropouts did not fail math or English in 8th grade, and they attended school more than 80% of the time. But they had a tough time in 9th grade: they earned few credits and attended school less than 70% of the time. By using these few criteria, we can identify 80% of the dropouts by the end of their first year in high school.

These data tell us several things. First, the dropout problem in Philadelphia's public schools is real, and it is severe. It is not a new crisis – the dropout rate has been approximately stable over the past 10 years. And Philadelphia is not unique among large cities in its high dropout rate. But like other cities with these sorts of educational outcomes, Philadelphia cannot be an economically and civically vibrant city of the 21st century with continued educational outcomes like these.

The data also tell us that there are some ways to tackle the problem. We can start by figuring out how better to support the education of students who are in the care or under the supervision of city agencies. We can use data to discover baselines, set goals and benchmarks, and measure our progress over time against these benchmarks. Second, we can work on identifying **adolescents** who are at high risk of dropping out. Whenever we mention identifying high-risk adolescents, someone always says, “Well, wouldn't it be better to invest in early childhood and elementary education?” Of course it is important to have good early childhood and elementary education to get these students on the right path. But adolescence is always going to do a number on some percentage of students, and not all students are going to get the skills they need in elementary school. Therefore, we need to have interventions all along the way. We need to be able to tell students, “It's not too late for you” – not too late if you are an 8th grader who has failed a major subject, not too late for you if you are a 9th grader who has failed every course, not too late for you if you are a young person who has already dropped out of school. In fact, it's *your time*, and here are some options for you.