

**PHILADELPHIA CITY
COUNCIL TESTIMONY,
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The Dropout Crisis in Philadelphia

Mr./Madame Chairman, members of City Council, my name is Liza Herzog and I am the Senior Researcher with the Philadelphia Education Fund. For the past 21 years, the Ed Fund has been providing innovative educational programming and research on behalf of young people in Philadelphia. We thank you for your continued attention to a critically important issue that touches the lives of all Philadelphians. We know that the byproducts of dropping out of school—increased unemployment, public assistance, social services, incarceration, health care costs—can make for a severely distressed city.

Together with Johns Hopkins University, the Ed Fund recently released a report, *Keeping Middle Grades Students on Track to Graduation*. We are lucky to have the uncommon advantage of both **local** and **longitudinal** data—these are our kids over time. We tracked sixth graders in Philadelphia public schools forward eight years, to a year beyond expected graduation.¹ We designed it this way because reported annual dropout rates can be difficult to understand and compare—first, dropout status changes over time. We know that some students who initially drop out re-enter at some point—sometimes at multiple points—to complete degree requirements. And, until we have a uniform definition of dropout, different bodies—school districts, state agencies, researchers—will continue to develop their own operational definitions. Our design allows us to look at what happens to the *same group* of kids *over time* and gives us what we believe to be the most reliable picture of what’s happening to our students.

We screened more than 20 variables (test scores, whether the student was overage, course grades, attendance, suspensions, behavior marks, special ed designation) to see which, if any, could identify who was at high risk for falling off-track. We looked for those with a high yield (75% or more of the students with this characteristic did not make it to the 12th grade with their class). We found the most powerful predictors of falling off track to graduation to be:

- **Attending school 80% or less of the time in the 6th grade**
- **Receiving a poor final behavior mark in the 6th grade**
- **Failing 6th grade Math**
- **Failing 6th grade English**

¹ From 1996-97 to 2003-04.

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In other words, the odds of a sixth grader ‘making it’ if she has one of these risk factors are:

If you’re a **Low Attender**, you have a 1 in 5 chance of making it to 12th grade on time

If you’re **Poorly Behaved**, you have a 1 in 4 chance

If you **Failed Math**, you have a 1 in 5 chance

If you **Failed English**, you have a 1 in 8 chance

We were able to identify 40% of eventual dropouts when they were in the 6th grade. The nexus of adolescence—being 11 and 12 years old—and living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty has a deep negative impact on a student’s relationship to school.

The best thing about doing this work is in applying it—the opportunity to turn our findings into *real supports for real students*. We’re currently in the Design Year in the North Region. With schools, we are co-designing interventions for sixth grade students who are at risk of dropping out. Our work with schools there corroborates our finding that there are significant numbers of sixth graders who are really struggling. In fact, each school year, between *1,000 and 2,000* sixth graders in Philadelphia have *each* of the Big Four risk factors. We are working with principals and their school teams on tiered supports—whole-school (for the entire 6th grade) targeted (for groups of 10-15 students) and intensive (1:1 or 1:2)—to increase the chances that these kids will make it with their classmates to graduation.

Secondary school supports can reach students too late, students for whom signs of disaffection (skipping school, leaving early, waning effort) can manifest gradually. These patterns are in place well before kids show up at the high school door. Students who enter high school *two or more years behind grade level* in math and literacy have only a 50/50 chance of on-time promotion to the 10th grade² and repeating the ninth grade has been found to be one of the strongest predictors for dropping out³

What amounts to an ‘early identification system’ that triggers appropriate supports as early as possible is vital to student success and will help us to shrink the pool of kids who are at an extreme disadvantage the minute they walk through the high school door.

What can our city do to help schools use this information effectively? We can take the lead in providing wraparound services—both in- and out-of-school supports for youth in Philadelphia. To this end, we would advocate for the creation of an education office within DHS to help resource, implement, and maintain school supports such as the placement of social workers or behavior specialists in schools with great numbers youth shown to have behavior challenges, so that our schools remain places in which youth grow, learn, and enjoy. Thank you.

² Neild and Balfanz (2001).

³ Edley and Wald, Harvard Civil Rights Project (2002).