

# FIGHTING THE **DROP-** **OUT** CRISIS

*Can the Obama administration get more high schoolers to graduate?  
A tale of three cities that are trying.*



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# INTRODUCTION

## Can Obama reverse the dropout crisis?

By Richard Lee Colvin

In his first address to Congress in February 2009, when the nation teetered on the brink of economic collapse, President Obama declared that “dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It’s not just quitting on yourself, it’s quitting on your country—and this country needs and values the talents of every American.” Since then, the administration has made a major commitment to increasing America’s high school graduation rate, which was once the highest in the developed world and is now among the lowest. Leading researchers now agree that 25 to 30 percent of students who enroll in American high schools fail to graduate. In many of the country’s largest urban school districts, such as Detroit, Cleveland, and Indianapolis, the dropout rate is as high as 60 percent, and rates are similarly high in many rural areas. A generation ago, high school dropouts could still join the military, or get work on assembly lines, and had a fair chance of finding their way in the world. President Obama does not exaggerate when he implies that today’s America has little use for dropouts and cannot expect to flourish so long as their numbers remain so high.

The administration has proposed nearly \$1 billion in its latest budget specifically for the dropout problem. And it has already put \$7.4 billion on the table, including its famous Race to the Top grants, which states and districts can get only if they agree to overhaul their worst-performing high schools. These are the 2,000 or so high schools that Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan refer to as “dropout factories”—schools that graduate fewer than 60 percent of their students and account for more than half the nation’s dropouts.

This level of financial commitment to fixing America’s underperforming high schools is unprecedented. The 1983 *Nation at Risk* report, which marked the start of the modern era of education reform, did not so much as mention the dropout problem even as it called for higher graduation requirements. Between 1988 and 1995, only eighty-nine school districts won federal grants for dropout prevention programs. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 applied mostly to grades three through eight. While it nominally required states to hold high schools accountable for dropout rates, it ended up allowing them to lowball the problem. Generally, the thought among educational reformers has been to concentrate on preschool and grade school education, and hope that success there would result in better student performance in high school.

Informing this approach was a not-unreasonable fear that by the time struggling students reached high school, there was little that could be done to turn them around. A 1999 report found that what few federally financed attempts had been made to improve teaching in high schools did not lower the dropout rate. A 2002 General Accounting Office report summed up twenty years of federal dropout prevention efforts by noting that the few that had been rigorously evaluated showed mixed results. Worse, even the occasional success stories were not replicated.

Which leaves a big question: Do we know enough today to make good use of a new massive federal commitment to lowering the dropout rate? One reason to think so is that there has been a data-driven revolution in our understanding of the problem.

During the 1970s and ’80s and well into the ’90s, educators and social scientists attempted, without a lot of success, to discover the most important predictors of whether a student would drop out or not. Mostly they wound up using known risk factors—

such as extreme poverty, poor grades, and contact with the juvenile justice and foster care systems—to predict who would drop out and try, through mentoring and other services, to keep them from doing so. Students who fit those categories were *on average* more likely to drop out. But averages can be misleading, especially when there is great diversity around the mean.

In recent years, researchers have gained access to “longitudinal” data—that is, information on the experiences of individual students as they progress over time. This research has yielded far more precise indicators of which students are likely not to graduate. For example, while many juvenile delinquents drop out, many do not. Yet if any child has a poor attendance record in ninth grade or fails to pass ninth-grade English or math, the chances are overwhelming that he or she won’t graduate, regardless of background or other experience. The research also showed much more variety among dropouts than experts imagined. Some have earned only a fraction of the credits they would need to graduate, while others drop out only a few credits shy of a diploma, largely because of outside events—a run-in with the law, say, or a family emergency requiring them to stay home with siblings. Such granular information should make it much easier to craft the right interventions for the right kids.

Yet there is still a big difference between abstract knowledge and effective practice. What do we really know about what has worked, and what has not, in schools? To answer this question, the *Washington Monthly* sent reporters to three large urban school districts—New York City, Philadelphia, and Portland, Oregon—that have worked strenuously in recent years to apply the new research to improve their chronically low graduation rates. The reports that have come back from the field give reason for qualified optimism. Yes, it is possible to move the needle on the dropout problem, but good intentions and effort are no guarantee of success.

All three cities have taken remarkably similar approaches to the problem.

Those approaches fall into two general categories: fixing existing low-performing high schools, often by breaking them into smaller schools; and creating alternative schools and programs—“multiple pathways,” in the jargon of the trade—that cater to the diverse needs of those kids who are on the verge of dropping out or already have done so. All three cities also have very active civil sectors—business groups, nonprofits, local and national foundations—which are playing central roles in the reform dramas, from spurring school officials into action to designing and running alternative programs.

And yet despite these similarities, the three cities have had quite different outcomes. New York has achieved the most impressive progress in lowering its dropout rate. Philadelphia has made real if less dramatic headway. Portland, on the other hand, has seen zero measurable im-

**It is possible to move the needle on the dropout problem, but good intentions and effort are no guarantee of success.**

provement. These results are almost the opposite of what you’d expect. After all, New York and Philadelphia are much bigger districts with much higher concentrations of poverty.

Policy choices can’t really explain the differences, since all three districts tried similar approaches. Rather, the explanation seems to lie in leadership and attitude. The New York schools have had one very capable and driven chancellor, Joel Klein, running them for eight years, whereas Philly and Portland have each gone through several superintendents, each bringing his or her own vision. And in New York, Klein has fostered an atmosphere of high expectations and accountability: every student is presumed capable of getting a diploma, and schools are measured and rewarded based on that assumption. In Portland, the opposite has been

true. Dropouts and at-risk kids, especially those in the city’s alternative schools, are coaxed into showing up in class, not challenged to actually graduate, and almost no adults are held accountable for results. (On the expectations-and-accountability front, Philly is closer to the New York model, and so is its level of success.)

What do these three case studies tell us about whether the Obama administration’s efforts are likely to work? For one thing, they suggest that success, if it comes, will not be uniform, but will vary according to the quality of local leaders and the engagement of local civic actors. For another, it confirms that school districts can get the job done and ought to be held responsible for doing so. “The problem is too big and complex for individual schools to handle on their own,” notes education consultant Chris Sturgis. They also suggest that the administration is on the right track with the policies it’s pushing, but not totally so. The vast majority of the funds the administration is making available are for turning around existing, low-performing high schools (by bringing in new leaders, new teachers, or turning them into charter schools). This is the right target, and one Washington has long neglected. But our reporting, as well as much research literature, shows that turning around chronically low-performing schools is awfully hard to pull off and will likely fail more often than it succeeds.

By contrast, the administration is putting relatively little money into the creation of alternative schools specifically for students who have dropped out or are about to. This doesn’t make much sense. Yes, alternative schools can easily become dumping grounds for the hard-to-educate, as has happened in Portland. But when good systems of accountability are built in, as New York has done, alternative schools can work well and are a crucial tool in getting graduation rates up.

There are other risks to the administration’s approach. On the one hand it is pushing policies to lower the dropout rate. On the other it is pressing Congress and the states to increase academic standards. Many experts warn that these

are conflicting goals—that the latter will make the former harder to accomplish, and the former will create further incentives to undermine the latter. That may be true. But it's worth noting that New York hasn't succumbed to that contradiction: it has increased graduation rates *and* the percentage of its students who pass its high-standards Regents exam.

Any effort to lower the dropout rate must also work against the countervailing effects of growing inequality, fallout of the Great Recession, and a demographic tide that leaves more students struggling with English as a second language. Indeed, many experts think that schools and teachers cannot by themselves provide the level of social support needed to make the kind of headway we'd want against the dropout problem. Robert Balfanz, a leading scholar on dropouts and codirector of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, has put together a consortium of schools in which members of City Year, the national service program for young adults, are assigned to work one-on-one with at-risk kids to help with their studies and keep them in school. Another group, Communities in Schools, assigns social workers as case managers for students with more acute needs.

Yet even without such extra levels of social support, our three case studies suggest that real progress can be made. That finding should be inspiring, especially considering how important such progress can be to the long-term strength of America's economy and society. One study estimates that if all the students who drop out over a decade were to graduate instead, they would earn an additional \$3 trillion in wages. That amount of money would do a lot to make the economic recovery that is now shakily underway sustainable in the years to come. <sup>WM</sup>

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# NEW YORK CITY

## Big gains in the Big Apple.

By Sarah Garland

Last fall, the New York City public schools granted Justin Skeete, a twenty-year-old dropout from a crime-ridden section of Coney Island, a third and last chance to graduate from high school. Once he turned twenty-one, he would be too old. His new school, Liberation Diploma Plus High School, was taking a risk: Justin arrived with a bad attitude. He cursed out teachers and fellow students. He didn't care about homework. His odds of finishing looked bleak, but Liberation, with a tiny student population of fewer than 200, was prepared for students like Justin.

One of several new last-chance high schools opened by the city in recent years, the school had a striking track record in graduating students that other schools had given up on. Justin's original high school was Lincoln, a traditional school in Coney Island with more than 2,500 students. Although he came in with high test scores on eighth-grade exams, after a few months at Lincoln he lost interest. He showed up every day, but slept through classes or wandered the halls. He failed ninth grade and returned for more of the same the next year. During his third year, he moved into an alternative school housed in the Lincoln building where he took evening classes. He earned five credits, but he didn't like the teachers. He started cutting and soon dropped out.

Justin was working two jobs, at McDonald's and Home Depot, when a cousin told him about Liberation. Justin was skeptical, but he liked the sound of the place. His cousin described the school as "just like a family"—the opposite of his former school.

After an intensive joint effort by counselors, teachers, and the school's principal, April Leong, to reach him, Justin settled in at Liberation. The teachers wrote lesson plans that incorporated the diverse cultures of their students and connected classwork to careers. The administrators balanced strict discipline with an open-door policy that allowed students from rough neighborhoods like Justin's to stay late at school and off the streets and away from potential trouble. Within a few months, Justin's grades had risen to As and Bs.

Leong says the school's philosophy is discovering "who the kid is, and what they need." Justin began meeting once a week with counselors from a nonprofit connected to the school. Soon, he was behaving better and, in June, he graduated. "Before I got here, I can't really say I tried," Justin says. "I felt like nobody cared."

Justin's turnaround is part of a bigger transformation in New York City, the largest school district in the nation. In 2009, the city pushed its four-year graduation rate to 63 percent, up from 47 percent in 2005, according to the state. By the city's calculations, which count GEDs as diplomas, the graduation rate rose from 51 percent in 2002 to 68 percent last year.

More students are also hanging on after four years: more than 65 percent of the students who remain for five or six years eventually graduate, according to state figures. White students are much more likely to graduate than blacks and Hispanics, but everyone is graduating at higher rates. Students are learning more as well. The percentage of graduates earning the more demanding state Regents diploma grew significantly.



**"Just like a family":** Liberation Diploma Plus High School in Coney Island didn't give up on Justin Skeete. He graduated in June.

New York's schools have all the challenges that we associate with urban schools, only more so: almost 80 percent of the city's 1.1 million students are poor enough to qualify for a reduced-price lunch. Roughly the same percentage are black and Hispanic. A tenth are special education students, and close to 15 percent are still learning English. All of those groups have an elevated risk of dropping out.

Some critics have questioned New York's improvement numbers, but even the most conservative calculations show unprecedented progress after decades of stagnation. The New York rate is especially dramatic considering that, on average, only about half the students graduate in large cities. In Los Angeles and Las Vegas, graduation rates have fallen. The city has made many missteps, but education reformers, including those in the Obama administration, have looked to New York as a model for

addressing the dropout crisis. It seems that New York, the nation's largest city and school district, offers potential solutions to an intractable problem that has primarily plagued big cities.

In July 2002, Mayor Michael Bloomberg stunned New York City with his choice for the new schools chancellor. Joel Klein was an antitrust lawyer, an old hand at breaking up monopolies. Bloomberg, who had recently wrested control of the city schools from the board of education, wanted someone willing to remake the dysfunctional school district.

A day after he was appointed, Klein phoned the woman who would lead the transformation. Michele Cahill was a program officer at the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and, at the time, she was running an experiment in New York City funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to replace large, strug-

gling schools with small, more intimate schools. Klein told her he had a job for her in his reorganized education department as his senior counsel. The job came with a monumental assignment: raise New York's four-year graduation rate by 20 percentage points. His goal was 70 percent—the same as the national average. Klein gave her one main instruction: "Be bold."

Shortly after, Cahill discovered that not a lot was known about the city's dropout challenge. Which of the city's 230 high schools were getting their at-risk students on the right track? Which were failing at that task? Which students were falling through the cracks? She found some useful data stored in an outdated computer system. Often, though, no one could answer her questions.

That fall, Cahill visited schools. At Evander Childs, a 3,000-student behemoth of a school in the northern

Bronx, the graduation rate had recently been tallied at 31 percent. When Cahill showed up a month into the school year, there were still nineteen teacher vacancies. The hallways were so chaotic it took students more than fifteen minutes to change classes. “This was the kind of thing where you said this doesn’t need a Band-Aid,” she says. “This was really, really broken.”

She decided on a two-pronged assault. The department would compile data to find out which students were dropping out, and why. At the same time, the district would close schools such as Evander Childs that had chronically low graduation rates. Inside these same buildings, they would open small schools with fewer than 500 students, replicating the experiment that Cahill had been working on at Carnegie.

The small schools strategy was not new: Klein and Cahill borrowed the idea from a decades-old progressive education movement in the city that had become a national model with the support of foundations, including Gates. Some of the older small schools were successful, but others floundered just as much as large schools. In 2002, the city’s existing small schools had a four-year graduation rate that was only marginally higher than the city average. But small schools potentially offered advantages over large schools. Teachers could get to know a smaller number of students better, and the more manageable size created an opportunity to experiment with teaching methods, curriculum, and course schedules.

The district, the administration believed, could increase its graduation rate by opening up more small schools modeled on the ones that worked. Cahill came up with a list of qualities that characterized the best schools: strong leadership, a strong shared mission, activities that excited teenagers, high expectations, good teaching, mechanisms for tracking student progress, and opportunities for the students to give back to the community. In October 2002,

Klein announced that the city would open 200 small schools starting the following year.

The plan was massively ambitious, but the district wouldn’t be opening the schools by itself. The Gates Foundation put \$150 million toward the new schools. The district would operate the new schools, but they would be connected to private groups, including New Visions for Public Schools, which worked on the Carnegie Corporation’s small schools experiment. The organizations ranged from Outward Bound to universities such as Johns Hopkins, to civil rights groups such as the National Council of La Raza. The connections provided more than extra support, says New Visions President Robert Hughes. Having outsiders with a variety of per-

**When Cahill showed up a month into the school year, there were still nineteen teacher vacancies. The hallways were so chaotic it took students more than fifteen minutes to change classes.**

spectives as partners “created a richer education experience.”

As the new schools were rolled out, Cahill got to work on the second piece of the plan—identifying and understanding the students who were most likely to drop out. To analyze the numbers, Cahill hired outsiders to help, including Parthenon Group, Boston-based private equity consultants who specialize in education. Cahill, with the help of Parthenon, gathered data on the cohort of students who had entered high school in 1999—almost a quarter of a million students. Each student had been given a code in the outdated computer system: still enrolled, graduated, or discharged—which meant they had either dropped out or transferred to an-

other district. They sorted through the discharge data to find which students had dropped out. For the students who were still enrolled, they looked at their age and how many credits they had earned toward graduation.

In 2005, the numbers were ready, and they were shocking. Nearly 140,000 high school-age youth in the city were at least two years behind where they needed to be to graduate on time. They had failed one or more grades in elementary or middle school and were way behind in accumulating the forty-four high school credits they needed to graduate. Half of the over-age and undercredited students had already dropped out. Those still in school made up almost a third of the city’s 247,000 high school students.

Some research had suggested that middle schools were the problem—that once future dropouts reached high school, they were already behind and doomed. But the New York numbers showed that nearly a third of eventual dropouts entered high school with their class, with proficient reading skills. This meant that for many students, high school was the problem, not middle school. The revelation was encouraging: it wasn’t too late to help students once they reached ninth grade. Redesigning the high school experience with new small schools, curriculum interventions, and improved teaching and leadership had the potential to make a major difference.

The data uncovered other bright spots. Three characteristics predicted which schools would have the best graduation rates: gender, school size, and incoming student performance on standardized tests. That is, schools with fewer low performers had significantly higher graduation rates. The researchers also found that reducing by 100 the number of students in the freshman class of a school with a high concentration of low performers produced a 2.7 percent increase in its graduation rate. Dispersing low-performing students among schools also helped.

More encouraging was a finding that alternative schools for at-risk students worked wonders with struggling students. Regular high schools graduated 19 percent of overage, undercredited students. At alternative schools, the graduation rates were 56 percent—right at the city average. Once students switched to an alternative school, they came to school more often and began earning credits more quickly. The solution was obvious: open more alternative schools.

Since the 1980s, Good Shepherd Services, a nonprofit organization in New York, ran a particularly successful alternative school for students at risk of dropping out. The group had opened in 1857 as a home for troubled girls. But its foray into coed public education was impressive. Cahill had already hired one of Good Shepherd's leaders, JoEllen Lynch, to help as a part-time consultant; she decided to hire her full-time.

Not all potential dropouts were the same, however. The Parthenon report revealed a wide range of achievement and experience among the students who were most likely to drop out, those who were already older than their classmates and were not earning enough credits to graduate on time. Studies done around the same time in Chicago and Philadelphia found the same thing. New York needed to create different options for different types of students.

In 2005, Klein and Cahill created an Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation with \$6.6 million from Gates and appointed Lynch director. She was charged with opening forty-five new schools. For older students closer to graduation, the district opened six new Young Adult Borough Centers, alternative schools located inside large high schools that continued to operate—such as the one that Justin attended at Lincoln. The YABCs held classes in the evening to accommodate work schedules and offered a diploma from the student's original school. In addition, Lynch opened thirty new transfer schools modeled on the Good Shepherd alternative school. Libera-

tion Diploma Plus was one of the new schools. The transfer schools would be open to the hard cases: younger students who had spent less time in school and had earned fewer credits, or students like Justin, for whom the YABCs didn't work. Not long after opening, waiting lists formed at several of the transfer schools.

At the new alternative schools, attendance was the obsession, since getting potential dropouts into the classroom was half the battle. At a YABC opened in John F. Kennedy High School in the Bronx, monitoring attendance was part of the job description of nine people. At some transfer schools, administrators visited the homes of students who missed class.

The data also pointed toward a less drastic option than closing down schools. Two-thirds of potential drop-

**By 2006, all of the pieces of New York's ambitious dropout reform plan were lurching to life. The next step was to wait and see what worked.**

outs with poor literacy skills quickly fell further behind in high school, and officials believed a new focus on helping them become better readers could keep more students in school. In 2003, 200 schools introduced Ramp Up, a remedial literacy program for ninth graders designed by America's Choice, a national for-profit education company that several states have since hired to help reform high schools.

Another reform was imposed by a judge in 2003. Local education advocates, worried the district was pushing out its lowest-performing students, won a lawsuit that forced schools to hold "exit interviews" with dropouts. Guidance counselors urged students to stay, or pointed them to alternative programs such as the YABCs. The de-

partment soon attributed a plummeting dropout rate, at least in part, to this simple new procedure. "These were very strategic decisions to move all the levers at the same time," says Lynch. "To close low-performing high schools, to open new small schools, to drive innovation around curriculum, and to create recuperative options."

By 2006, all of the pieces were lurching to life. The next step was to wait and see what worked. There were good signs early on. That year, the first round of seniors graduated from fifteen small schools that had opened in 2002. The average graduation rate at the new schools was above 70 percent. At some of the schools, the graduation rate was above 90 percent.

It didn't take long for problems to appear, however. At Lincoln, the school where Justin began his high school career, the student population had grown from 2,500 to 2,800 the previous decade. The same phenomenon was happening citywide. As the city replaced large schools with small ones, the remaining big schools—which still held more than half of the city's students—got even more crowded. A 2009 report by researchers at the New School found that the neediest students from the closed schools tended to be channeled into the remaining large schools. Many of these students demanded services that small schools didn't necessarily offer—including special education—or were ill-equipped to make informed choices about the new school offerings.

Lincoln was able to keep up its graduation rate, but many of the ballooning schools struggled, creating a domino effect. In the New School report, researchers pointed out that several "barely functioning" large schools "soon became failing schools." The administration responded by closing them, too. By 2010, thirty-five high schools were in the process of being closed or had already been shuttered.

A New York University professor who has studied New York's drop-

# SMALL SCHOOL, BIG RESULTS

**B**RONX, New York—Jayquan Hyman, a gangly fifteen-year-old ninth grader, seemed destined to drop out after starting high school last September. He failed fifth grade and was older than his classmates, had spent years in special education classes, and cut classes throughout middle school. He was suspended within weeks of the start of school for cursing at a teacher. He was sullen and angry. He was also black, male, and living in the South Bronx, one of the poorest neighborhoods in America. The one person in his family who had gone to college was an aunt, now deceased. He was the sort of student that a principal might hope would quit to spare the school the trouble.

A decade ago, Jayquan would have been enrolled in South Bronx High, a school of about 1,000 students in a neighborhood of rusted train trestles and abandoned lots. Back then, the school had a reputation as a dumping ground for some of the borough's worst students, and it's likely Jayquan would have ended up among the one in five who dropped out every year. But South Bronx High had been closed.

Instead, Jayquan, a basketball player who hopes to make a career of it, enrolled at Urban Assembly School for Careers in Sports, one of three small schools installed in the old South Bronx building. Principal Felice Lepore understands the importance of engaging ninth graders quickly, before they have a chance to falter. Studies in a number of cities have found that failing even one ninth-grade class drastically reduces a student's chance of graduating. In the typical large high school, teachers with more seniority opt to work only with seniors and juniors. But Lepore says that at Urban Assembly the school's most effective teachers, regardless of seniority, are assigned to teach

ninth graders. The school puts its "best foot forward" for freshmen, she said.

The school uses sports—batting averages, the arc of a basketball shot, the biography of Jackie Robinson—to teach math and history. Ninth graders research careers and apply for internships with the New York Yankees. Twice a week, teachers gather in intense meetings to hash out lessons and debate how to help struggling students.

Jayquan was frequently a topic of discussion. None of what they tried seemed to penetrate. The breakthrough came when Lepore created a program just for him: he was given a campus job after school in the main office. But he was only allowed to work if his conduct that day was perfect. Jayquan pulled ahead. He began handing in his homework and passing his classes, which had a mix of special education and regular students, and even got 80s in his history and business classes. By March, his conduct reports were mostly positive. Jayquan is an example of what can happen when a school knows the history of entering students, monitors their progress, and provides them with help tailored to their needs. The school's population is one that, statistically, is less likely to graduate. More than 80 percent of its students live in poverty, 100 percent are black or Hispanic, and nearly 85 percent are male, who are slightly more likely to drop out than girls. But Urban Assembly's formula seems to be working. Its four-year graduation rate is more than 80 percent, compared to 46 percent at the old South Bronx High.

Lepore, who worried that Jayquan wouldn't last a year, now believes he'll make it all the way to graduation. The job seems to have made him more serious about school. What's the job? Every day, he calls the students who haven't shown up for school—in effect, becoming the enforcer of rules he once broke. —S.G.

out problem, Pedro Noguera, worries about the administration's attitude that "schools will fix themselves or they'll be shut down."

"We shouldn't allow schools to flounder," he says.

Some of the new small schools have faltered, too. A handful made the state's failing-schools list. When the schools did well, critics accused the administration of allowing small schools to "cream" the best students, pointing out that during their first two years of operating they were not required to admit special education students and those who were still learning to speak English. (The policy was later changed.) And while small schools are good at focusing interventions on struggling students, they don't have the resources of larger schools. Often they can't provide challenging courses for high-achieving students, exacerbating inequities between New York City schools.

Another problem has been the unintended consequences of pressure on principals to raise graduation rates or face closure. A few principals were caught cheating—raising grades and giving out unearned credits. More pervasive was an unmonitored system of credit recovery, which let students make up a failed class, sometimes by simply completing a few hours of homework. Although the state had required students to put in "seat time"—meaning hours spent in a classroom—to earn course credits, at many schools students were passing classes even though they didn't have to show up. In April, the state responded to the lax standards by implementing new guidelines. The city is collecting data to see how prevalent the practice is.

The missteps have disillusioned at least one former booster of Klein's methods—Diane Ravitch, the education historian and former assistant secretary of education. She has pointed to the large numbers of New York City public school graduates who must take remedial classes at the city's community colleges—75 percent—as evidence that the reforms are superficial. She has also accused the administration of

manipulating the graduation numbers, noting that the city excludes about a fifth of the students in each cohort from its graduation rate calculations. The students are labeled discharges, and the Bloomberg administration maintains that many of these students move to other districts. Ravitch argues that under federal guidelines, many would be considered dropouts. While the high percentage of discharges is problematic, it can't explain the rise in the graduation rate: discharges have stayed steady at about 20 percent for the past eight years.

Cahill acknowledges that in the rush of the reforms, everything wasn't "perfectly done," particularly when it came to helping the large schools cope. "We were not putting sufficient supports in those schools," she says. "But the overarching direction was to get more kids out of these dropout factories."

In that, they were successful. By 2008, the percentage of students in small high schools had more than tripled. About the same number of students were attending small schools as had attended the large schools that had been closed, according to a report released in February by the national research group MDRC. MDRC also found that the complaints that small schools serve less-challenging students were unfounded. Actually, small schools tend to serve more poor, minority, immigrant, and low-performing students than their larger counterparts.

Last year, the district's 234 new schools (most of them small) graduated 73 percent of their students. The graduation rate for black, Hispanic, English as a second language, and special education students was also higher at the new schools.

The results from the small schools are hopeful, but New York City still faces huge hurdles. Klein has become one of the city's longer-serving chancellors, giving much needed consistency to the system, but many of the deputies who orchestrated the reforms have left, in-

cluding Cahill and Lynch. Many more students are earning the more competitive Regents diploma than before, but 26 percent of graduates do not. In 2012, all students will have to earn a Regents diploma to graduate, meaning New York's graduation rate will likely drop. Last year, a state comptroller audit raised concerns about the quality of the Regents diploma system itself, which is based on exams graded by teachers who, according to the audit, tend to inflate the scores.

At the same time, recent changes to state law have made it more difficult for the city to close large failing schools. The new law may not be a significant blow to the city's reforms, however. Size mattered, but by itself, making schools smaller was not suffi-

**Some critics have questioned New York's improvement numbers, but even the most conservative calculations show unprecedented progress after decades of stagnation.**

cient to raise graduation rates. What mattered was how the smaller size of schools allowed educators to focus on, and be more flexible toward, student needs. It allowed not for bold change, but for incremental progress—student by student, day by day.

A department official who oversees academics, Josh Thomases, says the structural changes were really just laying the groundwork for a new phase of reform: improving teaching inside schools, both large and small, by encouraging more collaboration, helping teachers make better use of data about their students, and creating "fewer, clearer, higher standards" for schools and students.

One promising idea is teacher-led "inquiry teams." Small groups of

teachers meet regularly to discuss struggling students and collectively figure out ways to help them. New Visions, which has now opened 133 schools in New York City, first implemented the program as an experiment in its small schools. New Visions also created versions in two large, traditional schools. Graduation rates climbed from 54 percent to more than 68 percent at both schools, even as their student populations grew. The success spurred the department to require the program citywide.

The graduation rate has not yet made the 70 percent goal that Klein and Cahill set, and Bloomberg has since set a new goal: 75 percent by the end of his current four-year term. To meet it, the city plans to expand its reforms to new frontiers such as special education.

Yet city officials—along with their critics—have also come to believe that the Regents diploma is no longer enough. In the next phase, they plan to attack graduation standards and set a higher bar, the same one set by the Obama administration this year: making sure every student who graduates is also ready for college and a career. "The hardest work is still ahead of us," says Thomases.

New York's ideas for reforming high school may become more than just an interesting case study. That's what happened a decade ago when New York's innovations in community policing, under the David Dinkins administration, and its use of fine-grain data on crime, under Rudy Giuliani, got national attention as the country was battling violence and drugs. The Clinton administration institutionalized the city's ideas in the federal COPS program, and transformed how the country fought crime. If New York succeeds this time, it could once again be the leader in nationwide reform. <sup>WM</sup>

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# PHILADELPHIA

After decades of effort, a decade of progress.

By Dale Mezzacappa

No major city in America has worked longer and harder on its dropout problem than Philadelphia. Yet those efforts, going back nearly half a century, have gained traction only in the last ten years. Between 2001 and 2009 the percentage of Philadelphia students who entered ninth grade and graduated in four years increased from 48 percent to 56 percent. Those gains might seem modest, and are clearly insufficient. But the fact that they occurred at all, and at a time when dropout rates nationally have not budged, suggests that Philadelphia is doing something right.

It's a measure of the complexity of the problem, however, that it is difficult to discern which of the flurry of policies and practices that have been tried here are responsible for the gains. Unlike in New York, Philadelphia has not followed a single blueprint or plan. Instead, the work on the issue has accreted over time, with new reforms and initiatives, most of them privately conceived or supported, added to the mix along the way. In the last five years the city has concentrated on providing students with an ever-growing array of options to the city's traditional high schools—charter schools, small alternative or “accelerated” schools—based on students' needs and inclination. Yet some of the most promising experiments in reform have also occurred in the city's traditional high schools, which the vast majority of its students still attend. But for bureaucratic and budgetary reasons those initiatives have seldom been sustained. If Philadelphia wants to continue to make progress, it'll have to find a way to do so, and the Obama administration's efforts

to combat the dropout problem could provide some real help.

In 1968, Philadelphia's business, political, and civic elite got together to figure out how to get more high school kids to stay in school and prevent them from being swept up in the maelstrom of anger and urban violence touched off by the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. The year before, as many as 3,500 African American students demonstrated at school district headquarters demanding better schools,

**The kinds of problems that typically squelch major reforms in large urban school districts—money shortages, union resistance—were present in Philadelphia as well.**

more black teachers, and culturally relevant courses and textbooks.

The big idea the leaders formulated was career academies: subunits within large neighborhood schools that blended academics with a vocational training and established stronger relationships between students and their peers and teachers. The first such academy in the nation, focused on preparing students for jobs in the electrical field, opened in 1969 at Thomas Edison High School, which had the highest dropout rate in the city. New career academies were started throughout the 1970s and '80s, and by the mid-'90s there were twenty-nine in the city

and several thousand nationwide. Extensive research deemed the academies to be a successful anti-dropout strategy.

Over the next thirty years, with strong support and substantial nudging from the city's foundations and private sector, the school district would attack the dropout problem in a number of other ways. In 1982, when Constance Clayton became superintendent, she looked at the city's neighborhood high schools and saw “lethargy and sameness and undue stability of faculty and administrators.” She said

in a 1993 interview that she saw good anti-dropout programs, career academies among them, but they reached only a relatively small number of students in what was then a school district of more than 200,000 students.

Embracing the efforts of the Philadelphia High Schools Collaborative, an outside organization dedicated to reforming city high schools, she decided to shake things up. The Collaborative effort built on the career academies example and divided the high schools into smaller, semi-autonomous units within one building that focused more attention on incoming ninth graders. Good results were seen almost immediately at three pilot schools—better attendance, more success in classes, a more studious atmosphere. Eventually, twenty-two high schools were using parts of the strategy and 20,000 students were being affected. The goal was to create more intimate, personalized environments for learning, a concept that still drives much of the thinking on how to reduce the dropout rate.

But the kinds of problems that typically squelch major reforms in large urban school districts were present in Philadelphia as well. Skeptics questioned the

statistics showing improvement. The Philadelphia teachers union objected to making the smaller units equivalent to separate schools, which affected teachers' seniority and job security. Money problems grew. Clayton also had her differences with the Collaborative; she retired in 1993, and the effort faded. The "small learning communities" continued to exist, but lost the autonomy that made them effective. In many high schools, they began to function like academic tracks, separating students by ability. Meanwhile, vocational career academies were reduced in number, from twenty-nine in the '90s to only ten today.

It's impossible to say what effect these on-again-off-again reforms had on the school district's overall dropout rate. By narrowly defining who was a dropout, Philadelphia and other school districts had for decades been underreporting their actual attrition rates. Whatever the effect of the anti-dropout measures, they were overwhelmed by the flight of white and black working- and middle-class families to the suburbs and a growing poverty rate in the city, which rose from 15 percent in 1970 to 24 percent today, according to U.S. Census data. Students were promoted in elementary and middle schools even though they weren't learning fundamental skills; by 2000 more than 75 percent of the students who enrolled in the district's neighborhood high schools were far behind academically.

In 1999, Philadelphia's civic community pushed yet another remedy aimed at reworking the high schools that Clayton, more than a decade before, had characterized as outmoded and resistant to change. The Philadelphia Education Fund, which combines money from foundations, wealthy individuals, corporations, and public agencies, persuaded the school district to bring in a new approach to its worst schools. The model, developed at Johns Hopkins University, was called Talent Development High Schools, and its primary goal was to keep ninth graders on track toward graduation by making sure they passed all of their courses. Over the next four years, the model would show progress

in seven of the district's high schools. A 2004 evaluation by MDRC, the public policy research organization, found that the Talent Development schools "produced substantial gains in academic course credits earned and promotion rates and modest improvements in attendance."

In 2002, Paul Vallas, the energetic, do-it-all-at-once former CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, was hired as Philadelphia's sixth superintendent in thirty years. He arrived just after the state had declared the Philadelphia schools financially and academically bankrupt, replaced the mayorally appointed school board with a School Reform Commission with a majority named by the governor, and demanded that the district turn over many of its worst-performing schools to private, sometimes for-profit operators. Vallas embraced the "diverse provider" strategy even as he continued to push for more money and implement his own agenda. After the MDRC study came out, Vallas

**Philly's gains might seem modest, but the fact that they occurred at all, while dropout rates nationally have not budged, suggests the city is doing something right.**

said the district could not afford to continue the existing Talent Development High Schools, let alone expand the program intact. Instead, he said all the neighborhood schools would borrow some ideas from Talent Development.

James Kemple, the researcher who headed up the study of Talent Development, was at the meeting in which Vallas said he'd do his own take on the model. Kemple cautioned him against trying to do it piecemeal. "I was trying to make the case with Paul that the best research you have ... is based on this version of the model," Kemple said. He called Vallas's decision "changing horses midstream," and

said that when decisions are not made based on evidence they result in districts implementing the "reform du jour."

Rather than attempt to fix the large neighborhood high schools, Vallas's plan was to create alternatives to them. He started twenty-six new small schools, backed the creation of more charter schools, and created disciplinary schools that were run on contract by private companies. As of 2002, there were thirty-eight public high schools in Philadelphia, with an average enrollment of 1,700 students. By 2007, there were sixty-two schools, including charters. Today there are ninety, twenty-nine of them charters.

As Vallas was deciding to move away from Talent Development, Robert Balanz and Ruth Curran Neild, two Johns Hopkins researchers, began a retrospective study, paid for by a number of national and local foundations, of the "dropout crisis," covering the years from 2000 to 2005. Their 2006 report, called *Unfulfilled Promise*, was the first definitive counting of high school dropouts in the district, after decades of policies aimed at stemming the tide. They found that, during the period studied, some 30,000 Philadelphia students had dropped out, and thousands more were "near dropouts" who showed up less than half the time. On a positive note, however, they found evidence of improvement. More than 52 percent of the class of 2005 graduated on time in four years. That was about 4 percentage points higher than the average for the previous four years.

Until that study, "[w]e didn't have a public fix on who was dropping out, where they were dropping out from, and what kind of services they need," said Neild. Because it was one of the first studies to define the graduation rate in terms of cohorts—tracing the fortunes of each entering ninth-grade class and showing how many graduate—"it helped people realize the scale of it," she said.

The researchers discovered that many of those most likely to drop out could be identified beginning in the sixth grade and nearly all of them by the ninth grade. They advised that high schools alone could not fix the problem. The mid-

dle school grades would have to do a better job of educating their students. Keeping ninth graders on track needed to be a priority. Also important, however, was that one in five dropouts were older students who had either quit school or entered the juvenile justice system a few credits short of a diploma. The researchers recommended the creation of alternative institutions instead of expecting these youths to reenter the high schools they had already given up on. This had the potential to bump up the graduation rate quickly without dealing with the messy politics and adult interests that come with the territory in high school reform efforts.

Vallas created the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation to expand programs for disengaged youth. He contracted with private companies to run “accelerated” schools that could help students graduate more quickly. Arlene Ackerman succeeded Vallas in 2008, and she has added seats to the network, which now can accommodate 2,200 youths. Under Ackerman the district has also set up a Re-engagement Center, where former students can come and be referred to a school within the expanding network of options. And with funding from the U.S. Department of Labor, Philadelphia community organizations are now helping students

late '80s. Ackerman has a new plan called Renaissance Schools in which some of the worst schools will be converted to charters or slated for turnaround treatment within the district, some directly under her supervision. In the first year, three long-troubled high schools made that list.

Though disentangling the effects of all these policies on the city’s overall dropout rate isn’t easy, the numbers are certainly moving in the right direction. Between 2005 and 2009 the percentage of students who entered ninth grade and graduated in four years increased from 52 percent to 56 percent. And the six-year graduation rate has been steadily inching up—from 57 percent for the class of 2005 to 60 percent for the class of 2007. At least some of that six-year graduation rate increase is attributable to the new “accelerated” schools, according to Project U-Turn data.

It could be that Vallas and Project U-Turn are right and that taking on dysfunctional high schools was too hard and expensive, at least at the time. But there’s a limit to what the alternative schools Vallas and Ackerman have encouraged can do: most of the students entering them have accumulated very few high school credits and have reading and math proficiency that hovers around the fifth-grade level.

Even with the improvements, each year more than 8,000 Philadelphia students drop out, most from the neighborhood schools. Project U-Turn’s goal is to cut that number by at least 2,000 students by the end of the upcoming school year. Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter has set a high bar as well. He has committed city resources to increasing the six-year graduation rate to 80 percent. To reach those audacious goals, Philadelphia will need to do what it hasn’t succeeded in doing in the past—fix neighborhood schools. And with the Obama administration now pledging billions of federal dollars for school “turnaround” efforts, Philadelphia has another opportunity to keep trying. <sup>WM</sup>

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**Dropout factories:** Schools like West Philadelphia High desperately need reform.

Not surprisingly, it was this last recommendation that Vallas seized on, because it was consistent with what he was already doing. There also was demand. The release of the report had marked the launch of a new advocacy group called the Project U-Turn Collaborative that would help implement some of these recommendations. In the first year after its October 2006 launch, Project U-Turn raised \$10 million from public and private sources, and 1,500 dropouts contacted the project to ask for help in getting a diploma. But seats could only be found for 158 in the city’s existing alternative schools.

who have dropped out earn either a GED or credits toward a diploma.

The traditional high schools have not been abandoned by the new wave of reformers. Since Project U-Turn was created, the city has won about \$65 million in grants, also from the Labor Department, for programs in seven neighborhood high schools that were cited as “persistently dangerous.” Using some of this money, the district is creating in most of its neighborhood schools “bridge” programs that try to engage ninth graders in the summer before high school, reviving a practice first introduced by Clayton in the

# PORTLAND, OREGON

All the advantages, and nothing to show for it.

By Betsy Hammond

If any big-city school district should have a handle on its high school dropout problem, it would surely be Portland, Oregon.

Compact and bike friendly, this darling of urban planners draws middle- and upper-middle-income professionals to live inside its city limits. And they do something that their counterparts in Detroit or Washington, D.C., or Los Angeles rarely consider: they send their children to public schools. In a school district that enrolls 47,000 students, only 43 percent are poor (in Chicago, 85 percent are) and a majority are white (in Philadelphia, 13 percent are). White and middle-class teens are far less likely to drop out of high school than their minority and low-income peers.

But a shockingly low percentage of Portland's high school students graduate on time: just 53 percent. That puts its dropout rate on par with rates in Philadelphia, Louisville, and El Paso—all bigger districts with much higher concentrations of poverty. A majority of Portland's dropouts are white, only half qualify for subsidized school meals, and 90 percent are native English speakers.

It's not that Portland hasn't tried to do better. The school district has implemented a series of reforms, many of them strikingly similar to what New York City and Philadelphia, two cities with rising graduation rates, have been doing. A few of these reforms—turning to private outfits to run schools, upending the faculty and curriculum at schools with chronic low test scores, using sophisticated data systems to pinpoint instructional needs—are steps the Obama administration wants to

encourage all school districts with achievement problems to adopt.

But in Portland, those reforms haven't worked. Despite fifteen years of effort, the city's dropout rate hasn't budged. How Portland took good ideas and managed to botch their implementation—through inattention and a failure to measure and demand results—is a cautionary tale for those in Washington who want to use federal dollars to get local schools to do right by their students.

**How Portland took good ideas and botched their implementation is a cautionary tale for those who want to use federal dollars to get local schools to do right by their students.**

Portland's first effort to grapple with its dropout problem began in the mid-1990s, when the school district vastly expanded what had been a small network of community-based alternative high schools. Founded in the 1970s and '80s, these privately run nonprofit programs had a good reputation around Portland for welcoming troubled teens who had dropped out of traditional high schools and reconnecting them to the classroom and society.

Expanding these schools seemed like a good way to benefit more of these vulnerable kids. But it also happened to benefit the Portland school district's

bottom line. Voter-enacted changes in the way Oregon funds schools hit the Portland school district hard in the early 1990s. The surest and quickest way to refill its coffers was to lure back students who had dropped out.

It seemed like a win-win: disconnected students could find their niche in a nontraditional school setting, and the Portland school system could keep up to 20 percent of the state funds that paid for them to be there. Enrollment in the alternative programs doubled between 1991 and 1997.

National meetings were convened in Portland to let other youth-helping agencies see firsthand the variety and power of Portland's second-chance alternative schools. New York, Philadelphia, and others created similar networks of community-based schools with nontraditional structures and extra social and emotional support to help dropouts or near dropouts get back on track.

The city's second stab at fixing its dropout problem began in the early 2000s. At that time, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation was pouring major money into promoting a particular school reform idea: breaking up big, institutional high schools to create small, personalized ones. Researchers had found links between these more intimate school settings and higher test scores and graduation rates. Leading Portland-area employers teamed with Oregon's biggest philanthropy, the Meyer Memorial Trust, to pool funds and snare \$2.1 million more from Gates to remake three of the city's big traditional high schools—those with

the most disadvantaged students and the worst dropout rates. Those schools were broken up into multiple small academies housed under one roof, each with its own defined academic theme, such as business-technology and “renaissance” arts.

As those campuses were reorganizing, another effort got underway: an unprecedented study, also funded by foundations (including Gates, Carnegie, and Mott), of who dropped out in Portland and why. Released in May of 2007, the study tracked every student in the class of 2004 and yielded three major findings. First, the dropout problem was much bigger than the state or school district had let on: the on-time graduation rate was not 85 percent, as had long been officially reported, but 54 percent. Second, it wasn't just poor and minority students who were dropping out; white kids were, too, at alarming rates. Finally, and of most interest to school district leaders, likely dropouts could be pinpointed as early as ninth grade based on their attendance, test scores, and grades. In Portland, the study found, students of any race or family background who failed to accumulate 5.5 credits during ninth grade were four times more likely to drop out than those who earned enough credits.

The study sparked immediate action. Then superintendent Vicki Phillips, now head of education initiatives at Gates, created an “academic priority” program in which the district identified by name all incoming ninth graders with the most risk factors for failing to earn 5.5 credits. Each high school was given an average of \$120,000 apiece to design its own approach to helping these students. Some schools used the money to reduce class sizes in ninth grade and asked their best teachers to teach them. Others assigned blocks of freshmen to a common set of core academic teachers who met together to monitor their progress. Still others appointed adult mentors to conduct daily or weekly check-ins with the shakiest students.

In theory, the three strategies Portland chose to address its dropout problems—plentiful and welcoming alternative schools, innovative small academies in place of large traditional high schools, and targeted extra support for ninth graders at risk of failure—were the right ones. They have certainly worked elsewhere. New York City's small high schools showed slightly higher graduation rates just a couple years after they opened. Philadelphia's growing network of alternative high schools has brought positive results. Researchers in Chicago and Baltimore confirmed that identifying at-risk students in eighth and ninth grade and helping them pass enough classes to be on track toward graduation is the smart way to prevent dropouts.

**At Portland's alternative schools, students sit on comfy couches, bring guitars to class, and spend hours talking about current events. Actually earning credits to graduate can seem downright square.**

But in Portland, these same steps haven't led to any measurable improvement in the high school graduation rate. The reason is that in each case, the school district failed to press for results and to fight against—or even to recognize—the political, cultural, and bureaucratic forces that typically undermine reform.

Take the “academic priority” program for at-risk ninth graders. Leaving it up to individual schools to design their own interventions probably made sense—the district's central office certainly had no monopoly on good ideas. But for such a decentralized strategy to work, the district needed to measure and reward outcomes so that the principals and teachers would have an incentive to drop practices that weren't working and

adopt others that were. This the district failed to do. Three years into the project, there has yet to be a public report on how many “priority” freshmen at each school passed their classes or earned enough high school credits after getting extra attention. In fact, the district's office of high schools, which launched the ninth-grade initiative and was supposed to oversee it, was subsequently dismantled and its staff dismissed.

The city's effort to break up its big high schools into smaller schools-within-schools suffered a similar fate.

When Portland first won grants to create the new small schools, backers pledged that students would be known and nurtured and challenged so well that 97 percent would earn diplomas. But, five years into the Gates-led initiative, overall graduation rates at the small academies remain stuck at the same abysmal level of the old comprehensive high schools they replaced. One high school faculty revolted and reverted to the big school model.

Why the inability to improve? Part of the reason was the federal No Child Left Behind law, which required giving students at failing schools the ability to transfer out. Most students who could read and write at grade level opted to flee, leaving higher concentrations of lower-achieving students at the smaller schools. But those schools never had much of a chance to compete, because they never had real autonomy. New York City hired full-fledged principals for its new small high schools and gave them the ability to hire their own teachers. Portland paid small school principals what it paid vice principals at large schools and vetted their qualifications at that same, lesser standard. Teachers who were on staff at the big schools were recycled into small school faculty, whether or not they or the small schools considered that the right fit.

Portland's biggest failure, however, has been its community-based alternative schools. In 2007, the most recent year on which the district has reported,

these privately run alternative schools enrolled about 2,500 students but issued just 156 diplomas. By contrast, New York City's alternative schools now issue diplomas to more than half the overage, undercredited students who enter them.

The reason for this unconscionable difference has to do with expectations and accountability. In 2004, New York schools chancellor Joel Klein closed a host of dropout recovery programs that weren't getting the job done. The school district now issues detailed yearly performance reports on each of its transfer high schools, and schools that don't measure up risk being shut down. "One of the principles that drive the New York effort is the belief that all kids can graduate," says JoEllen Lynch, former executive director of the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation in New York. "Those students need a lot more support, instructionally and emotionally, but you have to move them toward a diploma. That's just a basic expectation of a school."

Such expectations and accountability have simply never been part of Portland's alternative schools system. Those schools are funded with public money, but because they are privately operated, they are not subject to state accountability reports on their test scores or graduation rates. The way school district and city leaders see it, getting disengaged teens to reconnect with school is a victory in itself. The atmosphere inside these schools reflects these low expectations. They project a youth-embracing vibe in which earning credits, mastering algebra, and learning to use proper spelling and grammar can seem downright square. Preparing for the GED—a vastly substandard credential to a diploma—is considered rigorous. Students can take classes on comfy couches, bring their guitars to class, and spend hours talking about current events—all engaging, but not the ticket to a proper high school diploma, much less college or career.

As you might imagine, this high-sympathy, low-demand ethos makes

the alternative schools wildly popular with young adults turned off by the city's traditional high schools (not to mention magnets for troubled and listless teens from nearby school districts). In New York City, about 5 percent of high school students attend community-based second-chance alternative schools high schools, known there as "transfer high schools"; in Portland, nearly 20 percent do.

Having such a large portion of the city's students in alternative schools can depress a district's graduation rate by excusing regular middle and high schools from addressing students' problems early on, notes Robert Balfanz, a Johns Hopkins University researcher who specializes in dropouts. "School officials can say, 'Well, we have lots of good alternative schools for students who need more

**If New York and Philadelphia, cities with much bigger problems, can improve their graduation rates, what excuse does Portland have not to do so, too?**

support than we can give, so the best solution is really to try to get these students there," rather than provide supports or prevention services in our regular schools, he said.

None of this should be news in Portland, by the way. The local paper, *The Oregonian* (for which I work), has run several front-page articles showing that the alternative schools have poor attendance, weak oversight, lax academic expectations, and extremely few graduates.

**T**he potentially good news is that the Portland schools are beginning to show signs of waking up. Superintendent Carole Smith, who spent decades running one of the city's better private alternative schools, has

indicated that the district will start vetting such schools for results beginning this fall, cutting off contracts to those that don't measure up. She has also said that this fall the district will begin posting data on at-risk freshmen at the traditional high schools who are supposed to be getting extra support and attention under the "academic priority" program. That should make it possible to see how good a job individual schools are doing in helping these at-risk kids pass their classes and earn sufficient credits to graduate.

In the face of declining district enrollment, Smith is also pressing a plan to close one or more high schools and lessen the socioeconomic gulfs between those that remain. Her hope is that having fewer, larger neighborhood high schools—the opposite of the Gates approach—will allow each one to guarantee more catch-up opportunities for struggling students, plus an array of fine arts, music, college prep, and world languages now entirely lacking in some of the less affluent Portland high schools.

Smith's focus on improving the district's graduation rate—she calls it "our primary challenge"—is welcome. But if she hopes to succeed she'll need to foster a change in expectations. The attitude that has long infused Portland's alternative schools—that troubled teens can't be expected to graduate, and that just getting them to show up is a victory—has also defined Portland's general approach to the dropout problem. Grant makers and school board members praised the district for its creativity and partnerships in addressing the dropout issue, even as the schools were still failing huge numbers of students. Good intentions were rewarded, not results. If New York and Philadelphia, cities with much bigger problems, can improve their graduation rates, what excuse does Portland have not to do so, too? <sup>WM</sup>

**Betsy Hammond** covers education for *The Oregonian*.



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