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COMMENTARY

Tackling the Dropout Crisis Comprehensively

By Paulette LoMonaco

A new report on the high school dropout problem, released in April by former U.S. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, his wife, Alma J. Powell, and the America's Promise Alliance, reveals the breathtaking dimensions of that national tragedy. ("**Dropout Campaigns Envisioned for States, 50 Key City Districts**," April 9, 2008.)

The report's findings show that "only about half of all students served by the main school systems in the nation's 50 largest cities graduate from high school." Nationwide, approximately 1.2 million students drop out each year—about 7,000 every school day.

Fortunately, there are programs in place in some of America's cities that attack this problem comprehensively, by addressing each of its many dimensions. Such endeavors are having a real impact and point the way to a solution.

I am involved with one such program, Good Shepherd Services, a nonprofit youth-development and family-services organization in New York City. Because we have been dealing with the dropout problem for almost three decades, we know that its contours are even more stark when one looks beyond the statistics, sees the real potential of many of these dropouts, and comes to understand the human consequences of their lost promise. A high school diploma is, after all, the critical first step in socioeconomic advancement.

Any solution to this problem will require active collaboration between local departments of education and community-based organizations. It can't be addressed by schools alone, because the problem isn't in the schools alone. Often, it involves a poor neighborhood, inadequate support systems, and multiple stresses on families.

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For those who would undertake such efforts, here are some points to keep in mind:

Successful partnerships can be developed. Collaboration between the New York City Department of Education and community-based organizations has resulted in a citywide strategy known as "multiple pathways to graduation," which has four primary components: transfer high schools, Young Adult Borough Centers, youth-focused General Educational Development programs, and Learning to Work initiatives.

Good Shepherd's first transfer high school was introduced to New York City in 2002. The school—South Brooklyn Community High School—is specially designed to provide active intervention; small, rigorous classes; accelerated learning; and a hands-on, personalized approach to learning. It also involves an equal partnership—in this case, between Good Shepherd Services, which built and operates the school and addresses out-of-class issues affecting students' performance, and the city's department of education, whose teachers provide high-caliber classroom instruction.

This nationally recognized model has been so successful that three additional transfer schools have been created—in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens. And there is interest in replicating the model further, in New York as well as in other cities.

Young Adult Borough Centers, which similarly reflect this crucial collaboration, provide a range of support services as well as academic evening classes designed for young people age 17 or older, who have earned at least 17 credits toward high school graduation. Access GED programs give these youths intensive and individualized remediation, and incorporate case management and other services that have not traditionally been part of GED programs to help prepare students for postsecondary success.

Learning to Work contracts developed by the department of education provide the community-based organizations with a funding stream for their work. Integrated across all three models, Learning to Work encourages in-depth exploration of career and educational options, as well as hands-on experience through subsidized internships, which open doors to employment and future career opportunities.

There is reason for optimism. Since the city's education department established its Office of Multiple Pathways in 2005, more than 5,000 young people in New York City who had either dropped out or fallen off track in traditional schools have graduated from multiple-pathways programs.

South Brooklyn Community High School, for example, boasts a graduation rate of 68 percent among former dropouts. Its students earn an average of from 12 to 14 credits per year toward the 44 credits required to graduate, compared with from 4 to 5 credits at their previous schools.

While these numbers are small, given the magnitude of the crisis, they are nevertheless encouraging. They show that these programs are working. They are now being expanded to serve more students in New York, and are being replicated to address the problem more broadly.

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And, for those 5,000 graduates, life looks far more promising. Those with high school diplomas are estimated, on average, to make more than \$250,000 in additional lifetime earnings, compared with dropouts, and they are half as likely to be unemployed.

The challenge now is to take what has been learned and apply it on a broader scale. Fortunately, many groups—from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to such New York-based philanthropies as the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Robin Hood, and the Tiger Foundation—are there to help. They have made major commitments to addressing the dropout problem, and provide important leadership and financial support.

The No. 1 predictor of a young person's future success, according to Alma Powell, the chair of the America's Promise Alliance, is whether or not they graduate from high school. None of us should accept anything less than this for any child.

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