

THE NEW JERSEY HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION CAMPAIGN

FORGING NEW JERSEY'S CRADLE TO COLLEGE & WORKFORCE PIPELINE FOR ALL CHILDREN

YEAR ONE
PRELIMINARY FINDINGS
AND PROPOSED PLAN
FOR ACTION



PREPARED BY:

NEW JERSEY OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL
WITH THE NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION &
NEW JERSEY HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION CAMPAIGN AND PARTNERS

INTRODUCTION

On October 15, 2008 Governor Jon S. Corzine was joined by Mrs. Alma Powell, chair of the America's Promise Alliance, and more than 700 stakeholders to convene the New Jersey High School Graduation Campaign and underscore his administration's commitment to the issue of dropout prevention. Since that day, five regional forums have been convened; more than 3,500 individuals and organizations have been meaningfully engaged; a large volume of dropout prevention information, feedback, and research has been gathered; several projects have been initiated; and these preliminary findings and proposed action steps have been prepared. What follows below presents our progress to date and proposes concrete next steps toward our vision that 100% of New Jersey's children graduate from high school ready to attend college and enter the workforce.

The purpose of this document is to share preliminary findings from the first year of the New Jersey High School Graduation Campaign and to propose a roadmap for moving forward. These preliminary findings and proposed action plan are not meant to be an exhaustive or overly-authoritative recitation of best practices for dropout prevention. Rather, they seek to offer a meaningful starting point for examining some foundational principles and strategies that have worked and/or are likely to work based on the information gleaned during the first year of the Campaign. More importantly, they are intended to move us beyond simply talking about the issue into the nuts and bolts of "How To." They are not meant to offer a single or quick fix for the challenge; rather, they seek to underscore the need for urgent, yet deliberate, concerted, collaborative, and sustained action beginning now and continuing into the future. The conversation has begun in earnest during this past year, and now is the time to begin taking action.

Our collective work this past year reflects an unprecedented statewide collaboration to gather information on the dropout issue and it creates a unique opportunity to address this issue in a comprehensive manner. As a result of this first year's work, we can report consensus that New Jersey has much to be proud of with regard to the quality of many of its schools and overall student achievement, its strong network of governmental and nongovernmental programs for children and families, and other critical initiatives affecting children such as access to affordable and free healthcare and improvements to the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Nevertheless, a realistic recognition also exists that the dropout and college-readiness situation is indeed a challenge that affects every state, including New Jersey. There is also a growing realization and sense of urgency that every state, including New Jersey, can and should do more to meaningfully address it. This recognition is mirrored by several current national efforts being led by organizations such as the America's Promise Alliance, the National Education Association, and the National Governor's Association.

Part I: Why A Graduation Campaign?

The National Picture

Across the United States children are dropping out of school at unacceptable levels. A decision to drop out of school results in significant costs, both for the individual and for society. Children who drop out of school are more likely to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, incarcerated, divorced, and their children will have a higher likelihood of dropping out themselves, creating a cycle of under education, poverty and under employment.¹ There are also significant economic costs associated with a decision to drop out. For example, high school dropouts, on average, earn \$9,200 less per year than high school graduates, and about \$1 million less over a lifetime than college graduates.² Thus, the monetary and social costs associated with the decision to dropout make the goal of 100% graduation a critical one.

In its groundbreaking work on the “Cradle to Prison Pipeline,” the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) has powerfully depicted how and why poor minority children are far more likely to dropout of school and be incarcerated. The realities of inadequate access to health coverage, gaps in early childhood development, disparate educational opportunities resulting in low achievement and attachment to school, and the prevalence of additional contributing factors such as child abuse and neglect, unmet mental health and emotional needs, substance abuse issues, and ineffective juvenile justice system responses constitute the underlying causes that have built the Cradle to Prison Pipeline in this country. As part of its Campaign to bring attention to and dismantle this Pipeline, the Children’s Defense Fund reports, in part, that:

Nationally, one in three Black and one in six Latino boys born in 2001 are at risk of imprisonment during their lifetime. While boys are five times as likely to be incarcerated as girls, there also are a significant number of girls in the juvenile justice system. This rate of incarceration is endangering children at younger and younger ages. This is America’s pipeline to prison — a trajectory that leads to marginalized lives, imprisonment and often premature death. Although the majority of fourth graders cannot read at grade level, states spend about three times as much money per prisoner as per public school pupil.³

School dropout and pipeline to prison challenges are inextricably connected, negatively impacting each state and nearly every major city in the nation. Recognizing this reality, the America’s Promise Alliance has made dropout prevention its priority. Founded in 1997 with General Colin Powell as Chairman and chaired today by Mrs. Alma Powell, America’s Promise Alliance is a non-partisan partnership of more than 300 corporations, nonprofits, faith-based organizations and advocacy groups that are passionate about improving lives and changing outcomes for children.

In large part thanks to the efforts of America’s Promise Alliance and its many partners, the reasons for a campaign to address what the Alliance labels a true “crisis” are

becoming more readily apparent. As reported on the America's Promise Alliance website:

Nationwide, nearly one in three U.S. high school students fails to graduate. In total, approximately 1.3 million students drop out each year – averaging 7,200 every school day. Among minority students, the problem is even more severe with nearly 50 percent of African American and Hispanic students not completing high school on time. Experts say that dropping out of high school affects not just students and their families, but the country overall – including businesses, government, and communities. The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that high school dropouts from the Class of 2006-07 will cost the U.S. more than \$329 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity over their lifetimes. Experts say that those who drop out are more likely to be incarcerated, rely on public programs and social services, and go without health insurance than those who graduate from high school.⁴

Dropping out of school is not simply “a schools problem,” but rather one that requires the involvement of all concerned citizens and stakeholders. Together, communities should understand how seemingly different sectors of society are, in truth, interconnected and contributing to the same pipeline. We should intentionally work to forge a different pipeline – one that ensures all children in all communities have everything needed to stay in school, be successful, and graduate to opportunities for college and beyond. In this sense, New Jersey should be forging its own “Cradle to College & Workforce Pipeline” for every child.

The New Jersey High School Graduation Campaign: Responding to the National Call to Action

High school dropout is a national problem that, if ignored, will continue to negatively impact on individual lives and on our national economy. The implications of this national problem are evident in every state in the country, including New Jersey. The data also show that if we can prevent high school dropout, we can improve our overall economic future. For example, if the male high school graduation rate increased by just 5%, it is estimated New Jersey would realize about \$189 million in public safety savings and additional revenue per year.⁵ If New Jersey's high schools graduated all students ready for college, it is estimated the state would save almost \$95.6 million per year in community college remediation costs.⁶ Similarly, it is estimated that New Jersey would save more than \$258.6 million in health care costs over the lifetimes of each class of dropouts had they earned their diplomas.⁷ Lastly, if the high school dropouts who currently head households in New Jersey had earned their diplomas, it is estimated the state's economy would have benefited from an additional \$1.9 billion in wealth accumulated by families.⁸

In April 2008, America's Promise Alliance launched its national Dropout Prevention Campaign which, among other things, carried with it a call-to-action for all 50

states and 55 cities to convene dropout prevention summits. Responding to this call-to-action, Governor Jon S. Corzine signed the America's Promise Alliance pledge and on October 15, 2008 formally launched the New Jersey High School Graduation Campaign. Early in the planning a decision was made that New Jersey's Campaign should be termed the "High School Graduation Campaign," reflecting a collective desire to concentrate on the intended positive outcome (more students graduating) and not the intended prevention or avoidance (less students dropping out).

In its first year, the central objectives of New Jersey High School Graduation Campaign have been to:

- increase public awareness of the dropout and college-readiness crisis;
- secure commitment for integrated collaboration between the corporate, nonprofit, public, and education sectors;
- engage schools and provide exposure to strengthen and support their efforts to help disadvantaged youth;
- identify and inspire local leaders to get involved in community-school initiatives;
- convene at least three regional forums; and
- convene a statewide summit in October 2009 to report findings and propose a plan of action for reducing the dropout rate in New Jersey.

Each of these objectives has been achieved. As reflected in the body of these preliminary findings, we have engaged and brought together more than 3,500 stakeholders; convened five regional forums; initiated specific dropout prevention efforts which engaged local leaders and strengthened community-school partnerships, such as the Truancy Reduction Pilot Initiative, the Broader Bolder Approach School Reform initiative, and the Alternative High School Initiative; collected and synthesized large volumes of data, forum feedback, and related research to address dropout concerns; prepared these preliminary findings and proposed plan of action; and convened a year-end summit on October 6, 2009.

Leadership and Coalition Building: Breaking Down Silos and Working Across Sectors

Increasing graduation in New Jersey requires leadership, commitment, and coalition building among a varied set of key stakeholders. Governor Corzine has exhibited this leadership by convening this statewide campaign, and by asking Attorney General Anne Milgram and the Office of the Attorney General to take the lead in carrying it out on behalf of the State.

Very early in this process the New Jersey Department of Education and Commissioner Lucille Davy, and the New Jersey Department of State and Secretary of State Nina Wells, signaled their desire to be pro-active participants in this Campaign. Accordingly, they have served as the Campaign's lead partners and, in this role, have been active participants in nearly every aspect of efforts to date.

There are several reasons why, though it may appear unusual at first glance, the Office of the Attorney General is spearheading a campaign intended to impact schools and graduation rates. Reflecting the reality that school dropouts impact all sectors of society, it is clear that truancy and school dropout are correlates of crime and delinquency. Moreover, the Attorney General also oversees implementation of the Governor's Strategy for Safe Streets and Neighborhoods, a comprehensive public safety initiative intended to reduce violent crime and gang activity through a three-pronged approach focusing on strategies for Law Enforcement, Reentry and Prevention.

The Prevention Strategy is charged with developing and implementing approaches that meaningfully impact the root causes why young people join gangs and commit violent crime in the first place; in essence, working to address the cradle to prison pipeline. The Strategy's comprehensive and unique approach recognizes that because there are multiple and interrelated factors contributing to juvenile delinquency, gangs, and youth violence, there must be multiple and interrelated solutions to preventing them. Significantly, a guiding principle and mandate for the Prevention Strategy is to "breakdown the silos" which currently exist in addressing these issues, both across state and local governments as well as across communities. In order to address this issue and maximize effectiveness, the Attorney General, in June 2008, convened a Prevention Coordinating Council. The Council consists of senior officials from key state departments and is charged with working collaboratively under the organizing principle of "Keeping Kids Safely in School and Positively Engaged." Each member agency, regardless of mission, is invested in this organizing principle.

Beyond state-level partnership, numerous school districts and local governments have taken part in the Campaign. Moreover, a broad coalition of partners from the education (including higher education), community, business, non-profit/faith-based, and philanthropic sectors have also participated and many have already assumed active roles. An evolving list of more than 100 governmental and nongovernmental partners have already participated and/or indicated that they would like to actively participate moving forward. While this is not an exhaustive list, many of the confirmed partners are listed below:

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|--|---------------------------------------|
| America's Promise Alliance | AmeriCorps |
| Association for Children of New Jersey | Bergen Community College |
| Berkeley College | Black Ministers Council of New Jersey |
| Boys & Girls Club of Atlantic City | Boys & Girls Clubs of NJ |
| Camden County Prosecutors Office | Camden City Public Schools |
| Capital One | Cinque, LLC |
| Citizen Schools of New Jersey | City of Jersey City |
| City of Newark | Cobblestone Records |
| Communities in Schools of New Jersey | Council of New Jersey Grantmakers |
| County College of Morris | Cumberland County College |
| Education Law Center | Educational Testing Services |
| Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of NJ | Hispanic Directors Association of NJ |
| Isles | JP Morgan Chase |

Latino Leadership Circle	Latino Peace Officers Association
The MCJ/Amelior Foundation	Mercer County Community College
Montclair State University	NJ After 3
NJ Agriculture Experiment Station	NJ Arts Education Partnership
NJ Black Issues Convention	NJ Chamber of Commerce
NJ Commission on Higher Education	NJ Community Development Corporation
NJ Council of County Vo-Tech Schools	NJ Department of Children & Families
NJ Department of Community Affairs	NJ Department of Education
NJ Department of Health & Senior Services	NJ Department of Human Services
NJ Dept. of Labor & Workforce Dev.	NJ Department of State
New Jersey Education Association	New Jersey Immigration Policy Network
NJ Juvenile Justice Commission	New Jersey NAACP
NJ Office of the Attorney General	NJ Office of Homeland Security
New Jersey Prevention Network	NJ Principals and Supervisors Association
New Jersey Resources	New Jersey School Age Care Coalition
New Jersey State Council on the Arts	New Jersey State Library
New Jersey Youth Corps	Newark Alliance
Newark Now	Newark Public Schools
Nicholson Foundation	Partnership for a Drug-Free New Jersey
Paterson Education Fund	Princeton Center for Leadership Training
The Prudential Foundation	PSEG
Rutgers Cooperative Extension	Rutgers T.E.E.M. Gateway / YES Center
Rutgers University	Sisterhood, Inc.
State Farm Insurance Companies	Statewide Parent Advocacy Network
Southern New Jersey Development Council	Teach For America
The NJ State League of Municipalities	UMDNJ Center for Healthy Schools
United Way of Essex and West Hudson	United Ways of New Jersey
Verizon	Volunteer Center of Bergen County
Welcome NJ	YouthBuild-Newark
YouthBuild Institute - Trenton	

As demonstrated by America’s Promise Alliance’s example, effective dropout prevention requires multi-level and multi-sector leadership and collaboration. Moreover, as reflected by this growing list of partners, we are off to a good start.

Part II: The New Jersey High School Graduation Campaign-The First Year and Preliminary Findings

Building Momentum and Ensuring Sustainability

Early in the planning a collective decision was made to ensure that this New Jersey effort embody an on-going campaign to meaningfully address the school dropout and college-readiness crisis in New Jersey. This consideration reflected a desire to avoid the all-too-common pitfall of convening a one-day summit or conference in which everyone comes together, concerns and issues are appropriately raised, but then there is

little clarity or follow-through on the plan for action moving forward. Therefore, it was determined that we should begin with a year-long campaign designed to build momentum and to create a plan of action necessary for ensuring that the work is sustainable and results-oriented, beginning now and continuing into the future.

Planning for the Campaign began more than a year ago. At first, the Office of the Attorney General secured the commitment of the New Jersey Departments of Education and State to serve as co-partners in the planning efforts. Shortly after, the MCJ/Amelior and Nicholson Foundations offered to play active roles, followed by Rutgers University and then by the City of Newark and Newark Public Schools because Newark had been identified as one of 55 target cities nationally by America's Promise Alliance. Alfred Koepp, President of the Newark Alliance and former President of PSEG, agreed to serve as Chair of a Business Coalition and, soon thereafter, Verizon, State Farm Insurance, and several other New Jersey companies signed on as supporters and partners. Verizon and State Farm Insurance, in particular, have been very proactive in the planning and related activities that have taken place. As noted, during the course of the past year a diverse and broad group of organizations – representing the education, higher education, community/faith-based, business, philanthropic, and public sectors -- have played active roles in some form or fashion, reflecting the truly public-private nature of this endeavor.

Engaging Stakeholder Voice and Participation

The Campaign has already succeeded to some degree in bringing together the broad coalition of partners needed for sustaining a dropout prevention effort of this magnitude. However, it also recognizes that outreach and coalition-building, in a sense, has barely begun and that it must continue in order to ensure that all voices, ideas, and concerns are being represented and invested in the ultimate goal – 100% graduation.

Last year, more than 700 people joined Governor Corzine, Mrs. Alma Powell, and others as New Jersey responded to America's Promise Alliance's call-to-action and signaled its intention to reverse the dropout and college-readiness crisis. Since then and during this past year, we have convened five Regional Forums at which more than 1,000 individuals actively participated in full-day discussion sessions that were facilitated and recorded by volunteer members of our coalition. As part of the methodology, the Urban Institute & Vera Institute for Justice undertook a formal content analysis of the more than 100 pages of content notes taken from the Regional Forums. These Regional Forums covered all corners of New Jersey, being held at Mercer County College, Montclair State University, County College of Morris, Cumberland County College, and Rutgers University-Camden.

In addition to these Regional Forums, we have collected 2,000 youth surveys, which were analyzed by the Office of the Attorney General's Statistical Analysis Coordinator. Notably, we ensured that current students, those who have dropped out, and recent graduates constituted the young people who participated in Regional Forums and who completed surveys. Moreover, with assistance from Rutgers University's Bloustein School and its Initiative for Regional and Community Transformation (IRCT), we also

undertook a relatively comprehensive review of national best practices, initiatives and recommendations related to dropout prevention. Throughout this time, a coalition of more than 35 diverse stakeholders has been meeting regularly and engaging in dialogue to offer feedback, suggestions, and concerns based on their depth of experience with these issues.

Through these efforts a sizable volume of stakeholder and expert information about dropout prevention, both generally and in New Jersey, has been gathered. Using this data along with other pertinent information gathered from coalition, individual stakeholder, and Prevention Coordinating Council meetings, the Office of the Attorney General in consultation with the Department of Education has prepared these preliminary findings and proposed plan of action. It has been prepared based upon the information collected as well as upon the substantial input and feedback received from many of the active partners. Through this process, the Office of the Attorney General has remained in a consultative posture with as many of the Campaign partners as possible.

The result is a set of preliminary findings and proposed action steps which we believe reflects substantial consensus about the realistic nature of the challenge before us and, more importantly, about what needs to be done to meaningfully address it.

Part III: What We Have Learned So Far – Why Students Are Dropping Out of School

A Snapshot of What We Have Heard and Learned

The following offers a snapshot of what we have heard and learned from forum participants, students, other stakeholders, and national observers about the motivation and factors related to whether or not children stay in school.

- **Students want to do well and graduate.** Most students view graduation and going to college as important to them. For instance, 83% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. According to a national poll released by MTV and the National Governors Association, 87% of young people want to go to college.
- **Students drop out and/or fail to do well in school for a wide-range of reasons.** As noted in the content analysis conducted by the Urban and Vera Institutes, “[s]tudents who are at risk of dropping out of school often face competing priorities and stressful personal circumstances. Students who participated in the Graduation Campaign Forums (GCF) noted how these significant pressures outside of the classroom can easily outweigh their motivation to continue in school.” As one student at a Regional Forum panel put it in describing why a friend left school, “[m]y friend has a job supporting his family and his brother is in a gang. He has no choice.” These types of competing pressures are consistent with the findings described in the groundbreaking 2006 report, *The Silent*

Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts, as it shared that: “There is no single reason why students drop out of high school. Respondents report different reasons: a lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; academic challenges; and the weight of real world events.”⁹

- **Students need positive relationships with adults and peers.** Interpersonal relationships were identified as perhaps the most important factor in motivating youth success. As noted in the content analysis, “[t]he motivation students received from their families and peers, and personal connection to teachers were most frequently identified as key factors contributing to student success. Teachers’ personal connections to youth were seen as important both in motivating academic success and in engaging young people in the class curriculum.” Nevertheless, consider that 41% of students responding to the survey indicated that they did not believe there was someone in their school whom they can approach for help with personal issues.
- **One of the biggest influencers of students is their peers.** Development of peer leadership and mentoring programs were identified as powerful support techniques for students, teachers and families. As the content analysis notes, “[p]articipants highlighted the importance of harnessing the positive powers of peers to support students in transition and to motivate those at-risk.” Moreover, “[s]tudent panelists consistently cited the strong role that their peers play in motivating them to achieve, and noted that leadership development was an important part of their own learning. Students drew strength from peers who were ‘on the right path.’” Furthermore, “[p]articipants, both students and educators, stated that peer-to-peer mentoring provides students with a ‘safe space’ to discuss issues they may not feel comfortable to discuss with adults and encounter support from other students they trust and who could better relate to their experiences.” As one student noted, “[o]lder students know what the younger ones are going through. They have the recent experience to help and put you through the right path.” Another encouraged students and teachers to “[f]ind the kids that all other students look up to, and get them involved; all the other kids will follow them.”
- **Families must be engaged and supported.** Students and participants also frequently cited parents and family relationships as the most important indicators of student success. As one student panelist described it, “[m]y mother was a big influence. The smile on her face and making her proud is very important to me.” Many forum participants discussed the importance of continuously engaging parents, especially with good news about how their child is doing. The content analysis also points out that, “[t]he same pressures that exert themselves on students, however, often exert on parents as well, eroding the ability of families to actively engage with and support student academic achievement.... These families may require concerted outreach by school staff, access to skill enhancement or concrete supports in order to fulfill their role as a positive force for their children.”

- **The dropout process is typically a gradual one which usually begins early and builds over time.** Participants repeatedly described the importance of strong starts for students in pre-school and elementary school as indicators of how students will do throughout school. Close observation of academic progress and behavioral trends in elementary and middle schools, along with daily monitoring of attendance, were identified as early warning signs for students more likely to be on the path to dropping out. As described in the content analysis, “[p]articipants emphasized that [high school] services would have a much greater impact if introduced at earlier grades as well. Participants stressed the importance of earlier identification of at-risk students and student-engagement supports provided to middle schools and elementary schools.”
- **Students need school and classroom cultures which foster high expectations and are engaging and challenging.** One of the most frequently mentioned factors as to why students drop out is because they are bored, disengaged, and uninspired. Many participants discussed the need to ensure that students are fully engaged and academically challenged. They also cited the need to ensure and maintain high standards for what we require our students to know and understand, especially with regard to connection to real world opportunities. We also heard from participants that oftentimes “less is more” in that sometimes it is more important to take the time to ensure that students truly grasp and understand academic material than it is to ensure rote pace with the textbook. As explained at one point in the content analysis: “[a]lthough making the structure and content of curriculum more engaging to youth, and providing opportunities for technical skills building were emphasized by participants, the ability of individual teachers to utilize more interactive methods was most frequently mentioned by students. Participants emphasized interactive and hands-on learning as appealing to many youth. They identified partnerships with local business as able to provide project- and task-based learning environments. They highlighted the necessity of professional development for teachers and flexibility for schools to develop teaching styles that are engaging to young people.” Indeed, 83% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that hands-on and career oriented classes would prepare them well for life after high school.
- **The business community can play a crucial role in student engagement and connection to opportunities in the real world.** As reported in the content analysis, “[w]hile some emphasized the increased resources businesses could provide schools (e.g., funding for recreational programs or scholarships), most emphasized the vocational and practical experience such programs provide students. Participants indicated that local businesses benefit from local publicity and from the development of local workforce trained in skills specific to their industries. However, participants noted that publicity and public relations by themselves are often not enough for businesses to sustain such programs over time.” It also related that “[o]ne of the participants gave the example of a group of young people who wanted to learn how to make skateboards. The school

partnered with Nike to offer the class, and now the school has ‘almost 100% attendance’ in the class with a group of young people who were typically not engaged in school.” In addition, businesses offer many other practical supports as well. At one Regional Forum, participants described how State Farm Insurance employees serve as mentors and regularly meet with high school students in one New Jersey school. Other businesses were identified that prioritize part-time or summer jobs opportunities for students who need to work.

- **Students need school and classroom cultures which provide the necessary supports as they are challenged to meet high expectations and standards.** While there is consensus on the need to instill high expectations and standards, there is also substantial agreement on the importance of ensuring appropriate supports are in place for students as they strive to reach these high expectations and standards. Sixty five percent of the students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that schools could do more to increase their ability to meet the demands of students. Meeting students’ needs requires collective recognition that students drop out of school for a variety of reasons, oftentimes related to pressures created outside the classroom but carried with them into it. Making dropout prevention a priority helps ensure that principals and teachers within a school do more to ensure appropriate engagement, relationships, and other supports are available. In meeting these challenges participants identified the importance of strong leadership and systems within schools as essential along with a collaborative network of strong partners beginning with families and including local community-based partnerships with youth service agencies, faith-based entities, police departments, recreation leagues, hospitals or health clinics, etc. School Based Youth Services Programs, New Jersey After 3, and 21st Century Community Learning Centers are specific programs in New Jersey that provide funding for academic support and tutoring as well as important social and health services to students both in and after school, most often under the lead of trusted community providers. These and similar programs were mentioned often as necessary tools in dropout prevention.
- **It does take a village.** Participant groups consistently identified fostering meaningful connections with parents, community, and business organizations as among the top three priorities in dropout prevention. In turn, these connections offer opportunities in a number of different areas. For example, many participants discussed the relevance to curriculum and engagement. The importance of community partners to operate after school and recreation programs, offer health services, and engage parents were often cited as necessary ingredients in any successful approach to serving children and preventing them from dropping out of school. As detailed in the content analysis, “[s]upportive services can be provided to families directly through the school, through community partners, or through a combination of the two. When provided by community partners, they can be provided either on the school site or at a community center off-site. Participants listed various successful delivery models based either in schools or through communities. Strengthening partnerships with such services not only reduce the

burden that teachers and schools feel ‘to address all the needs of a child,’ but also help ensure that such needs are addressed appropriately within the community.”

- **Very often schools are not used to partnering with businesses and community organizations.** Notwithstanding recognition that school partnerships with businesses and community organizations are important, there are very real obstacles to forging meaningful and constructive collaborations. For instance, as described in the content analysis, “[p]articipants also tended to agree that forging such partnerships requires overcoming barriers both on the side of the schools and of industry. On the side of the school, stakeholders noted that there is often resistance to inviting businesses to schools because of issues of “ownership” of the students’ educational experience. As one participant explained, there’s an ‘attitude of we are the educators, we know what is best’ that leads schools to ‘close their doors to businesses.’ Indeed, “[p]articipants noted that overcoming school resistance to business partnerships involves creating buy-in with school leadership and identifying where school needs and business needs overlap and ‘sell[ing] the idea to corporations in a way that speaks to their needs.’ Participants suggested that the first step in engaging business in school activity is to compile a needs assessment or ‘wish list’ from local businesses to identify what it is they would like out of a partnership with the school. A shared ‘common vision’ of what the program will do – both for students and for the needs of the company – creates investment that makes the partnerships stable and sustainable over time.”
- **Teachers must be engaged and supported consistent with the recognition that dropout prevention is a priority.** Beyond families and peers, teachers were identified as individuals with the biggest opportunity for positive impact on students. Participants recognized that this presents both opportunity and challenge for teachers therefore requiring appropriate supports and training to enable them to assume the daily leadership role that is being expected of them. As conveyed in the content analysis, “[p]articipants identified a need for on-going professional development and coaching that focused on individual learning styles, engaging teaching methods, and personal student support. Teachers’ abilities to connect with students on a personal level were identified as a main factor in motivating youth, while teaching styles were identified as the main factor in engaging youth in the classroom. Participants highlighted on-going coaching from other teachers and school staff rather than one-time workshops as a successful strategy to building these skills. Educators represented in the forums noted that there was significant confusion about the proper role of teachers, and there was very little support for the variety of responsibilities they were expected to fulfill.”

Part IV: Moving Toward 100% Graduation – Building Upon What Works and Crafting a Plan for Action

Building Upon Good Work That Exists and Has Begun

As we embark on this Campaign, it is important to recognize that a majority of New Jersey's schools do, in fact, have track records of success which should be examined as we strive for 100% graduation. Moreover, there are several significant systems reforms underway along with a long list of schools and organizations that are already implementing innovative programs and practices which bolster our efforts.

Policies and Initiatives Already Underway

Redirecting the prison pipeline to a college & workforce pipeline necessarily encompasses an array of systems working together to achieve the goal. From this perspective, New Jersey continues to improve these systems and the outcomes for those who need them. The following are just a few examples of existing policies and initiatives already underway that are consistent with many of the themes that have emerged during the first year of this Campaign.

- **The Secondary Education Transformation Initiative:** A recurring theme during the first year of this Campaign has been the importance of higher expectations and standards along with curriculum that is relevant to the workforce requirements of the 21st Century. Through its Secondary Education Transformation Initiative, the New Jersey Department of Education has already undertaken leadership to address this challenge in a significant way. This Initiative focuses on redesigning middle schools and high schools through action steps and supportive policies that align content standards, assessments and high school graduation requirements with college and workplace expectations. The emphasis is on raising the bar for all students so that every child is prepared for success in a rapidly changing, technologically-driven, globally competitive world. In order to ensure that students succeed in college level courses without remediation, or they are ready to enter the workforce to learn job-specific skills, their preparation must be the same. The Secondary Education Transformation Initiative encompasses grades 6-12 in recognition of the need to provide a strong foundation in the knowledge and skills required for success in high school and to ensure a smooth transition from middle school to high school grades and the earning of a high school diploma.
- **Early Childhood Education:** The importance of high quality preschools, especially for at-risk children, has also been identified as a critical factor in the likelihood for success of children in school and beyond. Intensive, high-quality preschool programs can substantially increase children's school success and produce a host of life-long benefits, including increased school achievement and social and economic success as adults. Governor Corzine and the Legislature

made a substantial commitment to the expansion of preschool with the passage of the School Funding Reform Act of 2008 which calls for a 6-year roll-out of high quality preschool for all at risk three- and four-year-old children statewide. At present, approximately 51,000 three- and four-year old children are being served through the \$600 million that has been committed for FY 2010. It is projected that within six years all low-income students will be afforded an opportunity to receive high quality preschool programs, substantially increasing children's chances for success in school.

- **Health Care for Children and NJ FamilyCare:** That children dropout of school for a myriad of reasons -- oftentimes having nothing to do with academics -- is also a recurring theme. The comprehensive nature of this reality considers the impact of health and well-being on student attachment to school. Not surprisingly, during the course of the past year the importance of health care and access to health-related services has been frequently mentioned. In this respect, New Jersey, through its Department of Human Services, has stood as a leader in ensuring free and affordable health care to all children. A major component of this effort is NJ FamilyCare, which is a free or low-cost program for income-eligible families. As a result of efforts to date, the number of New Jerseyans without health insurance has decreased by more than 11%, or 147,000 individuals, the second largest reduction in the nation between 2007 and 2008. Moreover, the net increase in the number of children now accessing health care as a result of NJ FamilyCare has exceeded 90,000.
- **Improving the Child Welfare System:** The need to understand and address the unique circumstances of individual and specific risk factors in child welfare has also been raised as a factor in dropout prevention. New Jersey, through the leadership of the Department of Children and Families (DCF), has made substantial strides in improving the state's child welfare system by implementing an array of programs and practices designed to create stronger and more supported families and home environments which in turn support kids' success in school. Over the past three years, DCF has made considerable strides on the fundamentals of reform such as, reducing caseloads; increasing the number of licensed, available foster and adoptive families; and eliminating the backlog of legally free children waiting to be adopted. In addition, the DCF has put in place key services that assist and support children in school, at home and in communities, including: school-based youth service programs, Family Success Centers; and a new statewide youth helpline called 2NDFLOOR. Through these programs and a number of additional system reforms, DCF has built and maintains a network of supports throughout the state to help at-risk families avert crisis, stay together and keep their children at home and in school.

- **High Quality, Comprehensive After School Programs:** High-quality, comprehensive after school programs have been frequently mentioned as important contributors to effective dropout prevention. Not only do they assist students with academics, but they offer safe and structured places for students during critical hours where they also receive comprehensive support services and enrichment opportunities. During the past four years Governor Corzine, the Legislature, and the federal government have made certain that funding for afterschool programs has risen by 20%, including an increase from \$27.3 million in 2005-06 to \$32.8 million in 2009-10 despite the challenging fiscal situation. Building on this framework to ensure that more students and schools are being reached with high-quality after school programs – especially in communities with high dropout rates – will be the challenge moving forward.
- **Safe Streets & Neighborhoods:** As has been noted, keeping kids safely in school and positively engaged has an inherent connection to the public safety plan that Governor Corzine unveiled two years ago with his Strategy for Safe Streets & Neighborhoods. This initiative which is being led by the Attorney General and Department of Law & Public Safety is already demonstrating measurable progress in how law enforcement impacts and reduces violent crime and gangs in many of our communities. Moreover, through its focus on Prevention, the Strategy is also employing a number of critical interventions, such as its Truancy Reduction Initiative in six pilot schools districts. With the support of a multi-disciplinary state team and the National Center for School Engagement, this initiative is supporting these districts to work with its partners on the local level to more effectively monitor student attendance and provide the supports necessary to students who are on the path toward truancy and dropping out.
- **School Construction Projects:** In July 2008 Governor Corzine signed legislation authorizing \$3.9 billion for school construction, including \$2.9 billion for SDA districts, formerly known as Abbott districts. During the past few years, several school construction projects have been undertaken by the New Jersey Schools Development Authority that serve as models for the potential of community-school connections in positively engaging and supporting children. A few examples of recent innovative projects include: the Cicely Tyson School of Fine and Performing Arts with theme-based facilities in East Orange; the Jose Marti Middle School with a community medical center and library in Union City; the Anastasia Elementary School with community health and media centers in Long Branch; and the Octavius V. Catto School with a Boys & Girls Club co-located in Camden.

Existing Schools, Programs, and Practices are Already Making a Difference

Consistent with a strength and asset-based approach to working with young people, many partners during this past year have reminded us of the importance of recognizing existing good work in the form of successes and progress that is already occurring. During the past year we have learned about many schools, programs, and practices that have already been making a positive difference in the lives of young people and moving in the right direction in terms of graduation rates and other positive indicators.

Many of these schools, programs, and practices exist in some of the communities experiencing the greatest challenges in terms of dropout rates. For instance, Met East High School in Camden and Garrett Morgan Academy in Paterson are two examples of schools reflecting the best of key principles relating to “small schools,” innovative community partnerships, and interest-based engagement/learning and which are seeing impressive results in terms of student retention and on-time graduation. These schools, and others like them, present us with the question and challenge of how to replicate these models of success in bringing them to scale in districts such as Camden and Paterson. This past year, we learned that the Vineland Public Schools has undertaken a bold initiative to do just that by restructuring its high schools to ensure that all of its students are benefiting from the opportunities that small school cultures have been proven to offer.

Similarly, the Youth Education and Employment Services Center (or YE²S Center) in Newark is an impressive collaborative effort between the Newark Public Schools, the City of Newark, Rutgers University and several other public and private partners. The YE²S Center is a One-Stop Center for young people who have already dropped out of school, are re-entering from the juvenile justice or criminal justice system, and/or are truant and on the verge of dropping out of school. This innovative and collaborative-based approach is already demonstrating measurable success in recapturing and recovering students who have dropped out (or are about to drop out) of school and connecting them with appropriate support services, including placement in a school that best meets their learning and service needs.

Moreover, we have also learned that there is no shortage of strong programs and services that are effectively working in and with schools and communities to reach young people in positive ways. Community- and faith-based organizations such as Boys & Girls Clubs, Communities in Schools, Bethany Cares, Southern New Jersey Hispanic Family Center, and many others offer important youth and family programs and resources. Likewise, state and federal funded programs such as School Based Youth Services Programs (New Jersey Department of Children & Families), AmeriCorps (New Jersey Department of State), 21st Century Community Learning Centers (New Jersey Department of Education), New Jersey After 3 (New Jersey Department of Education and private sources), and GEAR UP, “Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs,” (New Jersey Commission on Higher Education) provide critical resources and programs to students in the places where it is easiest and best to reach them – in the schools themselves. In their own right, each of these programs

represent some of the most effective models in the country for forging stronger school-community partnerships -- which is a guiding principle of this work.

The policies, programs, and initiatives outlined above are just a few of the many already underway and having a positive impact for children and families. Each has a direct impact in fortifying the positive pipeline that we want to see for all children from the cradle to college & workforce. Thus, it is essential to recognize the value and impact that each of these seemingly distinct initiatives has while also reflecting upon the challenge of how we can better leverage and maximize our respective individual efforts. This is why it is critical to have a framework for action which can “breakdown the silos” and help us to forge a common path as we strive for 100% graduation.

A Vision and Plan for Action

The consensus of participants in this work is that a clear and simple plan for action is needed if increasing graduation rates and dropout prevention is to be a real goal. The following framework is proposed as the “Next Steps” in our collective effort to achieve 100% graduation.

1. **Acknowledgment.** New Jersey should acknowledge that the dropout and college-readiness crisis is real, that it adversely affects New Jersey, and that New Jersey is not alone in addressing this challenge. The very fact that this Campaign has been undertaken and these preliminary findings and proposed plan of action have come to fruition is evidence that this is already happening. However, the true test will be in future months and years.

2. **There should be a Statewide Vision for 100% Graduation to College & Workforce for All Children and it should be a Stated Priority.** Our vision that 100% of New Jersey students should graduate college and career ready should be a stated priority and there should be corresponding accountability and responsibility on all levels and across public and private sectors. Schools cannot address these issues alone; they must be joined by a wide array of committed partners who work together with schools. Though raising expectations is clearly important, we must ensure we are also working together in raising the supports needed to help all children meet those expectations.

3. **We should have a Specific, Statewide 100% Graduation Action Plan.** This 100% Graduation Action Plan must be data-driven, action-oriented, and lay out a clear set of steps for achieving our goals. This Graduation Action Plan should build upon the information contained in these preliminary findings, be completed by May 2010, and include the following critical features: (1) accurate and current dropout rates; (2) clear goals and measurable benchmarks relating to graduation rates over a 3, 5, and 10 year period; (3) articulation of specific principles and strategies needed in achieving the stated goals and benchmarks; and (4) targeted action strategies for districts and communities with the highest dropout rates. It is worth noting here that accurate dropout rates should be uniformly calculated for all schools and districts and in a manner which provides strong indicator of the percentage of entering 9th graders who are graduating four years

later. A cohort rate approach consistent with one such as the national initiative led by the National Governor's Association is needed. Significantly, the Department of Education has confirmed that substantial efforts in this regard are already underway and that accurate dropout rate data will be available to serve as a basis for the statewide 100% Graduation Action Plan.

4. **We should have Structure and Shared Accountability.** A governmental Graduation Task Force -- as a committee of the Governor's Prevention Coordinating Council -- and with the assistance of a corresponding nongovernmental Stakeholder Advisory Board should be charged with drafting the 100% Graduation Action Plan consistent with the principles and strategies contained here. Together, the Graduation Task Force and Stakeholder Advisory Board should provide shared oversight and accountability for implementation of the statewide Graduation Action Plan and initiatives which arise from it. The Graduation Task Force will be chaired by a senior official from the Office of the Attorney General and co-chaired by a senior Department of Education official. Its members will include senior officials from several state departments and agencies. The Stakeholder Advisory Board shall serve to formalize the informal and inclusive coalition of 60+ nongovernmental stakeholders who have already joined the campaign. It shall be open to participation by other interested entities. The co-chairs of the Graduation Task Force shall ensure on-going communication and exchange between the Graduation Task Force and Stakeholder Advisory Board and work to develop an appropriate plan for governance. In addition, the Graduation Task Force and Stakeholder Advisory Board shall take proactive steps to ensure that youth and parent voices are well-represented and empowered as part of this Campaign and Plan.

5. **We should Regularly Convene and Maintain a Sense of Urgency and Priority.** The Graduation Task Force and Stakeholder Advisory Board shall meet regularly and develop strategies for on-going communication, including convene a comprehensive annual statewide summit & best practices conference as well as other related forums central to the goals of the Campaign. Reports on progress and challenges in meeting the goals of the Graduation Action Plan shall be the main subject of the annual summit.

6. **This should be a Sustainable, Nonpartisan Campaign.** This Graduation Campaign and the 100% Graduation Action Plan should be designed to exist and expand beyond any single department, agency, or community partner. Indeed, following the example of the America's Promise Alliance, this Campaign should plan to span administrations and be nonpartisan in its approach and outreach.

Simple and straight forward in its approach, this framework for action planning offers a usable roadmap for development of a specific plan and for making certain that the urgency of this issue does not fade away.

Guiding Principles

During the course of the past year, a number of common themes and principles consistently emerged. Some of these guiding principles tend to be broad and, therefore, may encompass one or several meanings depending on the context. Most of them are overlapping and often mutually reinforce and support each other. Development of the statewide 100% Graduation Action Plan and targeted action strategies should consider and be guided by them. This should not be viewed as an all-inclusive or exhaustive list, but simply as a starting point as we move forward together.

- **Ensure Strong Adult-Student Relationships within the School and Community.** Positive relationships begin at home with mom, dad, grandparents, and siblings, but they must also be present in all aspects of a young person’s life. Successful schools and their partners should ensure that all of their students are connected to as many positive, meaningful relationships as possible. Teachers, coaches, mentors, peers, ministers, principals, and counselors are just some of the many people in the community with whom students should have positive relationships.
- **Maximize Parent and Family Engagement.** Students and participants most frequently cited parents and family relationships as the most important indicators of student success. Schools and community partners should be proactive in: (1) enhancing family skills and knowledge; (2) expanding avenues for increasing positive interaction between parents and schools; and (3) improving access of parents and families to support services.
- **Schools and Classrooms Should be Places Where Children Want to Be, Where They Feel Safe, and Where Their Minds are Fully Engaged.** Beginning on day one, all students should be met with the expectation that they can and will do well in school, will ultimately graduate from high school, and will then have the option to attend the college of their choice. High expectations and meaningful engagement are at the heart of school and classroom culture and can also be reflected by rigorous curriculum and instruction that appropriately and patiently challenges students, instills high expectations, and turns minds onto a lifetime of learning. It recognizes that sometimes “less is more.” It is also measured by the quality and quantity of positive relationships for students with teachers, coaches, peers, and many others. Personalization strategies designed to ensure that students feel important, supported, and able to excel are vital. In all too many communities, the real issue can be summed up by the following question: Is the negative pull of the streets stronger than the positive pull of the classroom? Schools and classrooms must do everything in their power to ensure that students want to be there. Of course, this also means that schools and classrooms should be places where teachers want to be, too.

- **Employ Individualized Approaches & Considerations.** Each student is an individual with a unique array of characteristics, such as learning style, strengths, interests, needs, family history, etc. Accordingly, emphasis on individualized approaches must be ever-present in teaching strategies, educational & career pathway options, performance assessments, supportive services, data collection & analysis, etc. Individualized approaches also require the engagement of parents and families in meaningful ways. Attention to unique considerations for students at greater risk of dropping out is critical and must factor into school approaches. School leaders and their partners must demonstrate and employ cultural competency on a number of different levels and should constantly be asking what they are doing to ensure that foster youth and youth aging out of foster care, immigrants, English language learners, special needs students, over-aged middle school students, under-prepared high school students, teen mothers and their children, and other high-risk populations are receiving the support and attention that may be required.
- **There Should be Appropriate Accountability and Incentives at All Levels of Leadership for Ensuring that Students Stay in School and Graduate with a Meaningful Education.** Standardized test scores are and should remain an important element of evaluation and accountability; however, room should be made for school attendance, attachment, graduation rates, and student growth to be deemed as important. Superintendents, boards of education, principals, and teachers should hold themselves and each other accountable for high graduation rates in their districts, schools, and classrooms. In turn, parents, community members, business leaders, and many others should be accountable to help. Providing for this degree of accountability -- with everyone from state officials to superintendents to boards of education to teachers to students to the community at large -- helps to foster the appropriate levels of expectation, anticipated outcomes, and aligned action.
- **Current and Future Resources Should Be Aligned with the Value of 100% Graduation.** If keeping all students in school and engaged is truly a priority – with corresponding accountability – schools and districts should have budgets which consistently reflect this priority. In addition to the obvious reasons for keeping kids in school and engaged, there are economic reasons to do so as well. Districts receive a per pupil amount in funding; when students drop out that funding is lost. Keeping those students in school – and recovering those who have dropped out – should mean restoration of that funding. This should be viewed as an incentive for districts. Effective dropout prevention also requires innovative use and alignment of existing financial resources as well as the strategic leveraging of related resources. Schools and districts that are already spending a lot of money without excellent results should examine their approach and consider change --- in some cases, dramatic change.

- **Use Technology in a Myriad of Ways to Reach Children & Families and to Support Educators.** In many ways, technology is a continuous theme throughout these guiding principles and through most of the strategies listed below. The term “technology” in schools can have many different meanings in different contexts and times. In general, technology should be used in a myriad of ways to reach students and families, engage them in the classroom and curriculum in innovative and creative ways, challenge and support teachers, and to help schools and school systems to better communicate and be better organized.
- **Use Data and Information Systems to Ensure Quality and Positive Outcomes for Students.** Effective schools and school systems rely on data to identify problems, to develop solutions, and to better understand both the intended and unintended consequences of policy, practice and programs. Accurate data collection at the state and local level is critically important to ensuring accurate measurement of overall progress toward 100% graduation. It also helps to ensure that student attendance, attachment, and achievement is monitored and used to provide an early warning for school administrators to develop intervention strategies that can prevent a child from dropping out in the short or long run. As previously noted, it also means that districts are collecting and analyzing data in a manner that reflects the true dropout rate in their schools.
- **Develop Leadership within Schools and Communities and Provide for an Array of Training Opportunities.** Making 100% graduation a priority and achieving real results requires focused leadership on multiple levels, ranging from state officials to boards of education to building-level principals to community partners to parents and, of course, to students themselves. Establishing this expectation requires strong and sustained communication, appropriate training, and accountability. The New Jersey Department of Education’s Office of Leadership Development has already taken important steps to design programs for school leaders who aspire to become transformative facilitators of change. Collectively, we should work together to provide for appropriate multi-disciplinary forums, especially with school and community leaders and stakeholders from high dropout rate districts.
- **Employ Comprehensive Approaches which Require Strong Community-School Partnerships.** Keeping children in school and engaged is everyone’s responsibility. Of course, schools happen to be one potentially powerful vehicle for effectuating this goal. While dropout prevention most often requires a school-centered approach, responsibility rests not only with schools, but also with a broad range of community partners. This is true because students drop out of school for a wide-range of reasons – not simply because school is not challenging or boring. Successful dropout prevention will be realized only when schools and districts are effectively partnering with parents, non-profit and faith-based organizations, corporations & businesses, and other local government agencies in a coordinated and effective manner. School-level leaders and their community counterparts should understand and learn how they need each other and how they

can work together in constructive fashion. Partnerships which offer quality after-school, enrichment, and mentoring programs; career-focused internship and work experience; curriculum expertise; financial resources; and social and health services are simply a few of what should be limitless possibilities. Effective partnership often requires opportunity for community partners to assume leadership roles in and with schools and to take a proactive active role in strategic planning alongside school leaders. Exciting and innovative options like full service community schools, the Broader Bolder Approach, and other symbiotic community-school concepts should be explored, especially in schools and districts in need of dramatic change.

- **Fortify the Entire Pipeline from Cradle to College.** An effective 100% graduation strategy begins before birth and continues to and through high school graduation, until the cycle begins anew when a student ultimately becomes a parent. Too often, people think dropout prevention strategies should focus on students who are in or about to enter into high school, or that they should only focus on the students who are already in the process or at risk of dropping out. In fact, dropout prevention should begin as early as possible – with education for parents – and continue throughout the journey of every single child in the pre-k through 12 school system (and beyond). Dropout prevention is not any one program, system, or strategy. Rather, it is a broad and comprehensive approach that should be reflected in many different ways throughout the pipeline. The pipeline must lead to positive educational and career opportunities.
- **Provide Choice, Options, & Innovation.** Students and parents should have a variety of options at the classroom, school, district, and city levels. Within classrooms, instruction should be varied and differentiated to meet the learning styles and preferences of students. Within schools, students should be encouraged to take an active role in their education and explore options relating to personal and career interests, experiential learning opportunities, etc. Within districts, options should be available for different types of schools, especially at the high school level and including “small” and “alternative” school options with an understanding that alternative options should be equal options. Within a city or region, choice and options is meant to include traditional public, charter, and, in some cases, private schools. Collectively, the best of different approaches must be shared in order to promote innovation and spur positive change that will benefit as many children and families as possible.

Effective Strategies, Approaches and Practices

A lot of information and data has been collected relating to effective schools, programs, practices, approaches, policies, and strategies in the effort to reduce dropout rates and keep more children in school and engaged. In fact, there are so many that they cannot all be included in these preliminary findings. Instead, we have attempted to distill the essence of what we have heard and learned into the following example strategies and approaches.

Again, this is not an all-inclusive or exhaustive list of all the good ideas and best practices that exist. It is simply a menu representative of the kinds of strategies, policies, and best practices that we believe should be considered for any 100% graduation effort to succeed.

- **Ensure early and successful starts for all children.** Districts and schools should ensure that all students are benefiting from high-quality early childhood education and full-day kindergarten. They should provide the additional supports necessary to make certain that all students are reading and performing math on level by the third grade. Corresponding support strategies should include heavy emphasis on parent engagement and education in the early years as well as one-on-one tutoring for students in need of extra support. There appears to be consensus that an early and strong start for children may be the best indicator of whether they will later fall behind and, as a consequence, be at greater risk to dropping out of school.
- **Strong and reliable systems to monitor attendance and other early warning signs on a real time basis.** Research shows that it can be predicted with 66% accuracy when a student in elementary school will go on to drop out from high school. During middle school, America's Promise Alliance reports that the majority of students most likely to drop out can be determined by monitoring the ABC's of dropout prevention: Attendance, Behavior and Course Performance. Absenteeism is a habit which often begins to form as early as pre-school and kindergarten with parents neglecting to instill the importance of school attendance in their children. All districts and schools should have early warning systems for pre-kindergarten through 12th grade which includes daily monitoring of attendance/absenteeism as its centerpiece. These early warning systems should utilize technology and effective data collection as well as clearly prescribed action steps and protocols to ensure that schools are immediately notifying parents and providing the necessary supports to address the circumstances that may be affecting students and causing them to miss or not do well in school.

- **Community organizations should partner with schools to employ a collective approach to truancy prevention and intervention efforts that focus on positively intervening with students as the number of unexcused absences increases.** Community partners such as local police departments, youth serving agencies, and the family court should connect with school districts in developing clear policies and evidence-based practices and programs for working to address increasing levels of unexcused absences by students. At present, the Office of the Attorney General is working with several state-level partners and six cities as part of a pilot project designed to examine best practices in truancy prevention and to develop additional guidance on effective interventions on the spectrum between 0 and 10 unexcused absences. The results of this work will be shared and implemented statewide, especially in communities with unacceptable attendance and dropout rates. While this type of initiative naturally requires strong policies and systems within a school, it is also essential that community partners are playing a leading role in the prevention and intervention strategies that are needed. For example, one strategy might require that students who have missed school more than 4 times should be paired with a mentor through Big Brothers Big Sisters and/or parents may be urged to enroll that student in a Boys & Girls Club afterschool program. A school may look to these types of partners to assist in impacting other school policies, for example, as an alternative to out-of-school suspension for students who have missed school too often.
- **Resources and support should be made available to assist youth-serving nonprofit and faith-based organizations to strengthen capacities and abilities to effectively serve children and families, especially in communities with high dropout rates.** As has been discussed, keeping children in school and positively engaged is not a “schools only” problem; it requires the collective efforts of all stakeholders, perhaps especially nonprofit organizations dedicated to serving children and families. Improving these organizations’ abilities to achieve positive outcomes, deepen capacity, and make stronger connections with schools is critical. Through the Prevention Coordination Council, a focus should be placed on identifying opportunities to assist and support these types of organizations. Recently, Governor Corzine and the Office of the Attorney General announced the “Promise Communities” pilot program in Camden and Newark. This initiative is designed to identify and designate at least two qualified nonprofit organizations to receive technical assistance and related support from the Harlem Children’s Zone, which is a model nonprofit organization that has received national accolades for outcomes it has achieved in serving children in its community. Promise Communities, and other initiatives like it, should be an important focus of any serious effort to reduce the dropout rate.

- **Additional attention, monitoring, and supports should be provided at the transition points in students’ lives.** Research indicates that students who successfully make transitions into each level of schooling are significantly more likely to graduate from high school. Schools and districts should undertake efforts to ensure that strategies such as early warning systems for attendance, behavior, and course performance, supplemental programs, and parent communications are heightened as students enter into these critical transition periods, such as 8th into 9th grade.
- **Schools should monitor and work with staff and community partners to ensure the presence of positive interpersonal relationships in the lives of each student.** As schools monitor student progress with grades and standardized test scores, they should also monitor and take steps to ensure that each student has *at least* one positive interpersonal relationship with an adult (as well as peers). Schools should enlist the support of community partners in this effort. Many students need and crave one-on-one and individualized attention. In order to be as effective as possible, teachers and other school professionals should know and care about their students’ lives, interests, strengths, weaknesses, family circumstances, etc., and, conversely, students need to know that adults care about them. Personalized learning strategies, individualized learning plans, and small group advisories are examples of techniques that schools should employ to reinforce the importance of interpersonal interaction. The Department of Education’s recently-launched Personalized Student Learning Plans (PSLP) pilot initiative intentionally connects adult mentors with students and serves as an example of the types of individualized and relationship-based approaches that are needed. Providing for adult advocates and mentors from within or outside the school is a strategy that should be employed whenever possible. Likewise, after school programs, clubs, and athletic teams are examples of tangible opportunities for students to forge positive relationships with adults.
- **Maximize parent and family engagement.** Schools should begin before Day One in encouraging and, in some cases, requiring parental involvement in their children’s educational experience. Individualized graduation plans with parent input, homework requiring parental awareness and involvement, encouraging teachers to call home with “good news”, educational programs for young mothers and mothers-to-be, and school cultures that are warm and welcoming to parents are just a few of many strategies that should be utilized. Community and faith-based partners can play a role by working with families on how to effectively support their children; for example, by offering guidance on how to ensure a home environment conducive to study and learning. It is critical to make communication between parents and schools as easy and natural as possible, including an emphasis on reaching out to parents who haven’t completed high school, do not speak English, work two or more jobs, and/or may have other barriers to effective communication or participation.

- **Meaningfully engage students with innovative strategies designed to enhance the connection between the classroom and real world opportunities.** Schools and classroom teachers should develop and utilize an array of engagement strategies, ranging from differentiated instructional and interest-based approaches to broader experiential-, project-based, and service-learning opportunities. Flexibility to establish internships and work-based opportunities should be provided. Inherent in these approaches should be the recognition that students have different learning styles and interests and that employing hands-on, real-world opportunities sometimes requires a “less is more” mindset. It also requires the effective use of technology as well as strong and innovative partnerships with business and community partners. In some instances, it may necessitate some leeway in developing alternative assessment measures, where appropriate.
- **Performance assessments should emphasize their instructional nature about how to improve the way we are reaching and serving students.** Generally speaking, assessment of student performance – whether regularly in classrooms or on standardized tests – should be consistent with other principles and strategies in these preliminary findings. Accordingly, the essence of assessments should be to reveal issues of student misunderstanding or confusion before they become obstacles to learning. They should provide feedback to teachers about the effectiveness of lessons and to learners about the degree to which they are meeting learning expectations. Importantly, performance assessment provides data teachers can use to adjust instruction to meet the needs of individual learners thereby personalizing or customizing learning for students. As such, the use of performance assessments is an important strategy in enabling student success and graduation from high school. Indeed, performance assessment can and should be viewed as a mechanism for change and improvement, both within a classroom and a school.
- **Community partners should actively engage with schools to ensure that all schools are equipped with the full range of supports necessary to help all students succeed.** Students oftentimes fail to perform well in school because of obstacles that are created or exist outside of the classroom. Nutrition, unemployment, physical and mental health, social and family pressures, bullying, gangs, and lack of confidence are just a few of many real life examples that exist for too many young people. Therefore, schools should have an identifiable team of community partners to take the lead and/or assist in offering the necessary supports. Comprehensive and high-quality afterschool and student friendly drop-in programs such as School Based Youth Services, New Jersey After 3, and 21st Century Learning Centers and school-based health, mental health, and oral care centers, should be viable options for all schools in need of these types of services for their children and families. These and other similar programs can be offered by community-based organizations such as Boys & Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters, local hospitals or health clinics, and area colleges. Where possible, services and programs should be offered on-site and in schools, which may require school buildings to stay open later into the evenings and on weekends.

Schools should consider full-service community schools and comprehensive equity models as a means for integrating schools and services into a holistic approach.

- **Community and business advisory boards should be convened for schools and/or across districts to increase investment and ownership by community and business partners.** Beyond partnering with community organizations and businesses in order to provide services to students and families, schools and districts should consider advisory boards and coalitions designed to strengthen the level of ownership and investment by community stakeholders. Ultimately, invested community and business partners can offer even more than simply services and programs; they can help to positively influence the structure, direction, and culture of a school.
- **Extended-day and other alternative options should be available as a legitimate pathway for students who are falling behind.** Even with highly effective dropout prevention and interventions systems, some students will fall off track and need credit recovery options and alternative pathways to success. Schools and districts should be flexible in how they reach out and serve youth who are already behind in course work and/or credits. Examining high stakes course testing and punitive retention policies is important. Options to make up course work or restore credits through extended day options or summer programs are oftentimes critical components needed to get students back on track. Ensuring opportunities for alternative schools or multiple pathways is also a key element to signaling that schools and districts are not giving up on any of its students.
- **At the middle and high school levels, there should be options for “different schools for different students” and multiple pathways, with alternative schools options for students based on interests, strengths, and circumstances.** Districts and schools should strive to develop and offer a wide-range of schools and multitude of options for its students, especially in school districts with high dropout rates. Theme- and career-based academies, small learning communities, alternative/non-traditional schools, and partnerships that provide enhanced options with other educational institutions and providers should all be considered as part of a comprehensive approach. The Alternative High School Initiative underway in Newark in conjunction with the National League of Cities pilot project offers a model for crafting multiple pathways and education options for all students, including those already dropping out of school. Across districts and regions synergy and collaboration should be developed between traditional public, vocational, charter, and private schools. These types of schools should not view each other from an overly-competitive perspective, but rather begin to understand how working together can promote innovation and maximize positive options for students.

- **Students who have already dropped out of school should remain part of the 100% Graduation Action Plan.** The state, districts, and schools should examine policy and best practice designed to make certain that students who have already dropped out of school can still be re-engaged. The Newark Public Schools Office of Alternative Education and Rutgers University in partnership with many collaborators have established the Youth Education and Employment Center (YE²S Center), which serves as a model one-stop center for re-engaging students who have dropped out, are reentering, and/or are truant and on the verge of dropping out. This model is successfully re-engaging hundreds of students in Newark. Maximizing opportunities for “Adult” or “Second Chance” schools and other community-based education programs that offer diplomas or other education credentials, such as YouthBuild, must be part of a successful strategy. However, a broader policy question which must be answered is who (or which governmental agency) is responsible for youth who have already dropped out of school? Resolving this question should be part of the statewide strategy for dropout prevention and fortifying the college & workforce pipeline in New Jersey.
- **Professional development and professional learning communities to support educators, promote the exchange of best practices, and encourage innovation is vital.** One of the twelve recommendations in the National Education Association’s 12-Point Plan for Reducing the School Dropout Crisis is to “make sure educators have the training and resources they need to prevent students from dropping out.” This is consistent with the information received and reviewed this past year. It is clear that educators are on the frontlines in terms of their ability and opportunity to reach the young people at risk to dropping out. It is critical to support teachers to constantly strive to improve curriculum delivery and engagement techniques. It is also crucial to recognize and support the leadership role that teachers are encouraged to assume in this regard.
- **Employ and support comprehensive school turnaround strategies for districts or schools in need of dramatic change or action.** There is consensus that bold and sometimes dramatic school transformation is necessary in schools and districts in which high percentages of students are already dropping out. Many schools or districts may decide to voluntarily undertake school reform initiatives. For example, the Newark Public Schools’ recent decision to fully embrace the Broader Bolder Approach school reform process is one example as is the Vineland Public Schools’ initiative to transform its comprehensive high schools into small learning communities. In Orange, a comprehensive community schools planning model is being employed with support from JP Morgan Chase and the Children’s Aid Society. Decisions to engage in school transformation strategies provide fresh opportunities for schools and their stakeholders to consider a wide-range of best practice approaches, ranging from new school creation to various components of whole-school reform such as organizational and structural reforms that make middle and high schools more personalized; instructional, curricular, and assessment reforms; leadership reforms; and professional development reforms. It also provides opportunity to consider

proven innovative models such as full service community schools. As part of the statewide plan of action, we should build upon the Department of Education's existing efforts in the establishment of the "Turnaround Leadership Network," by ensuring an appropriate support vehicle for cultivating and developing best practice turnaround strategies.

Policy Considerations

It is necessary to mention two important policy issues which repeatedly surfaced in discussion and in print during the course of the first year: minimum compulsory school age requirements and graduation rate accountability.

- **Minimum compulsory school age requirements:** There is considerable debate regarding the current minimum compulsory school age requirement of 16 years old in New Jersey. Proponents of increasing the age point to research revealing that one in four potential dropouts stays in school simply because of the compulsory school age law and that a 16 year age requirement is incongruent with the goals and expectations of a dropout prevention campaign of this nature -- especially in a nation that provides substantial resources for public education through 12th grade. Opponents point out the possibility of additional costs and unintended pressures that an increase in school age requirements might place on schools and districts. National observers note that states which have increased their minimum compulsory school age have done so while also allowing for clear exemptions and/or waivers for justifiable reasons. This is an important discussion which must remain forefront during the next steps of our Campaign.
- **Graduation rate accountability:** The unintended consequences of No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) emphasis on test score accountability has resulted in incentives for some schools to "push out" low-performing students and, therefore, is not fulfilling the original promise of graduation rate accountability. While, in many ways, this is an issue that requires federal action (which perhaps could happen in the reauthorization of NCLB), it should not prevent New Jersey from doing what it can to signal commensurate accountability and incentives for keeping all children in school, engaged, and graduating. There is a very legitimate concern that an exclusive focus on test score accountability and corresponding financial incentives has the perverse consequence of contributing to the dropout crisis in some communities. Leaders should be held accountable both for achievement and for graduating students. Needless to say, this is a critical component to any campaign which aims at 100% graduation.

Conclusion

The preliminary findings and proposed action steps described in this document have been gathered through the substantial efforts of many people and organizations committed to the vision of 100% graduation and to forging a strong pipeline to college and workforce for all children in New Jersey. The efforts this first year reflect a reality that New Jersey has a strong foundation of schools, programs, and systems upon which to move forward. As importantly, and as reflected by the wide-spread participation during year one, there is no shortage of committed educators, community and faith-based organizations, businesses, philanthropists, and other stakeholders willing to play an active role.

In many ways the conversation has begun in earnest this past year and now is the time to begin taking action. In doing so New Jersey will embark upon an unprecedented effort and will have the unique opportunity to meaningfully address the dropout issue and set us on course toward our goal of 100% Graduation.

ENDNOTES

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Resource List

The following list of resources is provided for readers interested in learning more about dropout prevention and increasing graduation rates.

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