



“Louisiana’s Dropout Problem”

“The number one predictor of a child’s future success is whether he or she graduates from high school.”

Alma J. Powell, wife of Retired General Colin Powell and co-founder of *America’s Promise Alliance*

Nationwide, nearly one in three high school students drops out before graduating. In Louisiana, the statistics are even more disheartening. A 2008 study conducted by the Louisiana Department of Education of the 2006-07 school term found that only 65.9% of students who had entered the 9th grade four years earlier actually graduated. That means that - 34.1% -of the nearly 190,000 students that annually enroll in public high schools in Louisiana either dropout, graduate with a GED or something other than a diploma or do not graduate on time.

In the 2005-06 school year, 14,417 of Louisiana’s 9th-12th graders dropped out. During 2006-07 there were 13,541 high school students that left. Despite the slight improvement in the total number of Louisiana students dropping out, 10 of the state’s 69 school districts that reported uninterrupted data for the 2008 study had high school graduation rates below 60%. Twenty-nine of the districts saw their graduation rates decline from 2006 to 2007. (For a detailed breakdown of schools by parish click [here.](#)) The state’s graduation rate varies by race as well. For 2005-06, 45% of Louisiana’s African-American and 42.2% Of Native American students did not receive their diploma that year.

Louisiana Cohort Graduation Rate <i>(students who entered 9th grade and graduated 4 years later)</i>	<u>2005-06</u>
Native American	57.8%
Asian	77.8%
African American/Black	55.0%
Hispanic	62.8%
Caucasian American/White	72.4%

Source: “High School Counts 2008”, LA Dept of Education

Economic Impact

A study by the Education Trust found that the unemployment rate for high school dropouts is more than 30 percent higher than that of graduates. A recent report by the *Alliance of Excellent Education* notes that Louisiana high school dropouts from the class of 2006 alone will cost the state \$6.5 billion in lost wages over their lifetimes. Dropouts also contribute heavily to the state’s critical shortage of skilled workers. According to Louisiana Workforce Commission Executive Director Tim Barfield, *“When you look at the businesses that I’ve dealt with directly; their biggest concern is not necessarily the 4 year degree and beyond type occupations, the biggest concern is can we get that skilled labor force, the craftsman; the technician.”*

Educational Attainment:	Average Income
- HS Dropout	\$22,256
- HS Diploma	\$31,408
- Associate’s degree	\$38,320
- Bachelor’s	\$51,320

Social Costs

The Alliance of Excellent Education also reports that Individuals who fail to earn a high school diploma *“are generally less healthy and die earlier, are more likely to become parents when very young..and are more likely to need social welfare assistance. Even more tragic, their children are more likely to become high school dropouts themselves, as are their children’s children, and so on, in a possibly endless cycle of poverty.”*

A 2008 report by Invest in Kids, a national nonprofit organization made up of more than 4,000 police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors and violence survivors, found that high school dropouts are three and a half times more likely than graduates to be arrested and eight times more likely to be incarcerated. This does not bode well for Louisiana which currently claims the highest incarceration rate – one out of every 55 residents – than any other state.

Causes

The *Silent Epidemic*, a 2006 national survey of high school dropouts revealed that nearly half (47 %) of high school students who dropped out said a major reason for leaving was that classes were not interesting. Many students gave personal reasons for leaving: a third (32 %) said they had to get a job and make money; 26% said they became a parent; and 22% said they had to care for a family member.

The main reasons given to the Louisiana Department of Education by 2,184 of the 16,383 Louisiana students who left school in 2007-08 were “dislike of school experience”; “employment”; “entering the criminal justice system”; and “Behavioral” or “Academic Difficulty.”

Targeting Students at Risk

The Commission on High School Redesign was created in 2004 by then Governor Kathleen Blanco to recommend actions for redesigning high school *“to enable all Louisiana youth to graduate prepared with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college, careers, and community life.”* The High School Redesign division lists as its first goal *“the reduction of dropouts and an increase in high school graduation rates.”* Among its current efforts:

D.E.W.S. One of the pushes by the High School Redesign has been the institution of the Dropout Early Warning System (DEWS), a statewide electronic system in schools that identifies students early on who are at high risk of dropping out based on indicators such as poor attendance, low or failing grades and disciplinary problems. Once a student is identified, appropriate intervention is provided. Forty-four school districts are currently using DEWS.

9th Grade Initiative The 9th grade is considered the “make-or-break” year for students. Students are transitioning from being oldest to youngest; being known by teachers to virtually anonymous. In Louisiana, of the first-time 9th graders in 2002-03 who were not promoted to 10th grade, 77% did not complete high school. As a major dropout prevention effort by High School Redesign, 54 high schools received 3-year competitive grants in 2007 to redesign their 9th grades with a focus on individualized support for students. After only one year, according to data from 53 of the 54 schools involved, significant improvements have been achieved:

- An 87.5% 9th-10th grade promotion rate in 2007-08 vs. 82.1% for 2006-07.
- A 1.7% 9th grade dropout rate for 2007-08; down from 3.3% in 2006-07.
- 25.4% of 9th graders failing one or more core classes vs. 28.9% in 2006-07.

Curriculum Relevance According to High School Redesign, *“both national and state data reveal the primary reason students drop out is that they do not see the value of high school courses.”* To address this, Louisiana’s Comprehensive Curriculum has been revised to include relevant learning activities in every unit of every course. High School examples include *Anatomy/Physiology, Senior Applications in English, and Math Essentials.*

Jobs For America’s Graduates Louisiana (JAG-LA) An affiliate of the national Jobs for America’s Graduates Program (JAG), JAG-LA provides a unique set of services for at-risk students to help them earn a high school diploma, and for out-of-school youth, to assist them in earning a GED.

EMPLoY Educational Mission to Prepare Louisiana’s Youth (EMPLoY) is a pilot program which began in January 2009 to provide a range of resources for 540 students around the state who have been identified as potential dropouts. Largely based on the JAG model, EMPLoY involves students 16 years and older who function at the 7th grade level and above. The effort is an overhaul of the state’s key anti-dropout effort “Pre-GED/Skills Options”. In place for nearly a decade, “Pre-GED/Skills Options” was supposed to provide a safety net for children in danger of quitting school. But fewer than 600 of the 10,000 students enrolled in the program earn a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. The EMPLoY curriculum blends traditional high school classes with GED preparation, dual enrollment in a technical college or training for certification in a specific industry, paid work internships, and adult mentoring. EMPLoY is being piloted in 14 school districts: Ascension, Assumption, Avoyelles, Bossier, Caddo Calcasieu, Iberia, Jefferson, Ouachita, Rapides St. Tammany, Terrebonne, Vermilion and Winn. The DOE is using \$2.55 million in existing funds with federal funds and the support of business and industry. According to Yvonne Weimer, Job Specialist with the Ascension Parish School Board, *“Some of these students were certainly at risk for dropping out both for truancy, possibly discipline issues and being able to be part of the Louisiana Technical College program has benefited them greatly.”*

Every child in Louisiana is required by state law to attend public or private school from the child’s seventh birthday until their eighteenth birthday, unless the child graduates prior to their 18th birthday.
(Louisiana R.S. 17:221)

“Dual enrollment programs are known to reduce high school dropout rates, improve workforce participation, increase college-going rates and increase postsecondary graduation rates.”
Blueprint Louisiana

Confronting Truancy

In addition to being a risk factor for school dropout, truancy has been noted as the number one correlation for criminal behaviors later in life. Last year the Legislature established truancy as five unexcused absences by a student within a semester.

The LSU Office of Social Service Research and Development's Truancy Assessment Service Center (TASC) program was established during the 1999 Regular Session of the Legislature. Its purpose is to provide for early identification and assessment of truants and the prompt delivery of coordinated interventions to prevent continued absences. The anti-truancy program targets K-5 students. TASC currently has 19 operating sites that cover 28 parishes.

The success of TASC greatly depends on involvement of teachers, school administrators, law enforcement officials, and social services agencies. If a student has more than five unexcused absences, the teacher notifies school administrators, who then notify TASC personnel. TASC's job is to discover why the child is absent and find the help they need to improve their attendance.

Currently, truancy laws allow for the parents of truant children to be fined up to \$50 or to complete up to 25 hours of community service on their first offense. Subsequent offenses may result in parents being fined up to \$250 or imprisoned for up to 30 days. Governor Jindal is proposing new legislation to allow courts to also require school or community service of parents in addition to paying fines, attending parenting classes, and possibly the suspension of state-issued licenses

In 2007-2008, sixty-five percent of TASC children had five or fewer unexcused absences during the remainder of the 2007-2008 school year. A cost-benefit analysis by the LSU School of Business and the Southeastern Louisiana University Department of Finance concluded that dropping out of school is so costly to Louisiana that TASC would need to prevent just 12-13 dropouts annually (less than one percent of the children it serves) to justify its cost.

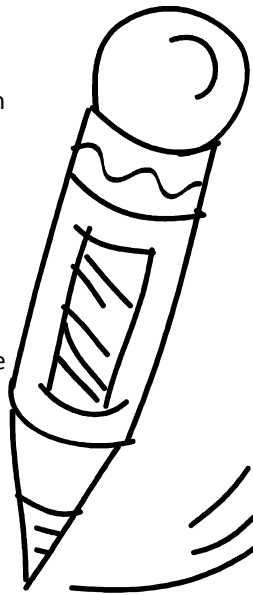
Rigor in the Classroom

Core vs. Core 4 Under changes approved last year, all incoming high school freshmen in 2008-2009 were enrolled into the "Louisiana Core 4 Curriculum." The "Core 4" curriculum requires students to earn 4 units each of math, English, science and social studies/social sciences in order to graduate. After their second year in high school, students have the option to opt out of the "Core 4" - with parental permission - to pursue the Louisiana "Core Curriculum": 4 units in math and English and 3 units in science and social studies/social sciences. Both curricula represent an increase of 1 math unit compared to pre-2008-2009 requirements. As before, high school students can choose an "Academic" or "Career/Technical" area of concentration that includes electives relevant to either path in addition to the new "Core 4" units.

While supporting the concept of more rigorous standards, House Appropriations Committee Chairman and former teacher, Jim Fannin (D), Jonesboro, would like to see a trimming of the "Core Curriculum" to three units of math and English. Fannin believes this will prevent those high school students who do not plan on attending college from being "pushed out" due to falling behind. Fannin feels this would also free up course time that could be filled with more vocational electives such as welding, electrical work and other areas. Students headed for the work force instead of college might benefit from math classes geared more towards a trade, he says. "You can still have relevance, rigor, even in vocational science, math or English." Fannin told *The Advocate*.

Student Achievement The National Dropout Prevention Center has identified low achievement as a risk factor for school dropout. In 1998, the Louisiana School and District Accountability System was formally created by the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (SBESE) after a legislative mandate. The system includes more rigorous content standards, testing and teacher quality initiatives. At the core of the accountability program is high-stakes testing, which consists of exams aligned with content standards created for each subject. High school students must pass the Graduation Exit Exam (GEE) before they can receive their diplomas. The test is given in both the 10th and 11th grades. Students can retake the GEE three times a year. 2008 data indicates that about 81% of students passed Math on their first try.

Such testing, which may provide needed data for gauging performance, doesn't give an accurate depiction of an individual's progress, according to Billie Smith, a teacher with McKinley High School in Baton Rouge. "The GEE ...actually gives you data on what 10th graders did last year and what 10th graders are doing this year. Why aren't we measuring to see that every student is moving forward?" A study cited in *Dissent magazine*, concluded that "high-stakes testing does indeed increase dropout rates" although noting there is room for further study to determine the relationship.



Commencement

As the nation faces its current economic challenges, the value of an educated workforce has become that much more important. In a speech given at the beginning of the month to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, President Barack Obama told those assembled that *“dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It’s not just quitting on yourself, it’s quitting on your country- and this country needs and values the talents of every American.”*

Rodnique Holmes, a former Louisiana high school dropout that has since earned her GED says, *“I wouldn’t advise anyone not to go to school. Education and having a high school diploma, having any degree is very important and you’ll have a better life if you have an education.”* Holmes is currently attending Delgado Community College and hopes to reach students who may be considering dropping out in her chosen career as a teacher, *“They have children out there just like me and they feel like they don’t have an opportunity. I can inspire other people with my story.”* ■



Related Links

[Louisiana Department of Education](#) - State agency for education

[Education’s Next Horizon](#) - A statewide non-profit organization with focus on PreK-12 education

[Louisiana’s Promise](#) - Information on statewide summits on dropout prevention; includes state data

[America’s Promise Alliance](#) – Child advocacy association founded by General Colin Powell

[LA ePortal](#) – Louisiana online workspace for connecting to career, college and workforce resources

Please tune into your local LPB television station to view *Louisiana Public Square’s* “Louisiana’s Dropout Problem” Wednesday, March 25th at 7 p.m.

You can continue the discussion the following day in an online chat, Thursday, March 26th from 2 to 3 p.m. Have your questions answered live by a representative from the Louisiana Department of Education and one of the Louisiana’s Parish Truancy Centers.

Visit www.lpb.org/publicsquare and click on the “Live Chat” link.