



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

CREATING STRATEGIES
for Educational and Economic Opportunity

TRANSCRIPT

Making Good on a Promise Press Conference

April 6, 2006

Introduction

I'm Adria Steinberg, Associate Vice President of Jobs for the Future and co-author with Cheryl Almeida and Cassius Johnson of *Making Good on a Promise*.

Jobs for the Future has a more than 20-year history of focusing on educational and economic advancement for low-income youth and adults. We do this work through a combination of research, policy advocacy, and consulting with communities and states.

I'm directing JFF's work on struggling students and out-of-school youth, and I have to say that this is the most promising moment I've seen in my 38 years of work to improve outcomes and options for this population of young people. I say this as someone who helped to found and run an alternative school for dropouts in the early 1970s and has worked on these issues ever since.

What makes this moment so promising is that the dropout issue has begun to get national attention, and people are beginning to understand that it is a much bigger problem with much worse economic and social consequences than was commonly thought.

We did this report because we believe that there is a need for more effective responses to the dropout problem, and for those to occur we need to know much more about what happens to real kids as they try to pursue their education over time. This study used the only national educational longitudinal database; it follows a cohort of 25,000 young people from 1988 to 2000, time they were in eighth grade, to 12 years later.

Report Highlights:

1. The first thing that is very clear from our research is that young people drop out of school, but they don't drop out of their education. Contrary to the popular image of dropouts as unmotivated kids who do not value the importance of education, JFF found that most dropouts are remarkably persistent in their drive to complete their education.
 - 60 percent of them eventually earn a high school credential, in most cases a GED;
 - Nearly half of that group enroll in a two- or four-year college.

In other words, they have absorbed the fact that to get a foothold in this job market they will need higher level skills and credentials.

2. The problem is that our educational system is not delivering on the promise of a second chance. Only one in ten of the high school dropouts who persist and get a GED and then persist and enroll in college actually come out with a degree. What that says is that the young people keep trying and we keep failing them.
3. We also found in the data that although dropping out is epidemic in low-income communities, it is not just a problem of the poor. Middle- and upper-class communities are not immune; the problem is more pervasive than many think.
 - 10 percent of middle- and upper-income youth drop out.
 - That compares to 40 percent of those in lower-income level.
4. Finally, a related point is that rather than race socioeconomic status, which is based on parents' income and education, is the key indicator for dropping out. Black and Hispanic youth are not more likely to drop out than white peers of similar family income and education. However, black and Hispanic youth are overrepresented in lowest income groups and thus the problem impacts their communities more.

All of this of course has implications for policy. In the report, we talk about several ways policymakers could help give dropouts a second chance:

- The first implication is that we need to do a much better job of counting and accounting for what happens to dropouts. States have been focusing on higher academic standards for the past decade, which is good and necessary. But we need an equal accountability focus on higher graduation rates.

Governors have taken a step in signing a Graduation Compact that commits them to tracking individuals from ninth grade to a four-year graduation rate. But we will need to do much more to invest in good data and in activities that will move kids to higher standards without losing them along the way.

- The second lesson is that there is a need for more pathways that help dropouts pursue an education: we cannot continue to base policy on the erroneous belief that all students will proceed through a traditional four years of high school followed directly by two to four years of college.

Instead, communities and states need to be strategic in the way they carry out high school reform—especially in low-income central cities with high concentrations of dropouts. Such activity includes the creation of new school options and a more diverse portfolio of options and pathways for young people, all of which lead to postsecondary credentials.

- Finally dropout recovery programs need to catch up with what our young people seem to understand: that it's not enough to just get a GED or an entry-level job. Recovery programs have to include on ramps to further education for those whose age, skills, number of high school credits, and life circumstances would otherwise make it difficult for them.