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# MAKING GRADUATION A PRIORITY



*Great Public Schools for Every Student*



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# Making Graduation a Priority

At a time when a high school diploma is an essential first step toward securing a good paying job or moving on further education or training, increasing numbers of urban students are leaving school before having earned one. Large discrepancies exist among and within states, with high needs schools in urban areas being particularly prone to unacceptably low numbers of graduates.

Students who do not complete their high school educations not only compromise their own futures but cost our nation billions of dollars in lost wages and taxes, as well as in additional spending for social programs.

The National Education Association has long been concerned

with increasing graduation rates in urban high schools. Together with creating great public schools for every child, increasing graduation rates is an NEA priority. Nearly every NEA department is contributing to this work in some way. On June 30, 2008, NEA Constituent Relations invited local leaders and staff to discuss this

effort. Guided by **NEA Human and Civil Rights Director Sheila Simmons and Marcie Dianda, a senior policy analyst with NEA Human and Civil Rights**, participants shared the challenges involved in increasing graduation rates and strategies that have proven successful in their states and districts.

## The scope of the issue

Dianda noted that pinpointing graduation rates within our nation's schools is not an easy task. Statistics vary according to who is reporting them with, for example, states, the U.S. Department of Education, and *Education Week* all

## INSIDE this issue

Making Graduation a Priority .....	1
<i>The scope of the issue</i> .....	1
<i>Why are we losing high school students?</i> .....	3
<i>How can we increase graduation rates?</i> .....	8
<i>What is NEA doing?</i> .....	12
Resources .....	14



## Participants

This issue of TRENDS is based upon a discussion convened on June 30, 2008, in Washington, D.C. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the participants and do not necessarily represent official NEA positions.

NEA would like to thank the following participants for contributing to the conversation:

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**DONALD BARRINGER, JR.**, president, Durham Association of Educators, N.C.

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**AUDREY NICHOLS**, Arkansas Education Association; secretary, Pulaski Association of Support Staff, Ark.

**DENNIS OULAHAN**, president, Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association, Wis.

**DAVID A. SCHUTTEN**, president, Organization of DeKalb Educators, Ga.

**SHEILA SIMMONS**, director, NEA Human and Civil Rights, Washington, D.C.

**CHARLES E. SMITH**, chair, NEA National Black Caucus, Mo.

**ADAM URBANSKI**, president, Rochester Teachers Association, N.Y.

**ALAN YOUNG**, president, Des Moines Education Association, Iowa



reporting different figures. To avoid sanctions under No Child Left Behind, many states and districts use creative ways to keep their graduation rates high. For instance, some states do not count students as dropouts if they do not come back to school in September after being there in June. The U.S. Department of Education has proposed implementing a modified version of a uniform on-time graduation rate formula developed by the National Governor's Association. If this proposal is adopted, states not currently using a procedure that is the same, or very similar, to the new one will likely see decreases in their graduation rates, at least in the short term as they switch to the uniform rate.

Some states and districts already are improving reporting independently. **Metropolitan Nashville (Tenn.) Education Association President Erick Huth** reported that his state and district have done this and that the improvement has skewed graduation data in recent years. **Mary T. McCray, president of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.) Association of Educators,**

noted that her district used to include graduation rates and attendance as part of a formula for calculating pay for performance for principals, often leading to principals' reporting inflated numbers. While graduation in four years and school attendance remain components of state and local accountability plans for performance pay, schools now use strategies in their school improvement plans to show growth in these areas. As a result, a negative stigma is no longer attached to this measure and statistics are now more accurate.

NCLB holds public high schools to a very high standard, namely on-time graduation within four years, Dianda said. The number of adults from 24 to 29 with a high school education is approximately 88 percent, a much higher percentage than graduation statistics indicate. Those who return later for a GED are not counted as graduates by most formulas. Simmons added that figures do not take into account student mobility. While losing even one child is a matter for concern, she said, NCLB sanctions make the entire graduation rate issue very difficult for schools. Moreover, while the U.S. Department of Educa-

tion's proposal would improve the uniformity of graduation statistics, the system is quite expensive to administer and places new financial burdens on already overextended state education budgets.

### **Des Moines (Iowa) Education Association President Alan Young**

cautioned against viewing the graduation rate issue with a crisis mentality, noting that viewing problems in this way too often causes people to look for quick-fix solutions that lead to making rash decisions based on skewed statistics, imposing rewards and punishments, or establishing unrealistic timetables. Rather, he said, we should view it as a deep complex societal challenge that we have been making progress toward resolving but that still requires much more effort. Dianda noted that the problem is deepest and most complex in urban centers, where graduation rates are extremely low by any calculation. Given that the alternative to high school is not only a lifetime of diminished earning power but too often the juvenile justice system for young men and early pregnancy for young women, these rates are unacceptable and call for a communitywide concerted response.

## **Why are we losing high school students?**

### *Tracking, labeling, and cultural competency*

Since NEA affiliates or joint NEA-AFT affiliates represent staff in many of the urban districts recently identi-

fied as having graduation rates far below the national average, this issue is not just someone else's problem but ours, Dianda said.

### **Rochester (N.Y.) Teachers Association President Adam Urbanski**

agreed. While acknowledging that schools have students only 19 percent of their time and that many drop out of school for reasons that schools cannot control, he cautioned that we cannot simply blame others but also must look at ourselves. This past May, Urbanski's district commissioned a study in which students who recently had dropped out of school were interviewed and asked their reasons for leaving. Sixty-two percent of the respondents reported not feeling a sufficient connection to teachers as a reason they had left. Approximately 80 percent of the district's teachers are middle class Caucasians, many of them from the suburbs, while approximately that same percentage of its students are children of color. Given that reality, Urbanski suggested, teachers must be trained to be culturally competent because, "If you don't know your students, you might as well not know your subject matter." **David Schutten, president of the Organization of DeKalb (Ga.) Educators**, added that, even when teachers and students are of the same race, class differences are often as devastating as racial insensitivity.

**NEA Constituent Relations Director Dorothy Harrell** cautioned that acting early to identify students in danger of dropping out too often

means placing them into special education classes. Schutten agreed, adding that not only school systems but individual teachers often push children with behavioral issues into special education. We need to educate our members to find a middle way of dealing with these students, he said. **Pulaski (Ark.) Association of Support Staff Secretary Audrey Nichols**, who works in a school office, said that teachers often share negative perceptions of students with other teachers and staff, creating preconceived notions about students with perceived behavior problems. These students are often put out of their classrooms, spending much of their time sitting in school offices and failing as a result. Schutten said that he has seen the intelligent, behaviorally challenged students he mentors do well with him only to observe them being berated and labeled as "bad" a few minutes later. Expecting such children to behave badly is going to encourage them to behave badly, Schutten argued, noting that inappropriate comments cut students psychologically. We must remember that we want to create lifetime learners, he added, and that forming positive relationships in high schools is crucial to this goal. Harrell suggested that negative interactions, fighting, and gang violence among students themselves also contribute to the dropout problem in large high schools, a factor supported by the Rochester survey, in which 55 percent of

students reported school violence as a reason for their leaving.

### *Low expectations and social promotion*

While positive teacher-student relationships may be at the heart of student success in high school, even the strongest relationships may not overcome the challenges students face when they enter high school unprepared. Huth said that as a high school teacher he is troubled by social promotion issues. Although the pressure for social promotion is far less in high school than in elementary or middle school, he said, students bring expectations of social promotion with them. When we build low expectations into children early on, they cannot cope with higher expectations in high school. **NEA National Black Caucus Chairman Charles E. Smith** agreed, saying that he was shocked to encounter one of his high school students whose reading level was rated “beginning level.” “How can a child progress through elementary and middle school reading at this level?” he asked. When children have been promoted socially for all these years and then enter high school where they are held to expectations they cannot possibly meet because of their inability to read, they drop out.

Schutten, who sits on the restructuring committee for a high school in his district, said he is advocating to his fellow committee members that dropout prevention begin at the second and third grade level with

intensive instruction to help those students who already have fallen behind and are beginning to become lost catch up. **Durham (N.C.) Association of Educators President Donald Barringer, Jr.** noted that while he has retained students in second or third grade, the problem often goes back further. Some children are pushed into school at an early age or are not adequately prepared when they enter. These children tend to do well if they are held back in the early grades, but parents often resist this decision. When this happens, children continue to struggle. Dianda noted that early childhood education is one of the most effective ways of keeping children in school through graduation.

**NCUEA Vice-President Leon P. Horne** recalled that when his nephew was in the eighth grade and doing poorly in school despite being a bright young man, he excused his poor performance by telling his mother that school does not count until ninth grade. Saying that he has seen this same attitude in his eighth grade students, Horne suggested that we also need to convince these young people that what they are learning now affects them later on. Saying that she tells such students and their parents, “Test scores will come back to bite you,” Nichols noted that poor test scores early on may dictate remedial courses later.

McCray said that in her state students now can leave school with either a diploma or a certificate of

graduation. Although certificates were initially intended only for these students with individualized education plans, increasing numbers of non-IEP students are now receiving them. Teachers are attempting to educate both parents and students that a certificate is not a diploma and leads nowhere. While giving students certificates might prevent them from dropping out of school, McCray said, it is not preparing them for any kind of future.

### *Curriculum*

Urbanski noted that there are more dropouts in schools than outside them. Many students who are still attending classes already have dropped out mentally and emotionally. If we simply try to bring dropouts back into the same system they left, we are not going to succeed, he said. Schutten argued that we need to ask students what they need and want. Too many teachers refuse to recognize that they are in the 21st century, he said. Such teachers are boring, refuse to change, and do not care enough about the students they are teaching. Of the three R’s of rigor, relevance, and relationships promoted by High Schools That Work, they too often forget everything except rigor. Schutten also noted that, as after-school and intramural programs are lost to budget cuts, schools have nothing to offer students when school is over for the day. Simmons agreed with the importance of engaging students, saying that students must feel and

*“If you don’t know your students, you might as well not know your subject matter.”*

know they share responsibility for their education.

Smith suggested that schools need a “major shift in the paradigm” to take into account differences in learning styles and pace. For example, some people are morning people and others are night people and yet all students are expected to attend school from 7:30 A.M. until 3:30 P.M. “Why can’t schools be open at night for those who perform best in the evening?” he asked. He also challenged the assumption that all students must move through school in 13 years and graduate at age 17 or 18. The current system is working for some but not all, he said, and if we are going to meet the needs of every student, we must recognize that we do not all learn alike in the same number of years. Young noted that the retention/social promotion model is based on the false assumption that all children do, in fact, learn in the same way in the same amount of time and must progress through school at the same rate. Such a system stigmatizes those who fall outside its parameters with words such as “fail”. If we do not move

beyond this system, Young said, we will continue to demand that only children change rather than change the way we are educating them. Noting that an NEA study showed that children held back are at greater risk of dropping out, Schutten termed the retention/social promotion model a Catch-22 situation.

Noting that career technical education has been devastated in his district, Huth said that we need to make high school relevant to today. Not everyone is going to go to college, he said, and if we do away with technical education we are basically giving students two options: go to college or we are going to proclaim you a failure at ninth grade because we have nothing here for you. The factory model of high school education was invented a century ago for a certain purpose—to divide the classes—and it fulfills that purpose well, Huth argued. It no longer works, however, if we want students to succeed. Horne agreed, saying that most students in his eighth grade classes can do more on the computer than he could ever do and text message under their desks without looking, yet many cannot do the work he is asking them to do. Passing state assessments and going to college is not on the minds of 80 percent of these students, and so we need to give them other options for being successful. Pointing to the importance of reading emerging literature such as *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* by Clayton

M. Christensen, Curtis W. Johnson, and Michael B. Horn, Urbanski suggested that we explore ways to use technology to reengage students who have become disengaged and that we insure that all students have access to computers and other state of the art technology.

McCray noted that the move to schools of choice has left many students in Charlotte disenfranchised because of where they live. Barringer said that despite what has happened in Charlotte, Durham is now instituting a similar magnet school system.<sup>1</sup> **NCUEA East Region Director Anne Marie Abercrombie**, who also is treasurer of the Union County (N.J.) Association of Educators, noted that her district is reorganizing its high schools so that students must apply to its single college preparatory academy, leaving all other students segregated into “basic” high schools.

Young noted that while learning is happening in schools today, it is too often learning that is easily measured but disconnected

<sup>1</sup> Durham is, however, providing transportation to those students attending schools of choice and accepting students to magnet programs in proportions comparable to the ethnic proportions of students applying, so that if, for example 75 percent of applicants are Hispanic, 75 percent of those students accepted will be Hispanic.



from students' lives. Students too often receive learning rather than participate in learning and schools too often use coercive instead of authentic means to make learning matter. "We need to not only be able to say that learning matters; we need to teach learning *that* matters," he said, and we must give students a voice and choice in that learning. What our students are learning must be of value and they must be allowed to demonstrate it in a way that shows what they can do authentically. Demonstrating learning in a real world way holds students to a higher standard than simply passing a test, Young suggested, adding that while many of these fundamental changes must be made at the classroom level, too often systemic blocks prevent them from happening.

Schutten suggested that, as a union, we must risk taking teachers to task over whether what they are teaching is reaching students. Others noted that administrators also prevent meaningful change. Huth described what he termed a "crisis

in leadership" in his district. Leaders think they know what they are doing and are trying to do what they think is right, yet often have only a half-formed idea on a piece of paper with no way of bringing it to reality. While we cannot make progress without leaders who know how to motivate and get along with people, he suggested, too many administrators lack these essential qualities. Horne agreed, saying that good leadership within buildings is essential for systemic change. Having administrators who refuse to allow positive innovations within a building is the quickest way to kill anything new, he said. Such administrators stifle creativity and change, often without even realizing they are doing so. They discourage people and make them afraid to offer positive suggestions.

### *NCLB pressures*

Affirming the importance of positive student-teacher relationships, **Lincoln (Nebr.) Education Association Vice President Jenni Absalon** noted that NCLB has placed

stress on those relationships. There is no longer time for social interactions any more because as early as kindergarten the focus is on moving students through a rigidly structured curriculum. Staff development is focused on subject matter as well, with limited opportunity for training in social and/or cultural skills. Absalon also noted that personnel such as counselors and case managers are either being eliminated or not added because of the need to add reading and math interventionists in order to meet NCLB requirements. Finally, she said, students' inability to take classes that truly interest them because they need to take extra reading and math classes in order to pass standardized tests contributes to their desire to drop out of school.

Abercrombie agreed, saying high school students in her district attend school from 7:30 A.M. until 4:00 P.M. The students hate this schedule, she said. Each day includes double reading and math periods and few electives. In addition, teachers were required to begin preparing students for year-end standardized tests in December this past school year. As a result of these requirements, both children and teachers become bored with learning as early as the third grade. She herself would not want to be a student in such schools, Abercrombie said.

Horne noted that the statewide assessment in his state takes two weeks and is mandatory for stu-

dents from third through tenth grade. Test preparation sometimes takes months. Students take the tests in April and, because so much emphasis is placed on test preparation, they believe they are through with school for the year after they have completed them. “We really just need to redo everything,” Horne said. When we keep doing the same thing over and over again and then add the emphasis on testing to everything else, the system is just not working.

### *Economic and social issues*

Educators can undoubtedly do many things to keep more students in school. However, the families and communities from which students come also profoundly affect their chances of remaining in school through graduation. Young suggested that schools and community are not separate but that schools are at the heart of the community. While we should be taking the lead in the effort to increase graduation rates, we cannot do it alone. Rather, it is a shared responsibility. Several participants noted ways in which factors outside school affect students’ academic success. Dianda noted that, according to research literature, poverty is the overriding social factor affecting graduation rates. Nichols suggested that many students with behavioral problems or learning difficulties may simply be hungry or have other issues going on in their lives that create problems for them in the classroom. McCray re-

called that as an elementary school teacher she always kept food in her classroom for children who were sent to school without breakfast.

*“Early childhood education is one of the most effective ways of keeping children in school through graduation.”*

Abercrombie, who teaches fifth grade, said she has found that many of the children who are having behavioral difficulties in her classroom cannot see and therefore cannot read. She also has had at least one student who could not hear. Such children develop behavioral problems in third, fourth, or fifth grade, tending to act out or find anything else to do except their work because they cannot read the work that is in front of them.

Referring to studies showing that students who cannot read by third grade are at greater risk for dropping out, Dianda noted that early intervention in the primary grades to ensure that students become proficient readers will help keep them in school.

Huth noted that school systems often seem insensitive to the real problems in students’ lives. Because

of personal tragedy or economic circumstances, a certain number of students must work to support their families at age 15 or 16. We cannot expect these students to graduate in four years if we allow them to be in school only from 7:00 A.M. until 3:00 P.M. Abercrombie noted that one of the difficulties with the 7:30 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. schedule in her district is that it restricts students’ ability to hold certain jobs and help their families financially.

### **Milwaukee (Wis.) Teachers’ Education Association President**

**Dennis Oulahan** referred to the HBO documentary *Hard Times at Douglass High*, which includes depictions of large numbers of students playing rather than taking school seriously. Characterizing such playing as nervous behavior, it is an indication that something is wrong, Oulahan suggested. Students are not motivated to do well in school because they do not see the value of a high school diploma. In Milwaukee, for example, the unemployment rate for African-American men is approximately 60 percent. Students understand that from their own experience and do not believe teachers when they tell them that if they do well in school and graduate something positive awaits them. Huth argued that, while we cannot use issues such as unemployment rates as excuses, we do need mutual accountability among schools and communities. It is legitimate to say to businesses, “We are doing our part to give these students the skills they need, but

we need jobs. You are accountable to these students as well," he said.

Noting that one of the major reasons given for dropping out of school by students who responded to the writers of the report *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts* was too much freedom, Simmons suggested that while students must take some responsibility for their own success, parents, families, and community play critical roles in teaching values that include the importance of education. Schutten noted that increasing numbers of children now live in group homes and have no adult role models. Others are being raised by grandparents or being bounced from foster home to foster home. These students often do not want to leave school at the end of the day because they have no where else to go and nothing to do.

Even when students have adults in their lives who want to help them succeed, school districts do not always make meaningful family involvement easy. Absalon shared her own experience in having one of her children, who was diagnosed as having bipolar disorder, identified as a special education student in order to secure the services she needed in the school and community. Absalon, who has taught special education for 23 years and considers herself knowledgeable, termed that process incredibly hard. When we ask why parents do not simply advocate for their children she said, we forget how

difficult such work often is. Dianda added that this kind of action is often especially challenging for low income parents or those whose first language is not English.

### **How can we increase graduation rates?**

Dianda presented a number of research-based recommendations for increasing the graduation rate. They include communitywide solutions such as funding after-school programs, providing school-linked social services, and forming school-community partnerships, as well as school-based solutions such as implementing proven prevention programs; reorganizing high schools into small, personalized learning environments; and providing adult advocates for students at risk of dropping out. Dianda emphasized that many programs exist that claim to address this issue, but that the challenge is finding those such as the Perry Preschool Program and the high school intervention program First Things First that have proven track records. Baringer agreed, noting that while his district has many programs in place, it has just now hired someone to evaluate them. Absalon stressed the importance of sharing successful models so that they can be replicated.

Young suggested that we need to change from a subject-centered to a learner-centered construct of schooling, so that we focus more on helping children develop as whole persons and less on primar-

ily filling them with basic content knowledge. This requires us to change the system more fundamentally than simply creating programs to move students along more quickly. Urbanski suggested that the solution is not an either/or proposition. Rather, he said we should view increasing graduation rates as a three-stage process. First we must address immediate needs. Secondly, we must enter a recovery stage that takes us from where we are to where we need to be. Finally, we must enter into a long-term reform stage where we make fundamental systemic changes. Urbanski also suggested that successful efforts must incorporate school flexibility, an inclusive curriculum that allows students to see themselves in course material and does not marginalize them, and a long-term view that looks at the issue of increasing graduation rates not just this year or next year but 10 years from now.

Referring to the comprehensive prevention model described by Johns Hopkins University researcher Robert Balfanz, Dianda noted that too often schools provide intensive programs targeted to the five or 10 percent of students who are most difficult to reach before engaging in more basic changes that would reach more students. If we were to first undertake schoolwide actions that might be put in place simply by reorganizing existing resources, we could reach 65 to 75 percent of the students who are at risk of not graduating, she said. This would

free us up to work with the 15 to 20 percent who can be reached with just a little extra help, and it still would leave energy and resources for us to act in partnerships with the community to address the needs of the five or 10 percent who need intensive intervention.

### *School organization and curriculum*

Responding to the research Dianda presented, Harrell identified reorganizing large high schools into smaller ones as a key factor in turning around schools with low graduation rates. Smaller schools would alleviate much of the school violence that worries students as well as improve student-teacher relationships. They also would provide better opportunities to implement other research-based recommendations such as establishing regular interaction between schools and families, developing individualized graduation plans, identifying at-risk students early and intervening with them, and providing at-risk students with adult advocates, Harrell said.

Some participants reported that their districts are reorganizing their schools to both keep current students and serve those who have left and want to return. Abercrombie said that her district, having found that middle schools are breeding grounds for gang violence, is replacing the middle school model with smaller K-8 schools. McCray said that three of Charlotte's high schools have been broken into smaller schools

within schools. Each school has its own administrative team and class sizes are smaller. As a result both teachers and administrators have the opportunity to know their students and form better relationships with them. Specialized subject area focuses in each school provide opportunities for student choice and engagement.

Urbanski said that his district has instituted a program called Pathways that has substantially increased the graduation rate by changing the view of high school from a four year proposition to a three, four, or five year proposition. The key to the program's success is that it allows students who would otherwise have dropped out to take a fifth year to complete their work without being branded as failures. Barringer said that North Carolina now has Twilight Schools that operate after hours to serve nontraditional students. McCray said that Charlotte also has a Performance Learning Center to meet the needs of students who have dropped out and

want to come back. The center allows students to set up their own track toward graduation and to march with their former school at graduation if they choose.

McCray said that her district is looking at the middle and elementary schools that feed into high schools and identifying students with behavioral and attendance problems early, so that counselors are ready for them when they arrive at ninth grade. Charlotte also has instituted eight-plus and ninth grade programs. The eight-plus program, called Midwood High School, targets students who have not passed the reading and/or math portion(s) of the state's eighth grade gateway tests, providing those students with up to a year of the intensive help they need in order to move on to high school.

Young pointed to the New Basics Project in Queensland, Australia as a model worth examining because it re-centers learning around questions of identity and how students relate to their world. Suggesting



that systemic change is sometimes achieved on a school by school basis, Oulahan noted, for example, that his district has developed a strategic plan that includes lower class sizes in grades four through 12. While the district lacks the funding to implement this change in all its schools, it could add one teacher to one school and begin to work toward its goal in that way.

### *Student and staff support*

Urbanski said that in response to the finding that many students who had dropped out felt disconnected from teachers, his local Association has proposed that half of the professional development for which teachers are credited be training on subject matter and the other half training that helps teachers know their students better. Dianda noted that NEA's C.A.R.E. training focuses on having a positive mindset and high expectations for all students. C.A.R.E. exercises challenge teachers to examine the unconscious assumptions they are making about their students, often leading to powerful insights.

Urbanski suggested that placing a case manager in every school to help students connect with available resources would keep teachers from having to play amateur social worker. Horne affirmed this idea, saying that teachers often know what students need but have no idea where to go to get them help. It would be tremendously helpful to be able turn these problems over to a case worker, he said, since

counselors, who have done this kind of work in the past, are now too overburdened with scheduling and other duties to assist effectively. Schutten said that the restructured high school with which he is working is providing a full-time prevention intervention specialist who acts as a case manager. McCray noted that her district encourages teachers to use the "wraparound services" provided by nurses, counselors, psychologists, counselors, and dieticians in its schools. This support system takes much stress off teachers, providing them with alternatives other than labeling children or sending them to special education classes. The district is bringing in outside professionals from the health department to assist already overextended school personnel in this work.

### *Family and community outreach*

Simmons suggested that as we look at what can be done immediately in our schools and classrooms, we must find components that engage both students and families. McCray noted that North Carolina has instituted a program called Parent Assistant that allows parents to access up-to-date information on their children's attendance, assignments, projects, and grades online when they are unable to contact a teacher or counselor by phone or email. Recognizing that many parents in Charlotte are not computer literate, the local Association is working in partnership with four high needs

schools to teach parents how to use Parent Assistant. The project, funded by an NEA Public Engagement Project grant, provides evening classes for parents where they not only learn to use the online system but also have access to copies of textbooks so they can see exactly what their children are learning.

Realizing that keeping students in school must be a community effort and that we must take the lead in establishing community partnerships, Schutten said that he and his colleagues have reached out to the local business community and the chamber of commerce for support. As a result, the local community association is involved in high school reform, and the community association president also has been instrumental in persuading district and county governments to work together to provide more after-school recreational opportunities for students. Schutten himself runs an after-school club once a week. Club participants organized a summit last year over spring break attended by 80 students and 30 local business leaders. Schutten suggested that we include churches as potential partners as well as other organizations. Dianda said that Boys and Girls Clubs are now locating next to school campuses and providing good after-school programs for young people.

Schutten stressed the importance of bringing mentors into schools to provide positive adult role models to students. Absalon noted that

former Nebraska football coach Tom Osborne began a program in 1991 called TeamMates that recruits mentors for school aged children from businesses and the community. TeamMates has been highly successful in Nebraska and has been

*“We need to not only be able to say that learning matters; we need to teach learning that matters.”*

replicated throughout the country. Mentors often build long-term relationships with students, Absalon said, recalling that at least one of her students was mentored by the same TeamMate from third grade until his senior year in high school.

Harrell recalled that during her last 10 years of teaching she was involved in establishing a program for adjudicated youth in the small town where she lived. One of the things that made this program successful was forming partnerships with the business community. Owners of businesses such as laundromats and gas stations became mentors, providing after-school jobs and working with students individually. These partnerships were mutually beneficial, Harrell said. They decreased the vandalism prevalent among out of school youth and provided the skills students needed to hold jobs. Harrell

recalled, for example, teaching students how to make change, a crucial skill for holding many of the jobs the town had to offer.

McCray said that her district is partnering with the local community college to meet the needs of students interested in pursuing a technical education. The district has set up a school on one of the community college campuses that operates under the name of a “middle college high school.” Students attend high school there in the morning and take community college courses in the afternoon and evening. Many program graduates are finding jobs with NASCAR, while others are going on to work in the fields of plumbing, electrical work, and technology.

### *The importance of language*

Several participants noted the importance of language in framing the graduation rate issue. Young termed Balfanz’s use of the term “dropout factories” in reference to those schools struggling with low graduation rates offensive, saying that it projects the wrong image both to teachers and to the public. Urbanski called the term a slur that undermines the credibility of anyone who uses it. Simmons agreed that this terminology is a problem and noted that NEA is using terms such as “increasing the graduation rate” and “making graduation a priority,” so as to frame the issue within an asset rather than a deficit model. When a school is labeled negatively, the entire community

is labeled, Simmons said, and so it is our place as educators to call into question such language. Barringer agreed. Noting that the high school from which both he and North Carolina’s chief justice graduated has now been labeled as low performing, Barringer noted that such labeling makes him feel bad even though he no longer attends. He suggested using the term “at-promise” rather than “at-risk” to refer to high needs students and the schools that serve them. Schools of promise have the capability of helping children succeed and simply need nurturing to make that happen, he said. Smith likened NEA’s reframing of the graduation issue to its earlier use of the term “priority schools” rather than “low performing schools” and called such messaging proactive and forward thinking.

Oulahan suggested that we need to find a term that conveys urgency but not despair. Urbanski cautioned that our language must reflect the fact that this is not just a minority problem but everyone’s problem. Young agreed, adding that defining the challenge as involving only “these kids” or “these groups” leads to “band-aid” solutions for just “these kids” rather than larger systemic changes that help all students. When everyone can be involved and take ownership of this issue, we can move past the status quo and create systems that engage and empower youth as we educate them, he said.

Picking up on Harrell's account of teaching her students to make change, Young said that he also teaches his students to make change—to make change in their world. "Something vital is missing in terms of how we engage students if we do not help them make an impact on their world and their lives," he said. Rather than ask what our students should know and do, we should ask who we want them to become. Asking this question would help us address the whole child and engage students in a way that helps them value their learning because it helps them create change. Young suggested that participants return home and unite around a common vision of what it means to graduate. We as teacher unions cannot allow others to define great teaching and learning, he said. Rather we must define these things ourselves in terms of students, insuring that authentic learning and assessment are at the heart of the matter.

### What is NEA doing?

To carry out its goal of increasing graduation rates, NEA has formulated a 12-point dropout prevention plan that addresses many of the issues participants discussed and is supported by more than 30 national organizations. The 12 points include:

- Mandate high school graduation or equivalency as compulsory for everyone below the age of 21;



- Establish high school graduation centers for students 19-21 years old;
- Make sure students receive individual attention;
- Expand students' graduation options;
- Increase career education and workforce readiness programs in schools;
- Act early so students do not drop out;
- Involve families in students' learning at school and at home;
- Monitor students' academic progress in school;
- Monitor, accurately report, and work to reduce dropout rates;
- Involve the entire community in dropout prevention;
- Make sure educators have the training and resources they need to prevent students from dropping out;
- Make high school graduation a federal priority.

### Partnerships

NEA considers carrying out its plan to be a shared responsibility, involving not only educators but parents and families, businesses and the community, and policymakers and elected officials. Therefore, it is partnering in this work with a number of organizations, particularly Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) and America's Promise Alliance (APA).

JAG is a school-to-career program implemented in 700 schools across the country. JAG's mission is to keep young people in school through graduation and provide work-based learning experiences that ultimately lead to a quality job and rewarding career. JAG's trained "career specialists" provide instruction to groups of 35-45 students selected by in-school advisory committees, typically composed of faculty, administrators, and counselors. They also provide individual attention to students to help them overcome barriers that prevent them from tak-

ing advantage of their high school education, completing requirements for a high school diploma, and/or securing employment or pursuing a postsecondary education after high school or GED completion. They advise and support students as they make significant career and life decisions in the earlier high school years and connect students to professional counseling services to address more serious

*“Research shows that poverty is the overriding social factor affecting graduation rates.”*

barriers, such as mental health problems and substance abuse.

While JAG’s national curriculum equips participants with job skills for the workplace, JAG also provides job placement services during the summer months, and career specialists engage in intensive, one-on-one employer marketing and job development activities to identify entry-level job opportunities for students after graduation or GED completion. Likewise, specialists help graduates explore post-secondary education opportunities and show them how to navigate the financial aid process to pursue these opportunities. Finally, JAG provides students with 12 months of follow-up services and on-the-

job or post-secondary education support. The average cost per participant is \$1,500 for the in-school phase of the program. Full-time employed graduates, or completers who are full-time employed, repay the cost of their participation. JAG reports impressive outcomes, including a 94 percent graduation rate for participants in 2006. Forty percent of JAG graduates pursue further education after high school, and more than two-thirds go on to full-time jobs.

NEA is an enthusiastic JAG partner, Simmons said, because this program provides direct services to students and, in many cases, career specialists are NEA members or retired members. NEA has provided state affiliates with a list of the schools in which JAG operates, cross-referenced by state affiliate, and has encouraged affiliates to learn more about the program and explore ways in which members can support its school-based work. NEA also supported and attended JAG’s National Leadership Awards Event luncheon in December.

America’s Promise Alliance (APA), an organization founded 10 years ago to focus on children’s issues, hopes to host more than 100 dropout prevention summits throughout the nation between June 2008 and 2010. **APA Senior Director Chrystal Morris**, who is overseeing these summits, said that her organization, which receives funding from businesses such as State Farm Insurance Company and AT&T, pro-

vides \$25,000 grants to states and \$10,000 grants to targeted cities to defray the costs of hosting them. All 50 governors, as well as mayors and school superintendents from 50 cities targeted as having the nation’s lowest graduation rates, have been invited to attend. Participating communities must coalesce a varied group of stakeholders to set the agenda for the summit and submit a plan for moving forward afterward. In many cases, the summits represent the first time all these parties have come together to address this issue.

APA’s initiative was launched on April 1, 2008. Morris termed the first summit, held in Detroit, a tremendous success, resulting in an action plan and a \$10 million campaign to sustain the work over the next five years. Simmons noted that NEA affiliates were not automatically included among invited participants initially, a fact verified by some discussion participants. This has changed since NEA has begun to partner with APA, Simmons said. The Michigan Education Association worked with the governor’s office on an October 20 statewide summit, and the Ohio Education Association was involved in planning Ohio’s November 17 summit. NEA hopes that other NEA affiliates will either sponsor, co-sponsor, or participate in the summits as well. Simmons noted that NEA also can work with affiliates to sponsor summits in areas that APA is not targeting. APA provides free summit tools

and templates on its Web site (see Resources).

APA provides programs and support for post-summit work, including three national action strategies around which to mobilize community leaders:

- Where the kids are: using schools as hubs for providing community services to at-risk children;
- Ready for the real world: engaging students in service learning and career exploration;
- All kids covered: making sure children who are eligible to receive public health insurance are enrolled.

These strategies connect to APA's five promises to young people: caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, effective education, and opportunities to serve others. APA also is partnering with the PTA and Annie E. Casey Foundation to focus on empowering parents to help keep their children in school. In addition to including parents as conveners in its dropout summits, it is working through the Casey Foundation to formulate three parent engagement summits to learn how school systems and communities can better inform and educate parents as well as make them feel more comfortable dealing with schools and teachers. APA supports the 10-point plan to improve

dropout prevention defined in *The Silent Epidemic*, a plan supported by more than 100 organizations. NEA's 12-point plan, described above, incorporates these points.

## RESOURCES

### NEA Resources:

- NEA's Dropout Prevention, [www.nea.org/home/Dropout-Prevention.html](http://www.nea.org/home/Dropout-Prevention.html).
- NEA's 12-Point Action Plan and other resources are available from NEA at [www.nea.org/home/18106.htm](http://www.nea.org/home/18106.htm)
- *The Slow Fade: School Dropouts in the United States: A Research Update*. Richard R. Verdugo and Thomas H. Dial (February 2008). Available from NEA Human and Civil Rights.
- *Preventing Future High School Dropouts: An Advocacy and Action Guide for NEA State and*

*Local Affiliates*. Marcie Dianda (November 2008). Available from NEA Human and Civil Rights and at [www.nea.org/home/ns/20332.htm](http://www.nea.org/home/ns/20332.htm).

### Other Publications:

- *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*. Clayton M. Christensen, Curtis W. Johnson, and Michael B. Horn (2008).
- *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. A report by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. John M. Bridgeland, John

J. Dilulio, Jr., and Karen Burke Morison (March 2006).

- *Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 2005–06*. National Center for Education Statistics. (June 2008). Includes data on graduation rates. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubinfo.asp?pubid=2008339>

### Other organizations addressing graduation rates:

- America's Promise Alliance: [www.americaspromise.org](http://www.americaspromise.org)
- Jobs for America's Graduates: [www.jag.org](http://www.jag.org)



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