THE DROPOUT CRISIS

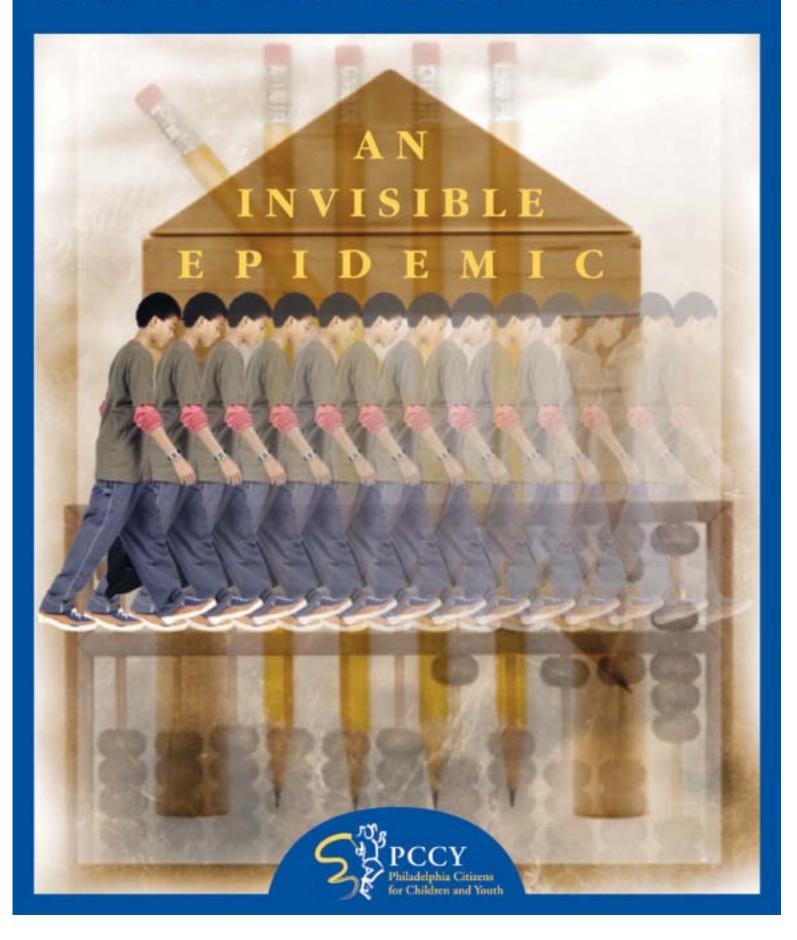## AN INVISIBLE EPIDEMIC

PCCY
Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth

About PCCY

Founded in 1980, Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) serves as the region's leading child advocacy organization and works to improve the lives and life chances of its children. Through thoughtful and informed advocacy, community education, targeted service projects and budget analysis, PCCY seeks to watch out and speak out for children and families. PCCY undertakes specific and focused projects in areas affecting the healthy growth and development of children, including after-school, child care, public education, child health, juvenile justice and child welfare. PCCY is a committed advocate and an independent watchdog for the well-being of children.

The Dropout Crisis: An Invisible Epidemic

*Thousands of young Philadelphians leave school
without graduating each year.*

*What can we do
to help those young people complete their education?*

*What must we do
to salvage their futures and enhance our own?*

Introduction

Most Philadelphia children manage to complete high school – but a growing number of local students leave school without graduating. They have few skills and little hope of finding and holding a job, supporting a family, or becoming the productive citizens we need them to be.

Thousands of youth stop attending high school in Philadelphia every year. Many of them share common needs and life experiences. Most have not known success in school. Neither their parents nor their community have been able to help them. Many attended schools where graduation was not the norm. Some found that school was unsafe or boring or not connected to life. Many felt disconnected and isolated in their schools, unable to connect with anyone to help them with school or life issues.

Historically, we have not paid much attention to these youth; they have been invisible to most of us. In the past, they were quietly absorbed into the workforce when good-paying factory jobs for the unskilled were plentiful. Now, low-skilled work opportunities are rapidly disappearing. We need to look closely at youth who fail to complete high school and help them get back on track in school and in life – because their future and ours are intertwined.

A capable workforce is essential in order for Philadelphia to be an attractive, economically vibrant place to live – a city that attracts and welcomes business and families. So beyond the needs and welfare of these young people as individuals, it is in the best interest of our community that we embrace the huge number of youth who are leaving high school without diplomas and develop strategies that will enable them to realize their potential for success. We must recognize our stake in their fate and support them in becoming productive citizens.

Unfortunately, we don't know the exact number of youth who dropout because they have not been counted and have been invisible to most of us for many years. **They have not been carefully tracked by any public system.** There are some studies that suggest that unless change occurs, more than two out of five students in 9th grade in Philadelphia public schools today will not graduate in five years.

In Philadelphia, unless more action is taken, we believe that almost 6,000 youth entering 9th grade each year will leave school without graduating. Other in higher grades will also dropout. That's over 24,000 young people over four high school years.

In 2005, Pennsylvania began to develop an education identifier for high school students. That is an important step so that in the future, students at risk of failing or withdrawing from school can be more easily identified and, hopefully, helped to change their course before they dropout of school and out of sight.

What would it take for all Philadelphia youth to graduate from high school?

How can we, as a Commonwealth, City and Community, change the course of the future for these young people – and for ourselves? Where do we begin and how do we chart our progress?

Who Drops Out Of School: Out of School Youth Profile

Who Drops Out Of School: *Out of School Youth Profile*

**Most of the youth who dropout of school are from low-income families
and attend schools that have low promotion rates.**

Many of their parents, caregivers and other family members have not had successful experiences in school and do not connect school success with success in life. Many of these families are ill-prepared to help their children meet the challenges of school. Yet there are many young people who come from similar families and low income neighborhoods who attend the same schools and do experience success. Our challenge is to do better in responding to each young person's needs so that every student can succeed.

In recent years, there have been more efforts to provide homework help, tutoring, parenting support and involvement programs, but many families are not being reached.

Many youth who quit school have been unsuccessful academically for a long time.

Many have been truant, have had trouble in math and reading, and have exhibited discipline problems in their elementary school years. When they leave elementary school, they often are not ready for the challenges of the critical middle and high school years.

The School District has provided more after school and summer school support for children who have not been academically successful in school, but mastery comes slowly for many. There has been a collaborative effort between the School District, the Courts and the Department of Human Services to combat truancy in recent years. There are some tutoring programs and many more after school and summer programs available, but still many youth are not being reached. There are some new school-based behavioral health programs, but the supports fail to meet the demand for services. There are Consultation and Education specialists in most elementary schools, and some are working with the school behavioral health/referral process in middle and high schools. But these programs primarily refer children and families to services which can often be difficult to access. Although almost 10,000 Philadelphia low-income teens secure mental health services annually, there are young people who cannot find services, or whose requests for help are put on waiting lists.

**Many youth who dropout have reported feeling unsafe in school, while
others report that they never connected with teachers, counselors or school in general,
and didn't recognize the relevance of school to their lives. Many of these young people feel
invisible in large, anonymous schools.**

Our schools reflect the neglect and violence in many of our communities. In recent years in Philadelphia, the School District has installed metal detectors in all high schools, increased the school police presence and adopted a zero-tolerance policy for non-compliant behavior. The number of school-based behavioral health programs has also increased. In working to develop a more personal and cohesive climate for students, the District is supporting the breaking up of very large high schools into smaller schools. Still, thousands of students continue to attend high schools where there are too many youngsters and not enough adults to advise, support or protect them. There are far too few counselors or social workers available to discuss problems with students, or to provide guidance and support. Youth who leave school are not routinely contacted by school officials to determine why they left or to urge them to return.

How do we learn more about these youth and work together to change their direction?

Looking Closer
Special Populations

Looking Closer - Special Populations: *Youth in Foster Care, Pregnant & Parenting Teens, Adjudicated Youth*

Some of the youth who leave school are involved with other public systems. Although dependency, delinquency, pregnancy or parenthood are not the reasons for leaving school for a majority of dropouts, these situations increase the likelihood that students will have difficulty finishing high school. The health, child welfare and juvenile justice systems place little emphasis on the educational progress of the youth in their care; nor does the school system focus many resources or attention on the non-educational needs of students. Thus, too often, identification of special needs and collaboration for better support for these youth does not occur.

Youth in Foster Care

**Nationally, youth in out-of-home care are up to
two times more likely than other teens to dropout of school.**[1,2]

Locally, the Department of Human Services does not emphasize or track the educational progress of students in its care or who "age out" of foster care. Although recently DHS has agreed to try to collect school progress information, the challenge is to focus on the youngsters' education as part of the regular work of the child welfare system.

Why do the teens in foster care have trouble in school?

Many teens who come into care in their teens have had histories of stressful living situations. They have moved frequently, resulting in multiple school transfers and long waits for their records to be sent to their new schools. The difficult adolescent years have been compounded by the demands of adjusting to new living situations as well as to new schools. For most of these young people, there is no one to turn to for help in navigating the school system. Again, these students often attend large, impersonal schools with low promotion rates and few counselors or social workers to assist them.

Finally, national data indicates that youth in out-of-home care frequently face serious obstacles: they are more likely to have behavior and discipline problems, are generally at least one year behind academically, and have disproportionately high rates of mental health problems.

What happens to teens who age out of the system?

Many out-of-school youth have been in foster care and "aged out" of the system at age 18. Each year, about 500 Philadelphia youth age out of foster care,[5] but we do not know their educational status. Another group, over age 18, stays in care to continue to receive treatment and/or continue to attend school. These young people are on board extensions, the child welfare system's program that continues support to youth in their care who wish to continue attending high school or to attend college.

Some youth who age out are "anxious to get out from under the rules" only to later change their minds and discover they are no longer eligible for a board extension. Still others are in permanent legal custody or living with relatives; these young people are ineligible for a board extension under current rules. In spite of its limitations, DHS supports about 700 youth on board extensions!

Some of these youth attend the Achieving Independence Center, which provides independent living skills for youth transitioning to living on their own after being in foster care. The Center currently serves about 500 youth. While we know that some youth who leave the system do finish high school, the child welfare system does not track or document their progress after they leave. As the primary mission of the educational system is to educate children, the primary mission of the child welfare system is to protect them. The challenge is to find new ways to strengthen collaboration in order to improve the life chances of these young people.

Pregnant and Parenting Youth

In Philadelphia, and across the nation, pregnant and parenting teens are represented among youth who dropout of school. Many of these young women were struggling with school before becoming pregnant; others were not.

Each year more than 3,500 young women under age 20 in Philadelphia have babies.[6] Some of them are able to stay in school and graduate, but many are not. In Philadelphia, between 10,000 and 12,000 young women under age 20 are parents.[7] Generally, we do not know how many of them stay in school each year, how many left school when they were pregnant or gave birth, or how many returned to school after giving birth. National data suggests that 60 percent of pregnant or parenting teens leave school.[8] Anecdotal information suggests that in Philadelphia, as elsewhere in the country, a majority of young mothers leave school when pregnant or parenting.

Why do so many young females leave high school when they become mothers?

Pregnant teens sometimes leave school because they are bored or embarrassed, or feel unsafe or disconnected at school. Others leave because of health issues related to pregnancy – such as physical complications or illness, or the need to keep medical appointments during the day. Many find few opportunities to make up missed instruction and homework during pregnancy and post-delivery. Some have no one to turn to at school or at home; some choose not to speak with the school nurse, because School District policy requires nurses to share information with parents. Although most of these young mothers secure prenatal care, health care providers do not routinely discuss with them the importance of staying in or returning to school, or attempt to connect them to school.

The ELECT/Cradle to Classroom program serves 1,000 to 1,500 pregnant or parenting teens annually in neighborhood high schools, but thousands more could be served if ELECT/CTC could identify them and provide services to them in all schools, or in collaboration with community organizations in neighborhood settings. Efforts are underway to provide homework and other school support to teens who miss school while pregnant or parenting, but there is no consistent, formal assistance provided to these young parents by the school system or the community.

What supports exist for pregnant and parenting youth?

Parenting teens are overwhelmingly low income and unmarried. Many are eligible for cash assistance (TANF) after the birth of the baby. Many receive this assistance, but there is no exact count because the state does not specifically track the number of teen parents receiving cash assistance. Many teens have trouble finding child care, but we don't track how many teens are receiving state child care subsidy. However, we do know that many teens miss school while trying to get child care subsidy, caring for their infants, and sometimes looking for a job. Most teen moms and their babies are eligible for the Women, Infant and Children program (WIC), but only a fraction get the benefits of this supplemental food program. Many teens find it hard to keep up or catch up with school work because of the multiple demands on their time, combined with the lack of flexibility in school scheduling.

Although the District has adjusted its school attendance policies to accommodate new parents, there is still not enough time for many new mothers to reorder their lives as parents quickly enough to resume regular school attendance in a timely manner. Under current rules, missing more than four weeks of classes post-delivery can result in loss of credit for work completed and may force the student to repeat the entire year. Although there are some educational alternatives available, including some which focus on quick credit accumulation, most such programs have waiting lists. While the State has simplified and increased its child care subsidy availability for teens, the application process can take a long time – and it cannot be started until after the baby is born.

Adjudicated Youth

Many youth who leave school have been in delinquency institutions. When they leave these institutions, some return to school and then drop out after a while, some do not return to school and still others do finish.

Philadelphia's delinquent youth population seems to fit the national profile: they generally do not do well in school before they are sent to delinquency institutions. Some improve in placement, but many get lost in the transition back to community. Across the country, between two and three out of five delinquent youths suffer from mental health disorders and/or drug addiction problems or learning disabilities.[9] There is also a high prevalence of violence in the lives of these children and their families. Many lack vocational skills and are poorly prepared to function in school or in the workplace. They usually return to communities that are unable to provide the intensive and sustained support and guidance they need to readjust to being home and to successfully finish their education. In Pennsylvania, many also face difficulties when the coursework they've completed at their placements (often in counties outside of Philadelphia) does not match the School District of Philadelphia's curriculum requirements. Thus, they do not get credit for their work.

In recent years, young people have attended the RETI WRAP program after leaving detention facilities. The program provides some testing and screening and assists them in being readmitted to a school. The Courts and DHS have developed a promising reintegration project to support youth as they transition home and reclaim their lives, but these youth have many more needs than these programs currently address.

Making the Dropout Crisis Visible

Making the Dropout Crisis Visible: *What Gets Counted Counts!*

Imagine an illness that affected more than one out of four children.
Imagine this illness caused severe damage to the patient.
Imagine this illness cost the community millions every year.
What would we call it? If we knew about it, we would call it an epidemic.

What would we do about it?

We would count every existing case and every new case. We would report on it to the community, invest in figuring out how to prevent it, if possible, and how to treat it.

We would identify any symptoms that seemed to lead to our children having their hopes crushed and their life chances threatened. We would support scientific investigation to find ways to stop the spread of the illness.

We would marshal our resources – invest and call on everyone to get involved. If we discovered a treatment but didn't have enough medication, we would somehow get the medication.

Once we understood the damage that this sickness was causing our children and society, we would declare an emergency and work on it together – because we understood that an illness that affects so many children was going to affect all of us, individually and collectively, sooner or later.

Millions of children in the United States leave school every year without graduating.

The Education Testing Service estimates that one-third of all high school students fail to graduate.[10] We are not sure of the exact number, because we don't count them. We believe that almost one-half of the country's African American students, 40 percent of Hispanic students, and 11 percent of white student attend high schools in which graduation is not the norm.[11] We don't even agree on whether to call them dropouts or just non-school attenders. What we do agree on is that their chances of success in life are seriously compromised; we do agree that their chances of becoming homeless or going to prison are high; we do know that there are increasingly fewer and fewer jobs for them.

Getting your high school diploma 40 years ago was important but not critical. Then, 70 percent of the jobs were for unskilled work; now that number at best is 30 percent.[12] At the same time, if present trends continue, about one out of five 9th graders – 33,000 young people in the state – will not graduate in four years.[13]

In Philadelphia it is estimated that more than two out of five youth leave school without graduating.

Some leave in 9th grade, some in 10th, some 11th or 12th.
If we look closely at 6th graders, we can see who most of them will be.[14]
Dropping out rarely has a sudden onset; it is a chronic condition that intensifies gradually.

Those people who have looked at the situation have identified some symptoms.

They see kids who fail reading or math or are truant in 6th grade;
They see kids whose lives are not stable, who change schools a lot, who have behavioral health issues, who attend big schools with big classes and with not enough counselors to help;
They see kids who are coming out of foster care and who have not been encouraged to stay in school;
They see kids who are pregnant or who are parents unable to access the services they need;
They see kids who return from delinquency institutions and who have trouble reconnecting to school;
They see kids who always had trouble reading and doing regular school work and didn't get help;
They see kids that too many of us have not seen.

They see states that don't provide enough support for kids with the most needs;
They see schools with policies that discourage kids from staying in or returning to them;
They see programs that serve only one quarter of the families that need them;
They see the failures of fragmented systems that don't respond to children's needs;
They see kids in schools where they don't feel safe, cared about or connected;
They see school counselors so overwhelmed by numbers and tasks that they are like emergency room workers – only able to treat the ones that are bleeding in front of them.

If we open our eyes...
We will begin to see them,
We will begin to count them,
We will begin to address their needs.

Then they will cease being invisible and we can begin to conquer this epidemic.

Recommendations

What Would It Take For Every Philadelphia Child To Graduate From High School?

It would require that we all...
Consider, Count, Collaborate, Connect, Change.

We recommend that:

1) The entire community **consider** the importance of high school graduation to students and to the best long-term interests of all Philadelphians.

2) The leadership of the City, State, School District, university, non-profit and business communities embrace the goal of graduation for every Philadelphia child – and help to develop strategies, monitor progress, and be accountable for change.

3) The "invisibility" of students who fail in school must end. All our young people must be **counted.** We must track all students, count them, monitor their progress and their problems and intervene when they drift toward leaving school. This will require that key stakeholders – the School District, child welfare system, health care system, juvenile courts and probation systems – make a commitment to share data, track progress and report to each other and the community on a regular basis.

4) All stakeholders embrace educational attainment as an integral part of each of their missions – and support that commitment with staff and other resources.

5) Schools, communities, families and the social service agencies **collaborate** to support student success – and to address problems that drive some children out of the classroom.

6) Key institutions work together to support an adequate number of social workers, counselors, and nurses in schools to support youth at-risk of school failure.

7) Schools become safer and more adept at addressing the varied needs of students. We must be able to reach out and **connect** with students as soon as they show any signs of educational risk. No child's education should end because he/she is afraid to go to school – or is left to wander away unnoticed.

8) The District develop policies and practices that support **change** in the size and climate of our schools.

9) The Commonwealth provide incentives to districts to keep at-risk youth in school.

10) The Commonwealth and the School District work together to develop funding and budgeting strategies that actually encourage schools to find, hold and graduate as many kids as possible.

11) The District develop more education alternatives, including smaller schools and programs in community settings that are flexible and responsive to youth needs – considering their age, credits needed for graduation, reading/math skill levels, and social and emotional needs.

12) The District work with the community to reach out to all young people who have left and develop strategies to **connect** with them and help them graduate.

For Pregnant & Parenting Teens - *Consider, Count, Collaborate, Connect, Change*

We recommend that:

1) The community **consider** the opportunity to positively impact on two lives by facilitating teen parents staying in school.

2) Schools, health care providers and community organizations help identify and reach out to pregnant and parenting teens to assess and respond to their needs and facilitate school success.

3) The School District, the Health Department, health care providers, DHS dedicate more time and energy to **counting** pregnant and parenting teens and connecting them to support services.

4) School policy and practice **connect** teens to the ELECT/Cradle to Classroom program, recognizing that by assisting children who are raising children, the community is supporting the healthy development of two generations.

5) The Commonwealth **collaborate** with health care providers in connecting young women with educational opportunities by prompting and supporting heath provider efforts to encourage young parents to continue their education. Prenatal care providers should be encouraged to secure consent from patients to **connect** them with school personnel and education opportunities.

6) The Commonwealth **change** child care rules to allow pregnant teens to submit the paperwork necessary to apply for child care subsidy before their babies are born.

7) School District **change** rules to allow extended time for parental leave from the current one month to six weeks.

8) Education programming be more flexible, take place in schools and community settings to enable young parents to keep up with school work and avoid losing course credit because of absences resulting from doing their duty as responsible parents.

For Youth in Foster Care - *Consider, Count, Collaborate, Connect, Change*

We recommend that:

1) DHS **consider** the importance of educational progress as part of the Agency's mission.

2) DHS **collaborate** with the School District to create an education unit in DHS and support educational advocates in group homes and other placements.

3) DHS regularly **count** and report on the educational progress of youth in care and the educational status of youth when they age out of care.

4) DHS **collaborate** with the School District to support social workers in schools with high numbers of children in DHS care.

5) DHS work with the School District and the community to reach out and **connect** with youth who leave care to encourage them to return to school and/or pursue other educational opportunities.

6) DHS work with the School District and provider agencies to **change** procedures so that school time is not lost when students change placements and schools.

For Adjudicated Youth - *Consider, Count, Collaborate, Connect, Change*

We recommend that:

1) DHS and the Courts **consider** the importance of assisting these young people in securing their diplomas.

2) DHS and the Courts provide transition supports such as mental health care, tutoring and anger management training so that these youth will be better prepared to **reconnect** with educational opportunities.

3) DHS and the Courts work with the School District to track progress and **count** the programs that work for these youth.

4) The School District **collaborate** with the community to develop small, alternative, educational programs so that older teens can work while accumulating course credits that count towards graduation.

5) The School District and the Courts continue the work now underway to align curricula at juvenile institutions with the School District curriculum.

6) DHS, the Courts and the School District continue the **collaboration** of the Reintegration Project, to more closely follow and assist kids in getting support services when they leave juvenile placement and are "reintegrated" into the community.

If we consider, count, collaborate, connect and change, we can set and reach a goal that will produce a better future for our children and all of us.

If each year, 10 percent fewer Philadelphia teens dropped out of school, think how much better off all of us would be!

We know what it will take.

We just need the will to commit to doing it.

Endnotes

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Acknowledgments

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