

## A Promise Worth Keeping: Advancing the High School Graduation Rate in Philadelphia, Part Two

[Population Health Sciences](#)

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This blog examining [A Promise Worth Keeping: Advancing the High School Graduation Rate in Philadelphia](#) is part two of a two part series. For part one, please click [here](#).

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In 2014, PolicyLab, in collaboration with researchers at Johns Hopkins University, was commissioned by Project U-Turn to conduct a follow-up study to [Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 2000-2005](#). This follow-up study, [A Promise Worth Keeping: Advancing the High School Graduation Rate in Philadelphia](#), provides an examination of graduation, dropout, re-engagement, and post-secondary enrollment for Philadelphia youth, including those involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems between 2002 and 2012. In order to continue to increase graduation rates and post-secondary enrollment for all groups, we have several more recommendations for ways the City of Philadelphia and the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) can support young people. The recommendations include examples of promising research-based programs and models from Casey Family Programs, America's Promise Alliance, and What Works Clearinghouse.

**1) Create more outreach and referral service centers throughout the city to support re-engagement and graduation efforts, and maintain capacity of existing re-engagement program options**

*Unfulfilled Promise* suggested the creation of multiple options for students who have dropped out of school because of the diversity of barriers leading to disengagement with the school system. Students are entering re-

engagement programs in increasing numbers, and many of these students have current and/or previous child welfare involvement. According to [America's Promise Alliance](#), research has shown that youth re-engaging in education need supportive services from families, schools, and communities in order to move them to graduation.

An increase in programs may be needed to target “hardest to serve” youth. Many existing programs fill to capacity with fairly strategic recruitment, yet outreach to the most disconnected youth has been a continued challenge. To engage these youth, intentional outreach efforts and/or onramps for successful re-engagement will be required. Once re-engaged, further emphasis will need to be placed on retention strategies that reflect individual student needs and expectations.

To encourage sustainability and increase capacity for the SDP's re-engagement center, program evaluation is needed to identify local community partnerships and geographic gaps that may exist (more neighborhoods may need greater supports and offerings than others), and whether there is a need for more specialized programming that reflects the needs of youth based on their life circumstances. Evaluation will also need to assess whether offerings align with regional career and work opportunities, and integrate education and employment through paid work experiences as needed. Finally, measures of persistence and definitions of success that are clear and consistent should be classified across all programs.

The re-engagement center at the SDP and the E3 centers provided physical spaces and dedicated staff members to provide supportive social services and case management. However, due to inadequate funding many of these resources have been diminished. In January 2015, the DHS Education Support Center re-dedicated an Education Stability Social Service Manager to work full-time within the re-engagement center as a means to increase support. The re-engagement center would benefit from a restoration of funding, and as demonstrated by the increase in the number of re-engaging students in *A Promise Worth Keeping*, re-engagement efforts need further reach and dissemination. Existing services need to be expanded in order to increase the number of students who successfully re-engage.

Similar to the SDP's re-engagement center, New York City's Referral Centers for High School Alternatives in each of its boroughs (The Bronx, Brooklyn, Staten Island, Manhattan, and Queens) assist students with finding alternative education programs to pursue a high school diploma or GED. The centers throughout the boroughs have guidance counselors, social workers, and academic support staff to assist students in the process. With New York City as a model, Philadelphia can benefit from locating referral service centers throughout the city and provide students with access to essential services.

In addition to expanding existing services, new models for reaching more students are crucial. [United Teen Equality Center \(UTEC\)](#) in Massachusetts utilizes “Streetworkers” as a key ingredient for their re-engagement efforts. For over a decade the UTEC has used “Streetworkers” to meet students where they are in neighborhoods and invite them to programs at the center, provide resource information, and crisis intervention for those most in need. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has recognized the “Streetworkers” program as

a model for youth violence prevention. By conducting outreach and forming relationships, the “Streetworkers” show students that there are caring adults who have been through similar challenges in life and can provide assistance with re-engaging in education.

## **2) Public systems and community-based organizations should continue citywide efforts to increase support for pathways to post-secondary opportunities for high school youth**

Financial, academic, and social supports are necessary for a successful transition to two year or four year post-secondary institutions [including](#) financial literacy, career exploration, peer mentoring, and academic advising. The Mayor’s Office of Education of Philadelphia coordinates the [Graduation Coach Campaign](#), which pairs students with an adult they already have a pre-existing relationship with, and provides support throughout high school and planning next steps for college. While the Philadelphia Graduation Coach Campaign is beneficial, Philadelphia could consider a new model such as New Hampshire’s [Graduation Coach Program](#), which has seen evidence of success. About 57 percent of students who completed the New Hampshire program enrolled in college and students who went through the program were more likely to enroll in college compared to their counterparts who did not engage in the program. The New Hampshire model provides a stipend for students, direct assistance with college applications, including essays, financial information, and application fees, and weekly meetings between mentors and mentees on school grounds with counselors to track progress. Introducing a structured model like the New Hampshire program to Philadelphia would add additional support for students in Philadelphia middle and high schools who may not have access to those resources and supports at home.

## **3) Continue to engage stakeholders citywide to implement initiatives focused on Black and Hispanic male academic achievement**

President Barack Obama launched the national My Brother’s Keeper Initiative (MBK) in February 2014, which is aimed at creating a “birth to career” strategy for improving life outcomes for young males of color. Philadelphia’s Mayor Nutter, who is the co-chair of the national MBK Initiative, launched the Philadelphia MBK initiative in September 2014. By March 2015 the Philly MBK action plan was released that focuses on [six milestones](#) with strategies to be implemented by six lead organizations. Each milestone receives support from partner organizations that are responsible for sharing data. However, we recommend that in order to ensure that milestones are met with regard to reading level and graduation, it is essential to have academic outcomes data beyond disproportionate discipline indicators reported specifically for Black and Latino male youth.

Former Mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg, implemented a [Young Men’s Initiative](#) in 2011. The initiative is a citywide cross-agency effort designed to fund and support programs that remove academic, social, and professional barriers to improve life outcomes for Black and Hispanic males. Three departments in the mayor’s office are now responsible for the successful execution of 40 policies and programs associated with the initiative. The policies and programs cover education, employment, the justice system, and health. Data sharing is integral to the initiative for evaluation and monitoring of programs. In order to monitor progress of their

initiatives, schools are required to report individually on academic outcomes of Black and Hispanic males as compared to other students. In addition to the Young Men's Initiative, the New York City Department of Education created a special unit to improve outcomes for Black and Hispanic students in 2012 as the result of the high dropout rate of male students. Substantive outcomes from the initiatives in New York City will take time. Philadelphia should consider reporting academic outcomes for Black and Hispanic male students and creating a special office within the SDP as the New York City Department of Education has done in order to continue to monitor the progress of the academic milestones for the Philly MBK initiative.

## **Conclusion**

While essential, these recommendations are secondary to the need for sustained equitable funding for Philadelphia schools. Equitable funding will allow for the restoration of many basic resources that existed during the study period that contributed to the increase in graduation rates and decrease in dropout rates that were observed. The prosperity of the City of Philadelphia is dependent upon having a well-educated, healthy populace.

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