



GRADUATION COUNTS

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Graduating from high school is a rite of passage for many American youth, an accomplishment that is hailed by families and communities alike, and as an achievement that warrants proms, parties, and presents. Newspaper stories hold up intellectually brilliant teenagers, challenged teenagers who have graduated despite all odds, and extraordinarily talented teenagers. These stories make us all proud to be part of a bigger community that has supported these young people as they have matured and prepared for the world of young adulthood.

And so it should be, because the transition from high school student to young adult is a critical one. Young people will enter into young adulthood as they head to college, the workforce or into whatever life has to offer – with or without the life skills and educational skills they need. Thus there is much riding on high school graduation and all that goes before it, and there are serious consequences for those who fail to obtain a high school diploma.

Graduating from high school matters, therefore, because it improves the chances that young Americans will go forward to become economically and socially successful. That is not to say that those without a high school diploma cannot go on to have successful and fulfilling lives. It is, however, much harder, according to most research.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION MATTERS FOR AMERICA

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the 2011 national high school graduation rate was 75 percent. The remaining 25 percent, or approximately 1.2 million high school seniors across the country, did not attain a high school diploma. This heterogeneous group of high school dropouts constitutes a loss to the national economy in terms of work participation, tax revenue, and wealth accumulation.

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, improving our nation's high school graduation rate is smart economic policy. The Alliance states in its June 2011 brief that if half of the 2010 high school drop-outs were to have graduated, they would have earned approximately \$7.6 billion more each year than they will without the diploma. In another report, *The Impact of High School Graduation on Household*

Wealth, the Alliance states that the U.S. could increase the nation's collective wealth by increasing the high school graduation rates.

Though the report was written in 2007, before the deep recession and resulting high unemployment rates, its message is still relevant: There is a direct connection

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between education and asset accumulation. Those without a high school diploma frequently end up at the lowest end of the economic spectrum and, as such, have the hardest time saving and accumulating wealth. The ability to accumulate wealth not only helps break

“The economy of Montana would see a combination of crime-related savings and additional revenue totaling approximately \$19.6 million each year if the male high school graduation rate would increase by just 5 percent.

Source: Alliance for Excellent Education.

the cycle of poverty, but it ensures a vibrant, successful working class. The report estimates the potential for “an additional \$74 billion in collective wealth in the United States if every household were headed by an individual with at least a high school diploma.”

General Education Development (GED)

What about those who did not graduate with a high school diploma, but go on to take their GED instead? The earnings outcome for this population is higher than for those who never get their GED, and the difference increases

over time. Initially, according to a 2004 study of non-graduates, those with a GED earned only \$1,600 per year more than those without. However, after six years, those who had obtained their GED saw a 13 to 20 percent higher earning capacity than those who had not.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION MATTERS FOR MONTANA

The Montana state report from the Alliance for Excellent Education shows that Montana is a big loser when youth do not graduate from high school. On average, a high school graduate in Montana will earn \$6,684 more each year than a high school dropout will, and the lost lifetime earnings for those who did not graduate from high school in 2011 is estimated to be \$312 million.

The report also states that if only half of Montana’s 2011 dropouts had graduated, they would likely have provided several economic benefits to the state, including \$21 million in increased home sales; \$1.8 million in increased annual auto sales; 100 new jobs; a \$15 million increase in the gross state product; and \$600,000 in increased annual state tax revenue. As stated above, a high school diploma matters not only to an individual’s earning capacity, it also impacts an individual’s accumulation of assets (Table 1).

**Table 1
Wealth Accumulation, Montana 2007**

Montana households	146,867
Households headed by high school dropouts	23%
Households headed by high school graduates	77%
Accumulated household wealth	\$581,920,000
Households headed by high school dropouts	3%
Households headed by high school graduates	97%
Average accumulated wealth per household	\$3,960
Households headed by high school dropouts	\$500
Households headed by high school graduates	\$5,000
Potential additional household wealth if all Montana heads of households were high school graduates	\$152,415,000

Source: Alliance for Excellent Education.

In addition, the Alliance report shows that Montana would save more than \$29.8 million in health care costs over the lifetime of each class of dropouts. The economy of Montana would see a combination of crime-related savings and additional revenue totaling about \$19.6 million each year if the male high school graduation rate would increase by just 5 percent.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION MATTERS FOR YOUTH

The impacts on individual students of obtaining a high school diploma versus not obtaining one have been studied for years, and the findings are convincing. The issue is much broader than just pass/fail, diploma or not, as so much more is affected by graduating. Youth that do not graduate with a high school diploma are more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, go to prison, be on public assistance, be single parents, and earn substantially less than their graduating counterparts.

Among workers without a high school diploma, those with full-time, year-round employment are in the minority. The most common occupations for those with less than a high school education include sales workers, truck drivers, janitors, construction laborers, and housekeeping cleaners. Projected lifetime earnings for a worker who did not graduate from high school was \$973,000 in 2009, compared to \$1,304,000 for workers with only a high school diploma and \$2,268,000 for a worker with a four-year college degree. Additionally, high school graduates are less likely to live in poverty or on public assistance, and are seven times more likely to own their own home, and less likely to be incarcerated. Nationally, 82 percent of all prisoners are high school dropouts while in Montana, according to the Montana Department of Corrections, nearly 80 percent of male inmates and 75 percent of female inmates at Montana State Prisons are high school dropouts.



DEFINITIONS

EVENT DROPOUT RATE:

The percentage of children who drop out during a single year.

COMPLETION RATE: Cohort approach that utilizes both dropout and graduate data for four consecutive years.

ADEQUATE YEARLY PROGRESS GRADUATION

RATE: The percentage of students who graduate from high school with a regular diploma in four years; estimated as a cohort rate.

Source: Montana Office of Public Instruction.

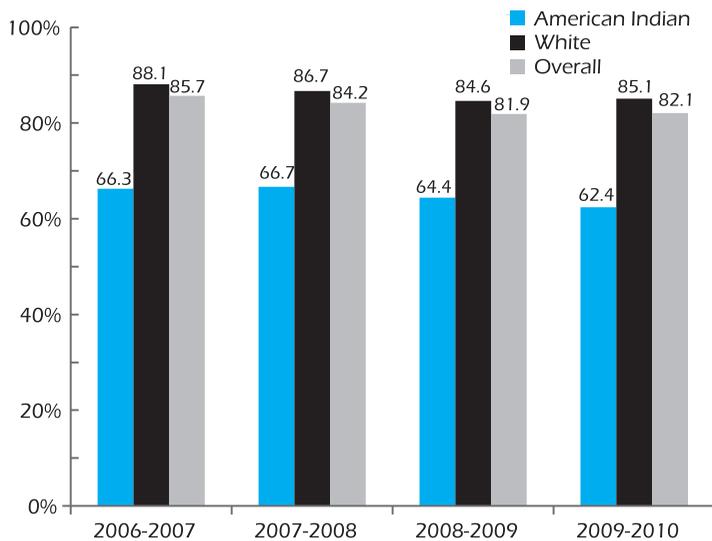
HOW IS MONTANA DOING?

Montana History, Trends, and Current Situation¹

High school graduation can be viewed from a variety of different angles, three of which are reported by the Montana Office of Public Instruction: Event Drop-Out Rate; Completion Rate; and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Graduation Rate (see sidebar). Using three different numbers to evaluate one event may seem needlessly complicated; however, counting graduates and dropouts is not as simple as it seems. There are a multitude of alternate scenarios to graduating from high school in four years, including graduating early; dropping out after 8th grade; dropping out, then returning to graduate later; and moving to a school in a different district and graduating there. Evaluating high school graduation from several angles ensures a better estimate of actual graduation rates.

¹For consistency across population and over time, this section uses data from the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) only, as dropout and graduation rates are calculated and reported differently by different entities at state and national levels.

Figure 1
Montana High School Completion Rates by Race



Source: Montana Office of Public Instruction.

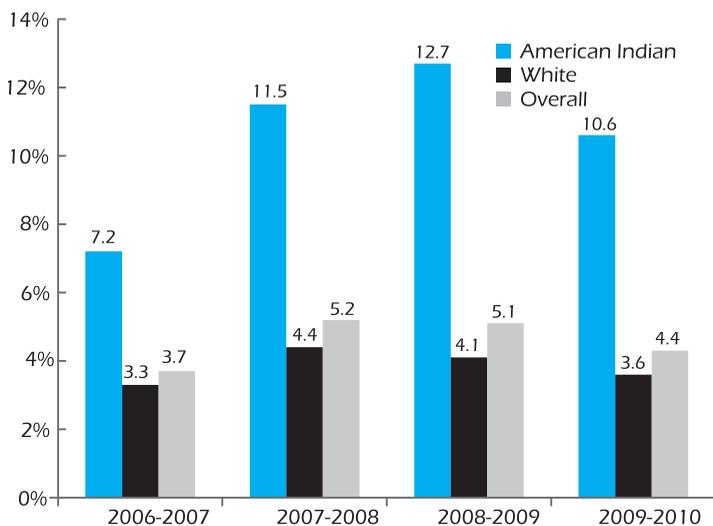
OPI reports that the completion rate for the cohort graduating following the 2009-10 school year was 82.1 percent, with 10,349 youth graduating and 2,252 youth dropping out at some point during the cohort's four years of high school (Figure 1). The completion rate was 80.5 percent for males and 83.8 percent for females. These rates do not constitute a significant change from those seen following the 2008-2009 school year graduating cohort.

For American Indians in Montana the 2009-2010 completion rate was 62.4 percent, the lowest among all ethnicities/races, and 85.1 percent for White youth.

Similarly, American Indian youth faced a high school drop-out rate of 10.6 percent, while the rate for White youth was 3.6 percent (Figure 2).

Additionally, American Indian students who drop out do so overwhelmingly in 11th grade, whereas White students tend to drop out during their 12th grade year. Research-based practices that have been proven to work for the U.S. student population in general work for American Indian students as well – IF they are culturally relevant.

Figure 2
Montana High School Dropout Rates by Race



Source: Montana Office of Public Instruction.

What determines if youth graduate – or not?

The reasons that youth stay in school or drop out are as varied as the youth themselves. However, based on extensive research, several predictive factors that go well beyond demographic characteristics have been identified by researchers at Johns Hopkins University. Some of the problems that may lead to a child dropping out can start well before high school:

- Repeating one or more grades;
- Poor grades and poor achievement on tests;
- Reading below grade level at the end of third grade;

- Performing below grade level in 6th grade;
- Failing one or more subjects, particularly in 9th grade;
- Ongoing patterns of absenteeism or tardiness;
- Lack of connection and engagement in school; and
- Multiple suspensions or other behavior problems.

While not an exhaustive list, knowledge of these factors is helpful in moving communities beyond profiling, and to examine behaviors that indicate problems and thus enable educators to intervene earlier with strategies tailored to each individual.

A much broader approach to investigating why youth drop out is used by the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University, which has identified

reasons for dropping out of school based on four levels: individual, family, school, and community. Their findings focus on the first two levels, individual and family, and hold community-wide implications:

“The act of graduating from high school is a step across the threshold between childhood and adulthood, a point where society owes it to its youth to have helped them prepare for the world of adulthood, not just in terms of academic testing, but also in terms of basic skills, character, and direction.”

Individual Domain

- Individual background characteristics;
- Early adult responsibilities;
- Social attitudes, values, and behavior;
- School performance;
- School engagement; and
- School behavior.

Family Domain

- Family background characteristics;
- Family engagement; and
- Family commitment to education.

In a parallel vein, researchers at the University of Kansas have identified protective factors that help keep youth in school:

- Positive and supportive school climate;
- High self-esteem;
- Parental support and involvement;
- Academic success;
- Social skills training;
- Problem-solving skills;
- High expectations; and
- Goals for the future.

IMPROVING THE ODDS

The act of graduating from high school is a step across the threshold between childhood and adulthood, a point where society owes it to its youth to have helped them prepare for the world of adulthood, not just in terms of academic testing, but also in terms of basic skills, character, and direction. Society expects a steady supply of qualified young workers even at low-level jobs, yet fails to provide the tools necessary for youth to acquire these skill sets. Communities need young adults who are equipped to be engaged in civic life, while older generations bemoan the lack of values held by “young kids today.” These issues are all reflections of how young people are prepared for life – at home, in schools, in neighborhoods, and in communities. Addressing issues in several realms of a youth’s life simultaneously promises to improve odds.

STRENGTHENING SCHOOL READINESS: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

A discussion of how to improve the likelihood of students graduating from high school is meaningless without addressing early childhood education as one of the baseline solutions. The first few years in any child’s life are crucial to proper brain development and future academic success. Extensive research has shown that enrollment in early childhood learning programs improves later school outcomes. In a 2003 article in the FedGazette, Rob Grunewald and Arthur Rolnick of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis showed, based on the Perry Preschool Project (see sidebar, page 7), how education outcomes

improve when a child has the advantage of a high-quality preschool education. Similar studies conducted over the years show the same positive educational outcomes. Most look at the effect of early childhood education on low-income preschoolers and all suggest that high-quality early childhood programs make a difference in school readiness despite poverty and other risk factors in children's backgrounds.

Head Start

In terms of early childhood education and federal efforts, Head Start is the best-known and largest early childhood intervention program in the United States. Head Start provides early childhood education and developmental services, health services, and nutrition services to preschool children from low-income families, as well as education services



for their parents. In Montana, there are 20 Head Start programs, seven of which are tribal programs, and 10 Early Head Start programs, three of which are tribal.

The Montana programs are funded to serve 4,800 children, but unlike the studies referred to above, there has been no carefully-controlled, large-scale, long-term randomized study of the outcomes of the local Head Start programs. Thus educational returns are hard to assess, and the operational budget per student for these public programs tends to be much lower than for private, high-quality preschools.

Montana is, however, working to improve access to and availability of high-quality early childhood education in the state. For a number of years, the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) has been working to raise the quality of early childhood education programs, and in 2010 launched a two-year pilot test involving 125 child care programs, the Best Beginnings STARS to Quality Program (STARS), a voluntary quality-improvement rating system that aligns quality indicators with support and incentives for early childhood programs and professionals. STARS is one element in a larger effort to improve the lives of young children in Montana using a system-wide approach to ensure all young children in Montana have access to physical and mental health care services, and that they and their families are supported in their communities and allowed to thrive and grow.

Community Support and Family Involvement

The importance of a supportive community in the lives of young people is often cited as a major factor to successfully graduate from high school, and many of the risk factors that predict whether a child does or does not graduate (see sidebar) stem from the environment where a child lives; be it family, school or community level.

BROADER DROPOUT-RELATED FINDINGS

- There is no single risk factor that can be used to accurately predict who is at risk of dropping out.
- The accuracy of dropout predictions increases when combinations of multiple risk factors are considered.
- Dropouts are not a homogeneous group. Many subgroups of students can be identified based on when risk factors emerge, the combinations of risk factors experienced, and how the factors influence them.
- Students who drop out often cite factors across multiple domains and there are complex interactions among risk factors.
- Dropping out of school is often the result of a long process of disengagement that may begin before a child enters school.
- Dropping out is often described as a process, not an event, with factors building and compounding over time.

Source: Hammond 2007.

While policy reform is certainly important, community involvement in schools can immediately mitigate some of the negative community-level factors that increase the chance of dropping out. According to the report, *A New Wave of Evidence*, from the National Center for Family and Community Connections, “when schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.” High-performing schools tend to have high levels of parent and community involvement as one of their defining characteristics.

The assumption is that a child will do better if his/her family does better, and a family does better if a community does better – a concept that is simple to understand but incredibly complex to implement, especially in terms of long-term changes. Some projects seek to initiate community revitalization and re-imagining, like the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *Making Connections* – an initiative which tests the above assumption by helping families do better through living in neighborhoods that provide opportunities for economic self-sufficiency and wealth; responsive, culturally relevant services; and social networks that empower residents and connect them to supports.

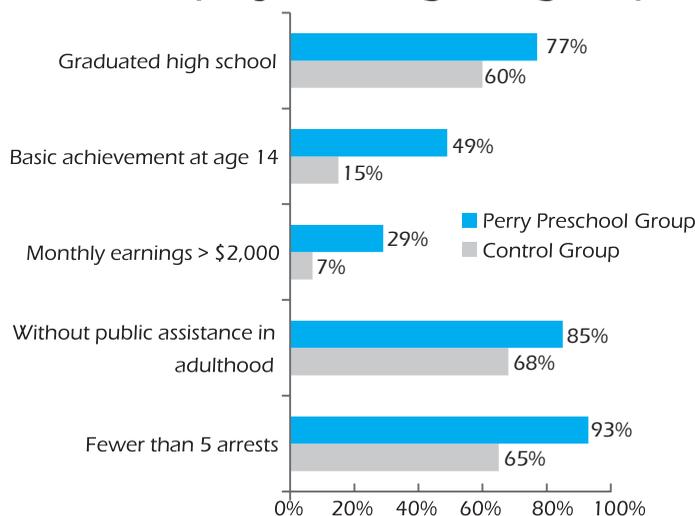
PERRY PRESCHOOL PROJECT

Perry Preschool Project was a longitudinal evaluation of the HighScope Curriculum, a preschool curriculum that focuses on children’s intellectual maturation, as opposed to the more commonly considered social and emotional advances, through a carefully designed process referred to as “active participatory learning.” The HighScope Curriculum has been shown to help young children excel in language and cognitive learning, as well as to promote independence, curiosity, decision-making, cooperation, persistence, creativity, and problem solving, and as such helps determine success in adult life.

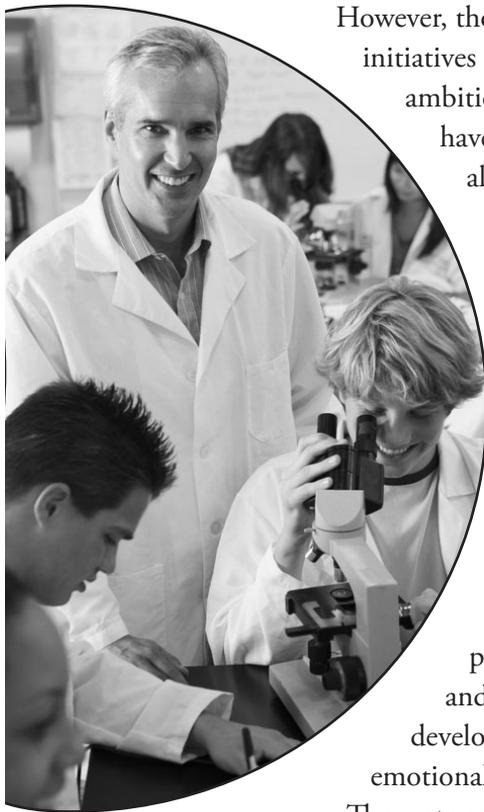
The Perry Preschool Project started as a randomized evaluation of 123 African American children from low-income families attending Perry Preschool in Ypsilanti, Michigan in 1962. Program participants were tracked through childhood, and subsequently 97 percent have been successfully tracked and periodically evaluated through age 40, the age which participants reached in 2005.

Source: HighScope Educational Research Foundation.

Figure 3
Perry Preschool Program Educational Effects
(major findings at age 40)



Source: HighScope Educational Research Foundation.



However, though other initiatives can be less ambitious in scope, many have been shown to also be successful in creating systems that support community efforts to become active participants in high schools. One example is youth mentoring programs that provide role models and help children develop socially and emotionally.

The meta-analysis of multiple studies conducted in *A New Wave of Evidence* identified several ways that schools can assist families in developing their capacity to support their children’s education. The focus is on a three-pronged approach: helping parents engage directly with the school; helping parents understand and participate in their child’s learning experience; and helping parents connect to the community strengths and/or social services. One direct recommendation from this study offers a new approach to family involvement with this paradigm-shifting advice: “...embrace a philosophy of partnership and be willing to share power with families. Make sure that parents, school staff, and community members understand that the responsibility for children’s educational development is a collaborative enterprise.”

SCHOOLS

School performance is judged by the rate of successfully graduating students, so naturally schools’ stake in improving graduation rates is high. When high-school dropouts are asked to identify what would have helped

them stay in school, as they were by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, their responses pointed to four major areas of change:

- Improve teaching and curricula to enhance the connection between school and work;
- Improve access to support for struggling students;
- Foster academics; and
- Promote close relationships with adults.

These major areas can be seen in most programs and initiatives undertaken by schools as they focus on improving graduation rates.

Montana’s Graduation Matters Graduation Matters Missoula

Montana’s initiative to improve graduation rates has received national attention, particularly *Graduation Matters Missoula* (GMM). GMM is an initiative created by Missoula County Public Schools through working with local businesses and nonprofits in a concerted community-wide effort to achieve a 100 percent high school graduation rate. The project’s goals are to not only to graduate every student, but also to encourage Missoula community members to help keep students in school. In the program’s first year, 2009-10, dropout rates were reduced by 40 percent, which is equivalent to 66 additional students staying on track to graduate.

“When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.”

Source: National Center for Family and Community Connections.

Graduation Matters Montana

Graduation Matters Missoula served as the model for *Graduation Matters Montana* (GMMt), a statewide dropout prevention program launched by the Office of Public

Instruction under School Superintendent Denise Juneau in 2011. Inspired by Missoula's success, the effort was in response to the fact that in 2010, 2,010 students in grades 7-12 dropped out of school.

The GMMt toolkit suggests that participating schools:

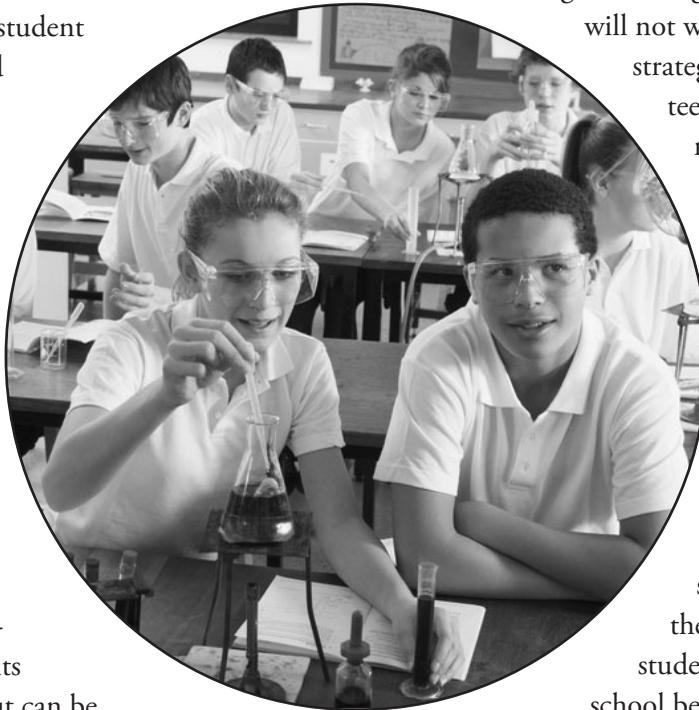
1) Review policies related to attendance, retaining and promoting students, grading and how or when it is recommended to a student to obtain their GED or attend an alternative school; and 2) Examine policies and provide alternatives that help students in various non-traditional situations, such as having to work a full-time job; accumulating a high number of absences due to raising a newborn; or struggling academically.

Likewise, the Toolkit recommends that participating schools institute early-warning systems and on-track indicators so that students who are at risk of dropping out can be identified as soon as possible and corrective, supportive action can be taken to keep them in school.

SOLUTIONS ACROSS REALMS

Most national and local level programs tend of to focus on people, be it individual students, family members, or people within the community. Such programs are part of the solution but must be accompanied by policy changes enacted at the national, state and local levels. There exists a host of evidence-based, thoroughly researched recommendations based on policies that have been shown to lower dropout rates; now the political will to follow evidence-based policy recommendations needs to be built.

There is no doubt that one size does not fit all, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation makes clear in its 2009



dropout prevention indicator brief that policy and program solutions should be based on solid evidence about why young people drop out of school in a particular locality. Although many factors that support youth in their quest to graduate can be identified, not all are at work in similar ways in all places. Obviously, strategies and policies designed for high-density urban populations

will not work in rural Montana. Likewise, strategies to help suburban White teenagers living near a large metropolitan area are not appropriate for American Indian students living on Montana's reservations.

An additional policy recommendation from the Annie E. Casey Foundation is to focus attention on supporting graduation among high school students with disabilities and other special needs. Currently at the national level, one in three students with disabilities leaves school before graduation. Students with disabilities that graduate often do so with an alternative document such as a "certificate of completion" if they do not meet standard graduation requirements.

"Although many factors that support youth in their quest to graduate can be identified, not all are at work in similar ways in all places. Obviously, strategies and policies designed for high-density urban populations will not work in rural Montana. Likewise, strategies to help suburban White teenagers living near a large metropolitan area are not appropriate for American Indian students living on Montana's reservations."



What can you do?

If you are a member of STATE GOVERNMENT, you can...

- Work to raise school age requirements under state law;
- Support the collection and analysis of accurate graduation and dropout data; and
- Enable supportive options for struggling students to meet rigorous expectations.

If you are a BUSINESS LEADER or COMMUNITY MEMBER, you can...

- Allow time for parents to volunteer at their children's schools;
- Encourage your local Chamber of Commerce to take an active role in supporting K-12 education; and
- Be a mentor through programs like GUTS, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Flagship, or other existing programs that offer mentoring opportunities.

If you are a SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR, you can...

- Establish early warning systems to support struggling students; and
- Expand college-level learning opportunities in high school.

If you are a TEACHER you can...

- Identify and engage students at risk for dropping out and help them understand the financial impact of dropping out;
- Establish high expectations by launching an "I Pledge to Graduate" campaign and incorporating college and career planning into the curriculum; and
- Let the students know you care.

If you are a PARENT, you can...

- Be engaged in your children's education by asking about their homework and talking to their teachers;
- Talk to your children about what they can do WHEN they graduate; and
- Volunteer in the classroom.

If you are a STUDENT, you can...

- Take the pledge to graduate and encourage others to join you;
- Stay on the right track by working hard in school;
- Prepare for the future by planning for it, talking about your goals, and finding a mentor who can help you achieve them; and
- Support your peers to make healthy and safe choices, and consider tutoring or mentoring a peer or younger student.

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