



Moneyball for dropout prevention

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For decades, more than one million students dropped out from high school every year, with dire consequences to them, society and the economy. If the moral imperative to help reverse these trends is not enough, consider that the 6.7 million 16-24 year olds who are disconnected from school and employment cost taxpayers \$93 billion every year in lost revenues and increased social services.

More than a decade ago, efforts began to emerge to get better data on who these students are, where they go to school, and why they dropped out. Fact-finding led to eye-opening journeys.

New research showed that 50 percent of high school dropouts were found in just 15 percent of high schools, enabling the country and states to take a more targeted approach. A first-ever national sample of dropouts across 25 cities, suburbs, and rural areas showed that most could have graduated, the specific barriers that stood in their way, and clear solutions to keep them on track, notwithstanding school and life challenges.

All 50 governors agreed to a common calculation of graduation rates, after states and the federal government had been over-estimating graduation rates for years and making optimistic guesses about what happened to transfer students. Report after report showed that graduation rates were much worse than states or the nation wanted to imagine – as low as 30 and 40 percent in some places and at around 70 percent nationally. The commitments of three U.S. presidents to raise graduation rates to 90 percent had been made in a context of bad data.

The last decade's progress in boosting graduation rates from a modern low to an all-time high has been a story about bringing "Moneyball" concepts to dropout prevention -- building evidence about what matters and what works, listening to the perspectives of those students we are trying to help and the teachers on the front lines of schools, putting in place the reforms, policies and practices supported by evidence, and building data and accountability systems to continuously learn and improve over time.

The Campbell Collaboration reviewed 548 reports describing 167 studies based on rigorous selection criteria to examine the comparative effectiveness of different programs and approaches on school completion and dropout prevention. When the stereotype is that "nothing works," they found the opposite to be true: "most school and

community-based programs [reviewed] were effective in decreasing school dropout...if implemented well and appropriate for the local environment.” The authors of this groundbreaking study warned policymakers and practitioners to consider cost-effectiveness when choosing between approaches.

We also learned about efforts that were not effective, such as zero-tolerance suspension policies for minor infractions. Such measures aggravated poor attendance patterns and led more students to drop out or be pushed out of school.

Remaining faithful to evidence and reality have been the twin coils of progress. Our data and evidence over the last decade now show that progress has not been the result of large economic or demographic forces, but of districts and states investing in strategies proven to work. Evidence-based strategies include: smaller, more personalized learning environments; 9th grade academies during this critical transition year and career academies linking learning to employment opportunities; early warning systems that sound alarms when patterns in attendance, behavior and coursework predict eventual dropout; supplemental academic supports and social and emotional learning that boost student success; and caring adult mentors and counselors children need to navigate an increasingly competitive and complex world. No Child Left Behind and subsequent executive action made graduation rates more accurate and states and districts accountable for improving them.

The results have been impressive and a hope spot for the nation – a more than 10 percentage point rise in graduation rates over the last decade, double digit gains in some states and school districts, Hispanic and African American students driving our national progress by making their own, and a nation on pace for the third year in a row to meet the 90 percent graduation rate goal by 2020.

A Moneyball approach also tells us shuddering things. Graduation rates for low-income students remain 15 percentage points behind their middle- and higher-income peers. Students with disabilities are at least 20 percentage points behind their peers and in one state the gap is 53 percentage points. One-third of the top 500 school districts in America are making no progress or losing ground. Minority and low-income students and students with disabilities still suffer disparities in academic opportunity, discipline in schools, and access to support systems.

We know a lot about what works and have examples across the country of effective responses to the dropout challenge. Continuing a Moneyball approach to dropout prevention will ensure millions of additional students graduate in the coming decades and are on a road to opportunity.

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