



Junior Achievement USA: A Solution to Increasing Graduation Rates

The dropout crisis in America's educational system has a devastating impact on the future health of the economy. Nearly every year, only 70 percent of students complete high school on time and earn a diploma. In October 2007, approximately 3.3 million non-institutionalized, 16-through 24-year-olds, were not enrolled in high school and had not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential¹.

The dropout crisis directly affects the U.S. economy. Over the course of a student's lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, about \$260,000 less than a high school graduate² and contributes about \$60,000 less in taxes.³ Conservative estimates show that the nation's economy would have benefited over time from nearly \$335 billion in additional income if the students who dropped out of the Class of 2009 had graduated.⁴ Overall, young people who drop out are twice as likely as graduates to be unemployed; three times as likely to live in poverty; eight times more likely to wind up in prison; and twice as likely to become the parent of a child who drops out of school.⁵ The economic benefits of increasing the graduation rate among students are evident. For example, if the male graduation rate were increased by only five percent, the nation would see an annual savings of \$4.9 billion in crime-related costs.⁶ Furthermore, America would save more than \$17 billion in Medicaid and expenditures for health care for the uninsured by graduating all students.⁷

To increase the graduation rate, policymakers, educators, community leaders, and nonprofit organizations must work together to ensure that students have access to high-quality educational experiences and resources that enable them to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to succeed in post-secondary educational institutions and the future workforce. Positive steps have been made to identify promising interventions. From 2002 to 2007, the number of "dropout factories" or high schools that account for about half of all high school dropouts each year fell by 261 schools, from 2,007 to 1,746.⁸ According to experts, targeting these schools and their feeder middle and elementary schools for improvement is critical in increasing the nation's graduation rate. Furthermore, a total of 120,000, approximately three percent, more students earned a high school diploma in 2008 compared to 2001.⁹

Research conducted by Civic Enterprises, Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, and America's Promise Alliance to determine what schools and states are doing to raise graduation rates revealed that progress cannot be attributed to one intervention but to a myriad of reform efforts that focus on community collaboration, strong leadership, evidence-

¹ National Center for Education Statistics

² http://www.tc.columbia.edu/i/a/3082_SocialCostsofInadequateEducation.pdf

³ Rouse, C. E. (2005). "Labor market consequences of an inadequate education." Paper prepared for the symposium on the Social Costs of Inadequate Education, Teachers College Columbia University, October 2005.

⁴ <http://www.all4ed.org/files/HighCost.pdf>

⁵ America's Promise Alliance

⁶ Alliance for Excellent Education. (2006b). *Saving futures, saving dollars: The impact of education on crime reduction and earnings*. Washington, DC: Author.

⁷ Alliance for Excellent Education. (2006a). *Healthier and wealthier: Decreasing health care costs by increasing educational attainment*. Washington, DC: Author.

⁸ Building a Grad Nation. <http://www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Grad-Nation/Building-a-Grad-Nation.aspx>

⁹ Department of Education



based teaching practices, and innovation. “Progress in states and school districts has often been the result of rising to a standard of excellence — with clear goals and expectations from the state to the classroom, by challenging all students with a more rigorous curriculum to obtain a meaningful diploma that prepares them for college and work, and through a targeted approach sustained over time that provides extra supports to the school leaders, teachers, and students who need them the most.”¹⁰

State and school district initiatives to increase the graduation rate have varied from macro-level changes at the policy and district level to training at the individual teacher level. For example, some states have enacted laws to encourage students to stay in school. Since 2002, 12 states have raised the age students are permitted to dropout to 17 or 18 years old, versus 16. In Tennessee and West Virginia, students must remain in school until they are 18 to keep their driver’s license.¹¹ Other school districts have focused efforts more at the individual school-level by changing the school climate to center on success and the expectation that all students will graduate college-ready. For many states, this has included adopting the Common Core Standards to standardize learning expectations across districts and states.

Other initiatives include developing more robust data systems to track graduation rates and individual students over time; creating early warning and intervention systems to efficiently target students who are at risk of dropping out; focusing on teacher effectiveness; and developing parent engagement strategies. Some of these initiatives are well under way in many states. For example, Virginia, a recipient of a \$17.5 million dollar grant from the Department of Education, is using longitudinal tracking systems to provide teachers with information about incoming students so they can customize lesson plans, electronically send transcripts between schools, and identify characteristics of students who are succeeding in college and the workforce.¹² Research has consistently shown that the quality of teachers in the classroom significantly impact student outcomes. In fact, “studies have found that teacher effectiveness has a greater impact on student achievement than any other reform under a school’s control.”¹³ To address this issue, many states are incorporating peer coaching, professional learning communities, and formal teacher assessments into practice.

While significant progress has been made to increase the graduation rate, more than 2 million students in 2008 still attended a high school in which graduation was “no better than close to a 50/50 proposition.” To address this issue, researchers and educators must continue to explore effective and scalable models. Community organizations must continue to collaborate with school districts to provide an integrated solution. In addition to quality teachers and tested pedagogy, students must see the direct relevance of what they are learning in the classroom to their future; understand the value of having a high school diploma at a minimum; and develop the internal drive and belief that they can be successful.

¹⁰ Building a Grad Nation. <http://www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Grad-Nation/Building-a-Grad-Nation.aspx>

¹¹ Building a Grad Nation. <http://www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Grad-Nation/Building-a-Grad-Nation.aspx>

¹² Building a Grad Nation. <http://www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Grad-Nation/Building-a-Grad-Nation.aspx>

¹³ Page 11. Building a Grad Nation. <http://www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Grad-Nation/Building-a-Grad-Nation.aspx>



Junior Achievement (JA): A Solution Provider

1. JA is relevant as it bridges the gap of what students are learning in school and how it can be applied in the real world.
 - According to the landmark study on high school dropouts, *The Silent Epidemic*, a primary reason that students drop out of school is they don't see the relevance of what they were learning in the classroom to the real world or their future.¹⁴

According to recent nationwide evaluations of JA:

- More than nine out of 10 teachers and volunteers (91%) agree or strongly agree that Junior Achievement programs connect what is learned in the classroom to the outside world.¹⁵
- Regarding the effects of their experience with Junior Achievement, more than eight out of 10 (84%) of JA alumni indicate that JA enabled them to connect what they learned in the classroom to real life.¹⁶

"I just think that it is really cool to learn things at school and then be able to apply them."
– *JA Company Program* student

2. JA reinforces the value of an education.
 - Seventy-five percent of teachers and volunteers agree or strongly agree that Junior Achievement programs help students' realize the importance of staying in school.¹⁷
 - In recent high school program evaluations, an average of eight out of 10 students report that Junior Achievement programs helped reinforce the importance of staying in school.¹⁸
 - Sixty-seven percent of JA alumni report that JA made them realize the importance of staying in school.¹⁹

"Through my participation in JA, I discovered that if you want to be a successful business woman or man you have to stay focused and stay in school so you can become what you want to become." – *JA Job Shadow* student

¹⁴ <http://www.civcenterprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-06.pdf>

¹⁵ Ongoing "Program Content & Instruction Survey" available at <http://www.ja.org/programs/programs.shtml>

¹⁶ "Junior Achievement Creates Alumni Success" available at www.ja.org

¹⁷ Ongoing "Program Content & Instruction Survey" available at <http://www.ja.org/programs/programs.shtml>

¹⁸ Synthesis of independent evaluation findings from 2000-2009

¹⁹ "Junior Achievement Creates Alumni Success" available at www.ja.org



3. JA instills self-confidence.

- Self-efficacy represents an individual's confidence in her or his ability to accomplish a particular task. Research has shown that young people with a higher generalized sense of self-efficacy set more challenging goals for themselves, try harder, persevere in difficult times, bounce back more quickly after failures, and ultimately are more successful.

According to recent nationwide evaluations of JA:

- Almost eight out of 10 (76%) teachers and volunteers agree or strongly agree that JA better prepares students for the world of work.²⁰
- In recent high school program evaluations, more than eight out of 10 students report that the Junior Achievement program better prepared them for the future.²¹
- In longitudinal studies, JA students were significantly more likely than their peers to believe that they would graduate from high school, pursue post-secondary education, and graduate from college.²²

“Junior Achievement positively affected my future by giving me the confidence to know that I can achieve my dreams.” – JA Alum

Junior Achievement: Innovative Solutions

In addition to providing students with curriculum that is relevant and reinforces the value of an education, Junior Achievement USA also is piloting and expanding in-depth initiatives that directly aim at increasing graduation rates among students who attend school districts that have been labeled “dropout factories.” In these “dropout factories,” located in 50 cities (15 of which are southern/southwestern states), only 60 percent of freshman graduate from high school.²³ Example initiatives include the “JA Fellows” program in Atlanta, Georgia, that was developed four years ago and has demonstrated amazing results with 100 percent of the participating students graduating from high school and going on to pursue post-secondary education. To learn more about the JA Fellows program, please visit <http://www.jafellows.com/home/>.

Junior Achievement USA has also partnered with The Bridgespan Group, a leader in helping nonprofits develop strategies to inspire and accelerate social change, to develop a framework for how to increase the graduation rate among students who are at the greatest risk of dropping out. This initiative will allow the organization to incorporate research-proven strategies into existing success models, such as the JA Fellows program, to have the greatest impact.

²⁰ Ongoing “Program Content & Instruction Survey” available at <http://www.ja.org/programs/programs.shtml>

²¹ Synthesis of independent evaluation findings from 2000-2009

²² 2001-2003 Longitudinal findings available at http://www.ja.org/files/long_summary.pdf

²³ This is a proxy estimate of dropouts; the numbers actually reflect the proportion of seniors to freshman .