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

[Population Health Sciences](#)

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

The report found that:

- Graduation rates for all youth increased in Philadelphia since the first report, but there are still several groups of students whose rates lag behind the majority – children involved in child welfare, Black and Latino male students, and adolescent mothers.
- The graduation rate for dropouts who re-engaged remained steady at roughly 35 percent across the seven cohorts observed. This suggests that while re-engagement programs pulled more dropouts back in, they may not have provided easier or more effective ways of achieving a high school diploma.
- Finally, the report found that post-secondary enrollment remained low for all groups of students.

In order to continue to increase graduation rates and post-secondary enrollment for all groups, we have several 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) Develop a cross-systems needs assessment for child welfare- and juvenile justice- involved populations of high school youth**

Although our report found lower dropout rates for students involved with the child welfare system since the [Unfulfilled Promise](#) report, there is still a gap between these students and non-involved students. SDP and the city's Department of Human Services (DHS) recently extended their five year data sharing agreement and continue to collaborate on finding ways to use data to increase success of students. The city should continue to encourage and support the efforts of the SDP and DHS to provide disaggregated data annually for parenting teens and high school students with child welfare involvement and/or juvenile justice involvement. This will guide integrated service planning to prevent dropout.

Variables for data collection should include child level data such as absences, suspensions, standardized test scores, special education designation, and school-level data, including percent poverty, percent with DHS involvement, and special education. Collecting these data will ensure that the city can redirect funds and services appropriately. For example, data indicated that several SDP schools had [high concentrations of students involved with DHS](#) and further identified schools with students experiencing elevated risk of abuse, neglect and truancy. In response, DHS directed social work staff to co-locate to high-risk SDP schools that lie within neighborhood Community Umbrella Agencies (CUA) and their overlapping SDP Learning Network, as outlined by ZIP code.

The city has also developed a cross-system Qualitative Service Review (QSR) between DHS and the SDP. The QSR builds on a quality improvement practice in child welfare systems across the country and identifies system-related barriers and solutions based on in-depth interviews of a small selection of SDP youth with ongoing DHS involvement. By continuing these assessments, the city will facilitate a higher level of response and innovation for at-risk youth.

San Diego, California and King County, Washington, serve as examples for ways that cities and counties can provide support and respond to the needs of system-involved youth through data sharing. The [San Diego County Office of Education's Foster Youth Services Program](#) provides support to youth from kindergarten through post-secondary enrollment. Through partnerships with community colleges, students are provided with tutors. Through their *Foster Youth Services Information System*, authorized users can access information including medical records, assessment scores, unofficial transcripts, and school histories of foster youth so that social workers and education liaisons can intervene to ensure that students stay on track to graduate. In addition, [Treehouse](#), which serves children in King County, Washington, is working toward raising graduation rates for child welfare-involved youth to the same levels as their non-involved peers through its *Graduation Success* program. *Graduation Success* was designed by University of Minnesota and is listed in the U.S. Department of Education's *What Works Clearinghouse* as an effective model for keeping students engaged in school and improving graduation rates. The Treehouse model focuses on similar goals, but also includes a Treehouse Education Specialist who then forms a team with caregivers, social workers, and in-school mentors. Formal data sharing partnerships with the state and school districts allows for timely information sharing for intervention and service delivery. For the 2013-2014 school year, 68 percent of students in the Treehouse program graduated on time (in four years). This is close to the 75 percent rate for the non-involved youth. The *Graduation Success* model could prove to be as beneficial for non-involved students as it is for child welfare-involved students in Philadelphia.

Through data sharing and software platforms to utilize the cross-sectional flags and warnings, the city can allow necessary child welfare systems to intervene and take a less reactionary and more proactive approach when a student needs their help. Programs like Treehouse allow these systems to reach children and families where they are and bring the care they need to them.

## **2) Strengthen and expand dropout prevention and intervention strategies for young mothers**

The stark dropout rates for adolescent mothers in our study highlights the necessity of keeping adolescent mothers engaged in school before they reach the reengagement programs. To do so, the SDP and community partners should enhance the services available through existing dropout prevention and intervention models such as the Education Leading to Employment and Career Training (ELECT) program, a statewide program

which offers free case management and supportive services such as child care, academic support, home visits, and parenting workshops to expecting or already parenting teen mothers and fathers 22-years-old and younger. ELECT provides students in non-alternative high schools with the support needed to remain successful in high school, as well as providing support for students in re-engagement programs.

However, ELECT could be strengthened through the ability to provide services to young mothers in a central location. The California Department of Education saw the need to improve education and life outcomes for teen parents at the states level and now provides resources for pregnant and parenting teens through the California School Age Families Education Program (Cal-SAFE). By taking a systems approach, Cal-SAFE addresses the education needs of young mothers in the city through the [Teenage Pregnancy and Parenting Program \(TAPP\)](#), which is coordinated by the city's Family Service Agency and funded through Cal-SAFE. In the TAPP program, young mothers and their families receive wrap-around services including health, educational, and social services. The center also provides information and referrals, basic needs assistance, family events, childcare, GED classes, peer educator hours, special interest program classes, and job skills training. In addition to ELECT services offered at Philadelphia school and program sites, applying the TAPP resource hub model at the SDP headquarters or within another city agency with wrap-around supports for teen mothers might encourage more Philadelphia mothers and fathers to remain in high school or to return if they have dropped out.

## **Part One Conclusion**

While the city has begun to provide an infrastructure for better coordinating the educational experience of DHS-involved youth, and notable progress has been made, challenges remain. Funding shortages between 2012 and 2015 resulted in many neighborhood schools losing key individuals such as behavioral health specialists who worked closely with education support liaisons from DHS's Education Support Center. While DHS-involved youth made significant progress in graduation after the Education Support Center was fully implemented in 2010, and we have seen an increase in students re-engaging in their education, the reduction in funding and staffing across the SDP is now a threat that might reverse those gains.

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