A PROMISE WORTH KEEPING:

Advancing the High School Graduation Rate in Philadelphia

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project u·turn

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Graduating from high school is a critical milestone for youth achieving a successful transition to adulthood. Youth without high school diplomas often face few job options, low annual incomes, and poor health outcomes. High dropout rates within a community are related to higher poverty and crime rates, less tax revenue, and more money and resources spent on social services.

In 2006, *Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 2000–2005* shed light on how many students drop out of high school in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) and what factors put students at risk for dropping out. The results were grim: for students entering high school between 1997 and 2001, the on-time graduation rate hovered around 50 percent. Risk factors associated with dropping out included chronic absence, child welfare involvement, and failing grades. After the release of *Unfulfilled Promise*, several citywide initiatives (including accelerated high school programs, afternoon and evening classes, re-engagement efforts, and workforce development and occupational skills training) were expanded or created to address the dropout crisis.

In 2014, Project U-Turn commissioned PolicyLab at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and Johns Hopkins University to conduct a follow-up study to examine whether the prevention and intervention initiatives reduced dropout rates by addressing the following questions:

- What were the cohort graduation and dropout rates? What factors related to these rates?

- How did subpopulations vary in graduation rates and risk factors for dropout?

- What were the re-engagement rates for high school dropouts over time? Of the students who dropped out of high school and re-engaged, how many participated in a Project U-Turn re-engagement program?

- How many students eventually enrolled in post-secondary institutions?

Graduation rates increased and dropout rates have decreased since the first *Unfulfilled Promise* report.

- Four percent fewer students dropped out of high school during the 2011–2012 school year than during the 2003–2004 school year.

- The 2008–2009 cohort graduation rate reached a high of 64 percent, an increase of 12 percentage points from the previous report's highest graduation rate.

- The four-year cohort dropout rate decreased from 29 percent for the 2003-2004 cohort to 25 percent for the 2008–2009 cohort.

- Grade promotions and attendance rates increased as graduation rates increased.

Graduation rates remain lower for at-risk students, including those involved with the city's Department of Human Services (DHS), black and Hispanic males, and females who gave birth prior to and/or during high school.

- Graduation rates for students with DHS involvement continued to lag behind those of their non-involved peers, with juvenile justice-involved youth having the lowest graduation rate.

- Hispanic males and females made the greatest gains in graduation rates, increasing 18 percentage points and 15 percentage points, respectively, between the 2002–2003 and 2008–2009 cohorts.

- Graduation rates increased for black and Hispanic male students, but they remain lower than those of their white and Asian male counterparts and all females.

- Graduation rates for adolescent mothers remained low, peaking at 43 percent with the 2007–2008 cohort.

- Students involved with juvenile justice and adolescent mothers had the highest probability of dropping out of high school of all high-risk groups examined.

Of the students who dropped out of high school, an increasingly large percentage re-engaged in either the school system or a re-engagement program.

- 54 percent of dropouts in the 2008–2009 cohort re-engaged, up from 47 percent in the 2002–2003 cohort.

- 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.

- One in five students across all cohorts, and over half of all re-engaging dropouts, participated in at least one Project U-Turn program: GED to College, Educational Options Program, E[3] Centers, Accelerated High School, Gateway to College, and Occupational Skills Training Program.

Although graduation rates increased, rates of enrollment in two-year and four-year post-secondary institutions failed to keep pace.

- Enrollment in post-secondary institutions for all students marginally increased.

- Students involved in DHS and adolescent mothers continue to lag far behind in post-secondary enrollment, and students in juvenile justice enroll in post-secondary education at substantially lower rates than all other DHS categories.

CONCLUSION

Overall, more students are graduating from Philadelphia public schools since the release of the first *Unfulfilled Promise* report. However, several groups continue to lag behind in terms of graduation and dropout rates. Providing additional dropout prevention and interventions for the most at-risk students (those with DHS involvement, adolescent mothers, and black and Hispanic males) may help them complete high school. Additionally, more students who drop out are re-engaging, and a majority of those are participating in one of the programs implemented or expanded as a result of Project U-Turn.

INTRODUCTION

A high school diploma is the basic academic credential needed for a young person to achieve gainful employment and access to post-secondary opportunities. In large urban areas such as Philadelphia, young people often struggle to stay in high school and many youth never graduate.[1] Areas with large numbers of high school dropouts have higher social service costs, higher crime rates, and less potential for economic development.[2]

In 2006, *Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 2000–2005* was commissioned by Project U-Turn to examine dropout and graduation rates in Philadelphia by subgroup and student characteristics. Project U-Turn, a campaign to resolve Philadelphia's dropout crisis, is led by a cross-sector collaborative with representation from the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), the Mayor's Office of Education (MOE), the city's Department of Human Services (DHS), family court, local foundations, and youth advocacy groups, as well as parents and young people. The Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) is the backbone organization for the effort. *Unfulfilled Promise* found that, of first-time ninth graders who started high school from 1996 through 2001, 45 to 52 percent graduated on time (i.e., in four years). In addition, the study found that no racial ethnic group had an on-time graduation rate above 71 percent for these years. Finally, across all years in the study, 30,000 students left Philadelphia's high schools without receiving a diploma.[3]

Project U-Turn and SDP implemented interventions to address the dropout crisis based on implications presented in *Unfulfilled Promise*, which included the need for a broad-based coalition and the involvement of social service agencies. This follow-up report, *A Promise Worth Keeping: Advancing the High School Graduation Rate in Philadelphia*, examines dropout and graduation rates after the implementation of Project U-Turn and SDP initiatives. Additionally, this report provides a nuanced view of dropout and graduation among high-risk youth, including students with child welfare involvement and students re-engaging after dropping out.

Finally, this study quantifies the impact of Project U-Turn programs created to re-engage students who have dropped out and provides information on post-secondary enrollment for Philadelphia students. In addition to analyzing the progress that has been made, this report highlights areas that warrant additional attention to improve the graduation rate.

This follow-up report examines the overall graduation and dropout rates of students in SDP, as well as high-risk subgroups of the student population, since the release of *Unfulfilled Promise*. Graduation, dropout, and re-engagement are assessed utilizing data from cohorts of students starting ninth grade for the first time between 2002 and 2008 and one year of snapshot data (school year 2011–2012). Data sources include SDP, DHS, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH), and PYN. This rich, multi-system dataset made it possible to identify not only academic student risk characteristics, but also social and health risks, including various levels of involvement with DHS and pregnancy experiences.[4] Data from Project U-Turn programs made it possible to examine the trajectory of students who drop out and return to high school or participate in other re-engagement programs.

Questions addressed in this report include:

- What were the cohort graduation and dropout rates? What factors relate to these rates?

- How did subpopulations vary in graduation rates and risk factors for dropout?

- What were the re-engagement rates for high school dropouts over time? Of the students who dropped out of high school and re-engaged, how many participated in a Project U-Turn re-engagement program?

- How many students eventually enrolled in post-secondary institutions?

To provide context for the questions addressed in this study and the landscape of dropout intervention efforts following the release of *Unfulfilled Promise*, the next section provides background information regarding the formation of Project U-Turn and its initiatives for disconnected youth.

PROJECT U-TURN

Unfulfilled Promise documented the multidimensional problem of Philadelphia's dropout crisis and emphasized that its resolution would require action on many fronts. Project U-Turn partners have worked collectively over the last eight years to raise public awareness about the dropout issue, expand educational options for struggling students and youth who have left school without a diploma, support research and measure results,[5] and leverage funds to support these efforts.

While its efforts are multifaceted, Project U-Turn has focused on reconnecting young people to a wider array of pathways leading to a secondary credential and postsecondary education or training. In fact, the launch of Project U-Turn featured a "come back fair," where former dropouts could meet with leaders from area schools, organizations, and programs to get back on track educationally.

Many of the re-engagement and alternative education options are coordinated through SDP's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation. For example, SDP contracts with providers to operate its Accelerated High School program, which provides educational programs and services for struggling students and out-of-school youth. Furthermore, in May 2008, SDP opened a Re-Engagement Center for youth seeking to return to education. Launched with seed funding from Project U-Turn, the Re-Engagement Center is based at the district headquarters, receives space, personnel, and operating funds from SDP, and has received staffing support from the City of Philadelphia. The Center is a one-stop resource where former students can get information about various educational program options and be referred to programs that meet their needs.

Examples of other pathways available for out-of-school youth include GED to College and Occupational Skills Training programs, funded by federal Workforce Investment Act dollars and approved by Philadelphia Works, Inc. E³ Centers are supported by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Youth Development Fund and are made available through the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services and approved by Philadelphia Works, and by major annual investments from DHS. All of these pathways are competitively procured and are operated by providers contracted by Philadelphia Works and PYN.

In addition to expanding alternative education programs for Philadelphia's youth, Project U-Turn and its partners have aggressively pursued policy changes and increased funding to advance dropout prevention and recovery. Key examples of these efforts include:

- Working with and supporting the School Reform Commission's efforts to expand the number of accelerated schools and increase high-quality options for off-track students and out-of-school youth.

- Leading advocacy efforts in 2011 and 2014 with local legislators and stakeholders to maintain support for Accelerated High Schools when fiscal crises threatened their existence.

- Collaborating with the juvenile justice system and SDP to change education policies and practices at delinquent placement facilities (for example, curriculum alignment, credit transfer rules, and career and technical education offerings) so that the academic and occupational coursework youth complete while in placement is more likely to be counted when students return to school district programming.

- Launching the DHS's Education Support Center in 2009 to improve educational stability and outcomes for youth in DHS care, including children who are in foster care, receiving in-home services, or involved in the juvenile justice system.

- Negotiating a memorandum of understanding to facilitate the exchange of data between DHS and SDP regarding agency-involved youth and their progress in school.

- Commissioning and supporting a series of studies to assess the needs and realities of Philadelphia's most vulnerable populations (many of whom participate in the aforementioned alternative education offerings) to inform program-based interventions and education policy decisions.

- Working with school district officials to align student maternity leave policies with the state's guidelines and timelines so that teens can access child care subsidies when they return to school.

Project U-Turn and the programs initiated following *Unfulfilled Promise* were created to stem the tide of the dropout crisis in Philadelphia. The next sections of the report provide analysis of graduation, dropout, re-engagement, and post-secondary enrollment in the years following the release of that report.

Graduation rates increased and dropout rates decreased since the first *Unfulfilled Promise* report.

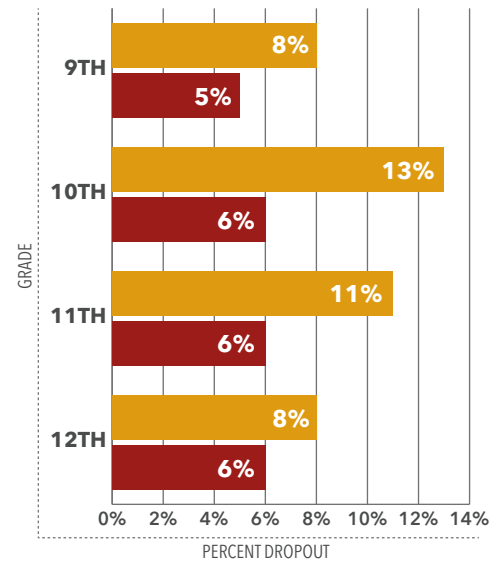### ANNUAL DROPOUT FOR THE 2011-2012 SCHOOL YEAR

KEY FINDING:

Four percent fewer students dropped out of high school during the 2011–2012 school year than during the 2003–2004 school year.

Unfulfilled Promise provided a one-year snapshot of dropout for the 2003–2004 school year for high school students, including those in charter schools. This section examines the magnitude of dropout for one year in Philadelphia for all high school students enrolled at any point in the 2011–2012 school year, including those in charter schools.[6] See Table 1 for characteristics of students in ninth through twelfth grade during the 2011–2012 school year. Of the 58,166 students, 6 percent had limited English proficiency, 16 percent received special education services, 19 percent were involved with child welfare (including juvenile justice), and 5 percent of female students had given birth prior to or during high school.

Six percent of students dropped out in the 2011–2012 school year, and the percentage was relatively constant across grades, ranging between 5 and 6 percent. This is a relative decrease of 4 percentages points from the annual dropout rates in the first *Unfulfilled Promise* study, which were 10 percent for all high school students and ranged between 8 and 13 percent for ninth through twelfth grades for the 2003–2004 school year (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
DROPOUT BY GRADE *for the 2003–2004 and 2011–2012 School Years*

2003-2004
2011-2012

Note: Data for both years include students enrolled in charter schools. Data for 2003–2004 obtained from *Unfulfilled Promise* (Neild & Balfanz, 2006)

Graduation rates increased over the same time period, as reflected by the cohort graduation rates detailed in the next section.

Table 1. **CHARACTERISTICS OF ALL 9TH-12TH GRADE STUDENTS IN THE 2011-2012 SCHOOL YEAR**
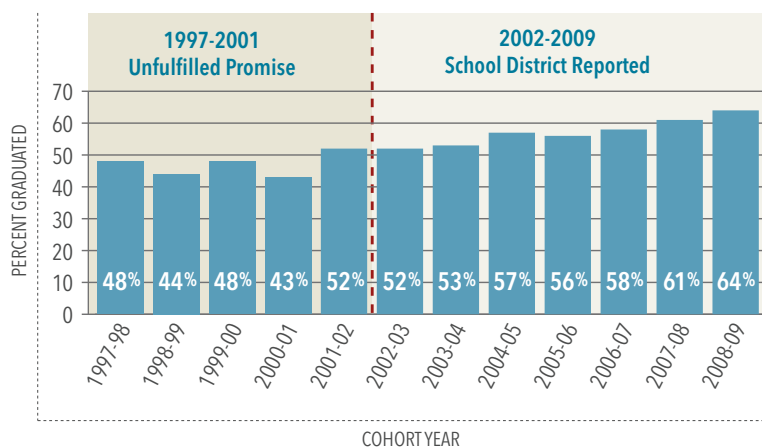
	All students: 58,166	White students: 7,989	Black students: 35,314	Hispanic students: 9,978	Asian students: 4,103
Limited English Proficiency	6%	2%	1%	19%	26%
Special Education	16%	15%	17%	17%	4%
DHS Involvement	19%	10%	24%	15%	6%
Maternity	5%	2%	6%	5%	1%

Note: Includes charter students. Characteristics are for percentage of all students in column one, followed by percentage of students with those characteristics in each racial group.

Figure 2.
FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES OF 9TH-GRADE COHORTS

Note: Includes first-time ninth graders beginning in School District of Philadelphia (SDP) schools (accelerated, special admission, citywide, and neighborhood). These rates exclude ninth graders starting in charter schools, as well as students attending charters after the start of ninth grade. Data for 1996–1997 through 2000–2001 cohorts were obtained from *Unfulfilled Promise* (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). The 2002–2003 through 2008–2009 cohort graduation data were provided by SDP, and were calculated using SDP's former four-year cohort graduation methodology. Students transferring out of SDP without returning to SDP are not included. The dashed line marks a distinction between data from the original study cohorts and the cohorts included in this follow-up study.

COHORT GRADUATION AND DROPOUT RATES

KEY FINDINGS:
- The 2008–2009 cohort graduation rate reached a high of 64 percent, an increase of 12 percentage points from the previous report's highest cohort graduation rate.

- The four-year cohort dropout rate decreased from 29 percent in the 2003–2004 cohort to 25 percent in the 2008–2009 cohort.

- 3,170 students in the 2008–2009 cohort dropped out of high school, compared to 5,493 in the 2002-2003 cohort, which graduated before the implementation of Project U-Turn. This represents a decrease of over 2,000 eventual dropouts.

- Grade promotions and attendance rates increased as graduation rates increased.
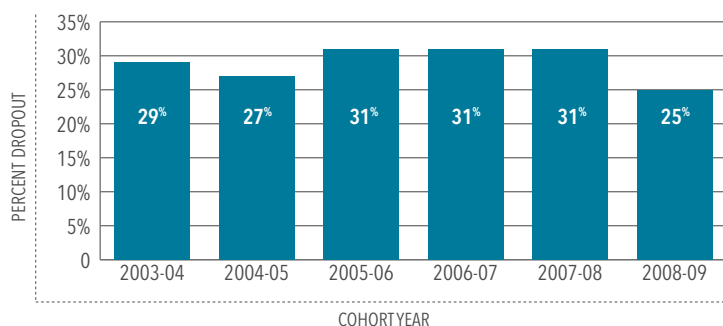
This section examines seven cohorts of first-time ninth-grade students from the 2002–2003 through 2008–2009 school years, followed up to four years from the beginning of ninth grade. While an annual graduation or dropout rate gives an idea of how many students graduate or drop in a single year, the cohort calculation provides graduation and dropout information for groups of students who start high school at the same time and are tracked over a given amount of time.

For example, a group of first-time ninth graders can be followed over four years to calculate the on-time graduation rate for that cohort. The cohort rate can also track a particular cohort for more than four years to allow students who dropped out more time to return and eventually graduate.[7]

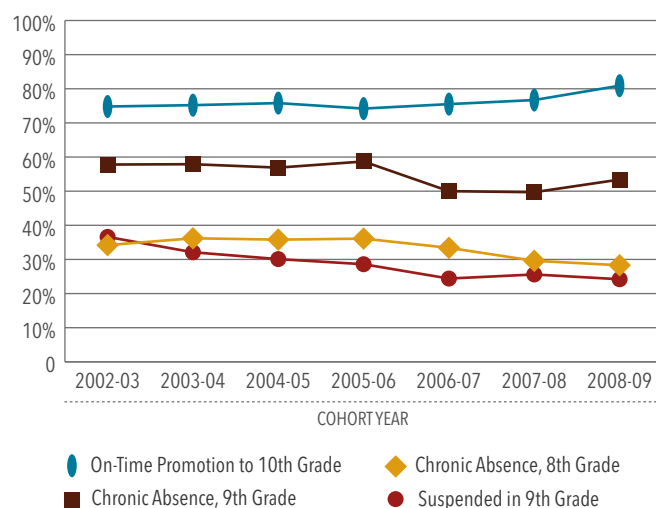### *On-Time Graduation Rates*
The percentage of students graduating in four years rose consistently between the 2002–2003 and 2008–2009 cohorts, especially when compared to cohorts from the *Unfulfilled Promise* report. For example, Figure 2 shows that the four-year graduation rate for students stood at 64 percent for the 2008–2009 cohort, while only one ninth-grade cohort had a graduation rate above 50 percent between 1997 and 2001.[8] This increase is consistent with the rise in graduation rates at the national level. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the on-time graduation rate for first-time ninth graders in the 2008–2009 cohort reached a forty-year high of 80 percent.[9] While students in SDP lag behind the national average, this is a substantial increase compared to previous years.

Figure 3.
FOUR-YEAR DROPOUT RATES OF 9TH-GRADE COHORTS

Note: Data were provided by the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), and were calculated using SDP's former four-year cohort dropout methodology. This methodology included students whose first school of ninth-grade attendance was an SDP or alternative school; it attributed students to their first school of ninth-grade attendance. Students who transferred in or whose first school of ninth-grade attendance was a charter school are excluded from the calculations.

Figure 4.
ON- AND OFF-TRACK HIGH SCHOOL INDICATORS

Note: Indicators are not portrayed for course credits and failing grades due to incomplete data within the student-level dataset provided by the School District of Philadelphia.

Dropout Rates

The four-year dropout rate ranged from 27 to 35 percent between the 1996–1997 and 2001–2002 cohorts.[10] As graduation rates increased following the release of *Unfulfilled Promise*, dropout rates steadily declined. The four-year dropout rate reached a low of 25 percent among the most recent cohort in this study (those students who entered ninth grade in 2008–2009). Between the 2002–2003 cohort, which graduated prior to the launch of Project U-Turn, and the 2008–2009 cohort, the number of high school dropouts decreased by over 2,000 students, or by 42 percent (Figure 3).[11]

The increase in graduation rates and decrease in dropout rates were accompanied by other advances in student achievement.

Graduation and Achievement

The increased graduation rates reflected for recent cohorts were preceded by an improvement in several indicators of progress toward graduation, such as higher rates of on-time promotion to tenth grade and reductions in the percentage of students with chronic absences. Philadelphia's students have improved in several indicators related to graduation, including chronic absenteeism, suspensions, and grade promotion. When a student experiences chronic absence, it can result in loss of classroom time, which can impact learning and lead to dropping out.[12] Chronic absence is commonly defined as attendance of under 90 percent, the equivalent of missing a month or more of school.[13] Suspension has also been associated with an increased probability of dropout and a decreased probability of graduating.[14] The percentage of students experiencing chronic absence in eighth and ninth grades decreased between the 2002–2003 and 2008–2009 cohorts (Figure 4). Chronic absences for ninth-grade students rose in both the 2005–2006 and 2008–2009 cohorts; however, they remain lower overall. Suspensions in ninth-grade decreased from 37 percent in the 2002–2003 school year to 24 percent in the 2008–2009 school year. The rate of on-time promotion to tenth grade grew for each subsequent year and reached 81 percent by the 2008–2009 cohort.

How did subpopulations vary in graduation rates and risk factors for dropout?

Graduation rates remain lower for at-risk students, including those involved with DHS, black and Hispanic males, and females who gave birth prior to and/or during high school.
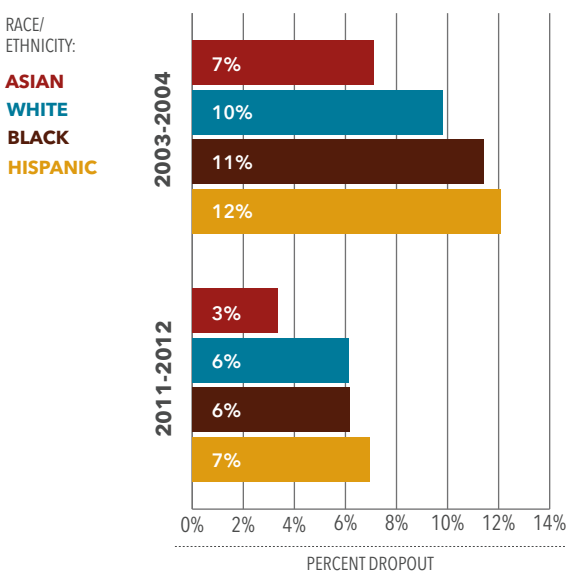
RACE & GENDER

KEY FINDING:

Graduation rates increased for black and Hispanic male students, but they remain below those of their white and Asian male counterparts and all females.

To assess the progress made by specific racial and ethnic groups over one year, Figure 5 shows the dropout percentages for white, black, Hispanic, and Asian students for the 2003–2004 and 2011–2012 school years. When compared to 2003–2004, the dropout rates for 2011–2012 decreased for all races. However, gaps among races persist, with approximately 6 percent of black and white students and 7 percent of Hispanic students dropping out in 2011–2012, compared to 3 percent of Asian students.
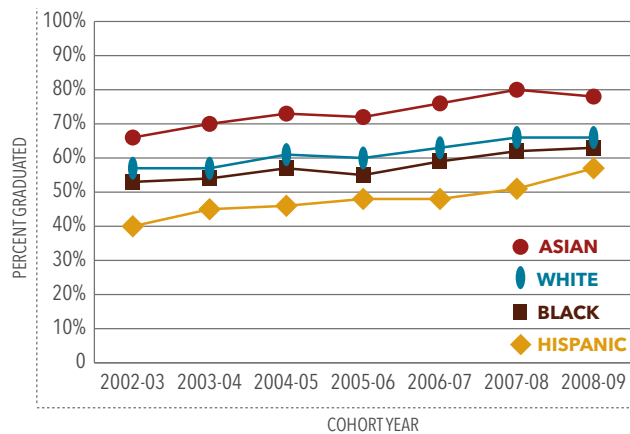
Figure 5.

DROPOUT RATES BY RACE/ETHNICITY IN THE 2003–2004 AND 2011–2012 SCHOOL YEARS

Note: Data for both years include students enrolled in charter schools. Data for 2003–2004 obtained from *Unfulfilled Promise* (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

While the disparity in graduation rates among different racial groups has improved since the publication of *Unfulfilled Promise*, a graduation gap persists across racial/ethnic categories for students in Philadelphia schools.

Figure 6.

FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

Cohort graduation rates increased for both males and females across all four racial/ethnic groups over time (Figures 7 and 8), although female students from most racial/ethnic groups showed less improvement when compared to their male counterparts. Despite less improvement compared to males, all female racial/ethnic groups continued to outpace their male counterparts by as much as 8 percentage points for Asian females and 11 percentage points for black females in the 2008–2009 cohort.

Figure 7.
**FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES
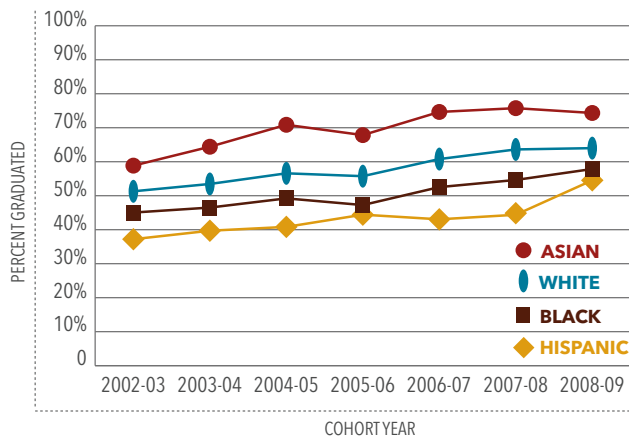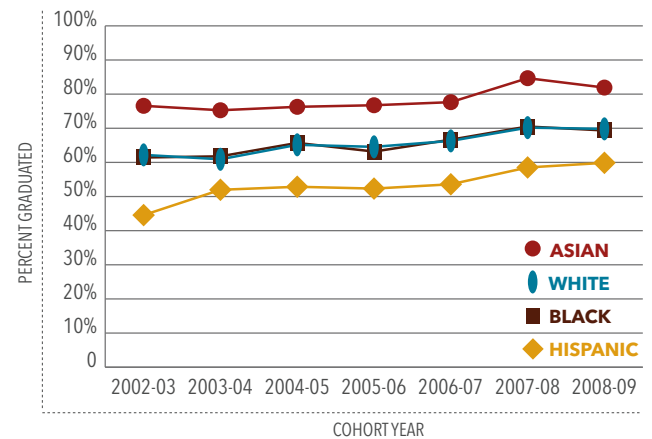FOR MALE STUDENTS**

Figure 8.
**FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES
FOR FEMALE STUDENTS**

The greatest gains in graduation rates were made among Hispanic males and females (increasing 18 percentage points and 15 percentage points, respectively, between the 2002–2003 and 2008–2009 cohorts). The graduation rates for black and Hispanic males (currently at 58 percent and 55 percent respectively) remain below those of their white and Asian male counterparts.

STUDENTS WITH DHS INVOLVEMENT

KEY FINDING:

Graduation rates for students with DHS involvement continued to lag behind those of their non-involved peers, with juvenile justice–involved youth having the lowest graduation rate.

In a school environment where one in five high school students is currently or was previously involved with the child welfare and/or juvenile justice system, it is important to consider their potentially unique risks to high school completion compared to their non-involved peers. Figure 9 shows students with DHS involvement had gradual improvements in graduation across all levels of involvement in the child welfare system. The graduation rate for youth with foster care involvement increased from 28 percent in the 2002–2003 cohort to 44 percent in the 2008–2009 cohort, and the graduation rate for children receiving other DHS services increased from 32 percent in the 2002–2003 cohort to 48 percent in the 2008–2009 cohort.

The graduation rate for juvenile justice–involved youth exhibited the greatest gain among high-risk students, increasing from 16 percent in the 2002–2003 cohort to 36 percent in the 2008–2009 cohort. Despite the gains for students with DHS involvement, their graduation rates remain lower than their non DHS-involved counterparts.[15] Previous research in Philadelphia suggests that this could be due to higher rates of school change, delays in enrollment, and a history of special education and/or behavioral problems.[16] However, it is worth noting the gains seen for students with DHS involvement were larger than those of their non-involved peers across the same cohort years.

The progress made in graduation rates since 2002-2003 by students with DHS involvement and those in juvenile justice may reflect increased information sharing and collaboration between SDP and DHS through the 2008 federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act and increased support through the DHS Education Support Center, which was established in 2010. Fostering Connections required that child welfare agencies and school districts work together to ensure that students do not experience disruptions in attendance and enrollment during changes in living arrangements as the result of foster care.

Figure 9.
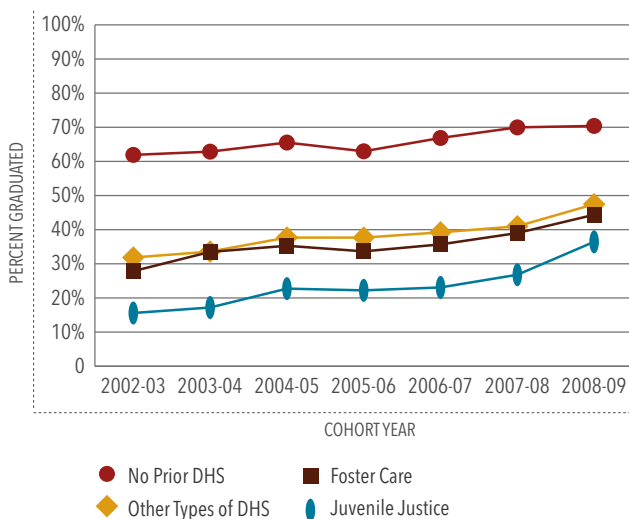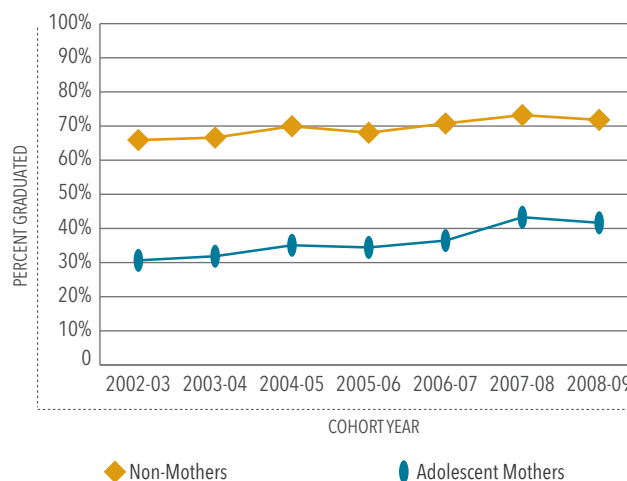**FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES
BY LEVEL OF DHS INVOLVEMENT**

**FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES FOR
ADOLESCENT MOTHERS AND NON-MOTHERS**

Figure 10.

ADOLESCENT MOTHERS

KEY FINDING:
Graduation rates for adolescent mothers remained low, peaking at 43 percent with the 2007–2008 cohort.

Adolescent mothers who gave birth prior to and/ or during high school had modest improvements in graduation rates, increasing from 31 percent (2002–2003 cohort) to 42 percent (2008–2009 cohort). Female students who did not give birth during this time showed smaller gains, from 66 percent (2002–2003 cohort) to 72 percent (2008–2009 cohort). Among all high-risk students, adolescent mothers experienced the least improvement in graduation rates since the *Unfulfilled Promise* report.

PROBABILITY OF DROPOUT
FOR HIGH-RISK STUDENTS

KEY FINDING:
Students involved with juvenile justice and adolescent mothers had the highest probability of dropping out of high school of all high-risk groups examined.

A large body of literature identifies the risk factors associated with dropping out, including belonging to an ethnic minority group, having limited English proficiency, and receiving special education services.[17] Research also shows that adolescent mothers and students with child welfare involvement, specifically foster care and juvenile justice, are at a higher risk of dropping out.[18] This section explores how strongly these risk factors relate to students' likelihood of dropping out of high school in Philadelphia. DHS involvement and maternity were the two factors most strongly associated with dropout.[19]

Figure 11.

**PROBABILITY OF DROPOUT BY
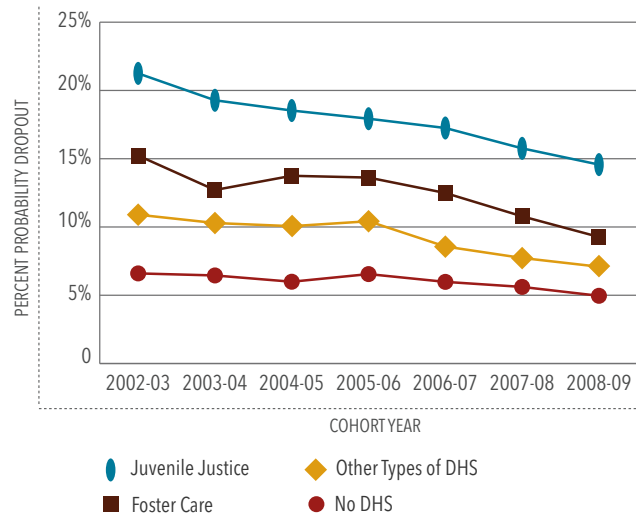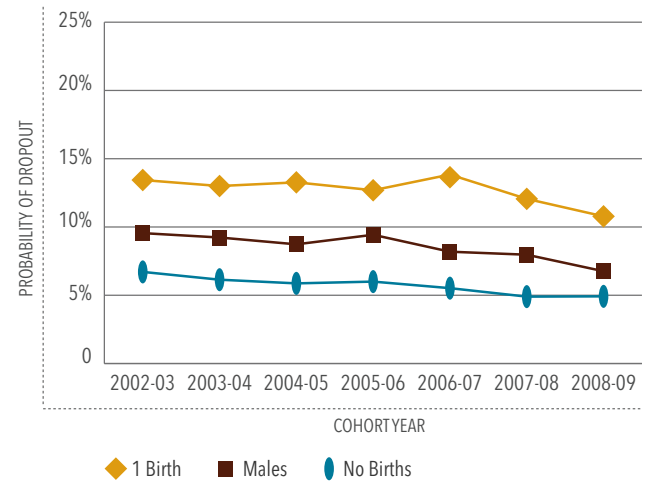LEVEL OF DHS INVOLVEMENT**

Figure 12.

**PROBABILITY OF DROPOUT FOR ADOLESCENT MOTHERS,
MALE STUDENTS, AND FEMALE STUDENTS WITHOUT A BIRTH**

Students with DHS Involvement

Students with any type of DHS involvement had a higher probability of dropping out than students with no DHS involvement (Figure 11). In recent cohorts, however, DHS-involved students' probability of dropout decreased as they began to catch up to their non-involved peers. Students in foster care and students with other types of child welfare involvement (for example, in-home protective services) had similar probabilities of dropping out over time: 15 percent and 9 percent respectively in the 2002–2003 cohort and 11 percent and 7 percent respectively in the 2008–2009 cohort. Across all cohort years, students with juvenile justice involvement had the highest probability of dropout: three times that of non-involved students. Yet the probability of dropping out for students in juvenile justice decreased over time from 21 percent in the 2002–2003 cohort compared to 15 percent in the 2008–2009 cohort.

Adolescent Mothers

As shown in Figure 12, the probability of dropout for female students who have had one birth lagged behind female students without births as well as male students. The probability of mothers dropping out did not decrease substantially between the 2002–2003 cohort (13 percent) and the 2008–2009 cohort (11 percent).[20] Adolescent mothers' were consistently more likely to drop out than male students and female students with no birth, and that likelihood increased for females with more than one child.

Given the improvement in graduation and dropout rates, albeit small for some groups of students, we were interested to see how these gains related to re-engagement of students who had dropped out. The following section describes trends in re-engagement.

What were the re-engagement rates for high school dropouts over time? Of the students who dropped out of high school and re-engaged, how many participated in a Project U-Turn re-engagement program?

> Of the students who dropped out of high school, an increasingly large percentage re-engaged.

RE-ENGAGEMENT IN PHILADELPHIA

KEY FINDING:

The percentage of all dropouts who re-engaged with the school system rose steadily from 47 percent in the 2002–2003 cohort, where 2,721 out of 5,730 dropouts re-engaged, to 54 percent in the 2008-2009 cohort, where 2,090 out of 3,868 dropouts re-engaged.

This section provides information on youth re-engagement in Accelerated High Schools, Gateway to College, the Education Options Program, GED to College, E³ Centers, and Occupational Skills Training Programs, six key interventions expanded or established by Project U-Turn collaborative members after *Unfulfilled Promises* was released in 2006.

Table 2 on page 17 provides detailed descriptions of the programs and services that are included in this report.
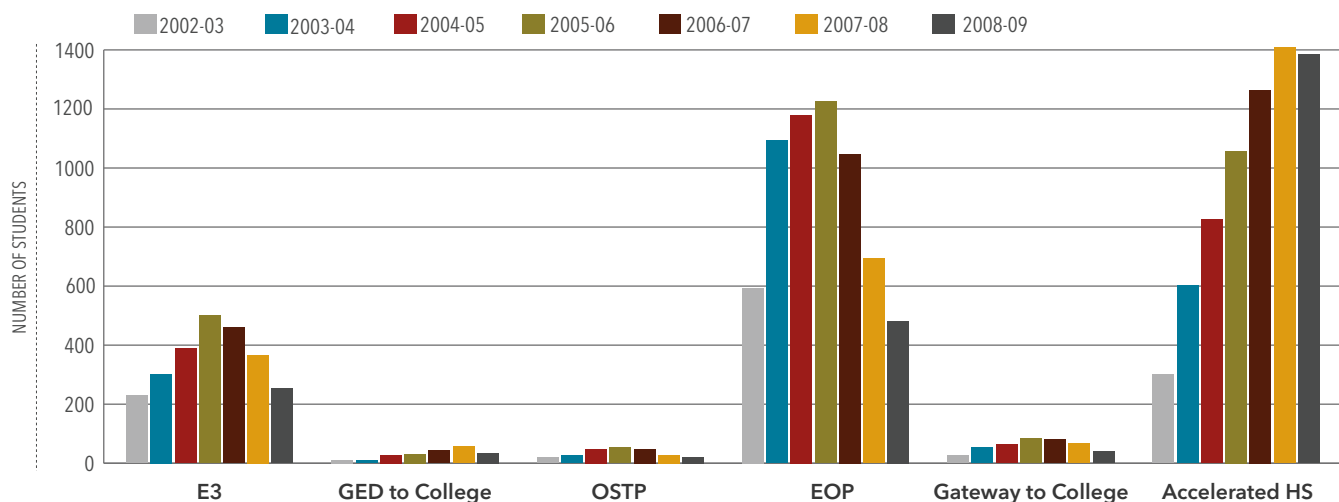
ENROLLMENT BY PROGRAM

KEY FINDING:

One in five students across all cohorts, and over half of all re-engaging dropouts, participated in at least one Project U-Turn program: GED to College, Educational Options Program, E³ Centers, Accelerated High School, Gateway to College, or Occupational Skills Training Program.

The programs vary widely in the number of students they serve each year. According to participation records analyzed for this study, GED to College, Gateway to College, and the Occupational Skills Training Program each worked with approximately 50–150 students annually. E³ Centers served several hundred students per year, while the Accelerated High Schools and the Educational Options Program collectively served between 1,000 and 2,000 students per year. Combined, the six programs provided about 5,000 slots to struggling students during their peak years. The programs also served students in foster care, youth returning from juvenile justice placements, and adolescent mothers; these subgroups were represented in all six programs at about twice the rate of other students.

Figure 13. **PARTICIPATION IN RE-ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS, BY COHORT**

Over the same period in which the re-engagement programs were introduced or expanded, the proportion of high school dropouts who chose to re-engage steadily increased, from 47 percent in the 2002–2003 cohort to 54 percent in the 2008–2009 cohort (Figure 14).[21] And a larger proportion of re-engaging dropouts participated in a Project U-Turn program, rather than returning to their neighborhood school. In later cohorts, between half and two-thirds of all re-engaging students were involved with one of the six programs, with the Accelerated High Schools and Educational Options Program serving the highest proportion.

Graduation Rates for Former Dropouts who Re-Engaged

While the re-engagement efforts were successful at drawing youth back into the school system and increasing the percentage of dropouts who re-engaged, these efforts were less successful in moving students through to graduation. The graduation rate of dropouts who re-engaged remained steady at approximately 35 percent across the seven cohorts. Thus, while the re-engagement programs successfully pulled more dropouts back in, the programs may not have provided the students with effective ways of achieving a high school diploma. Still, while the graduation rate of re-engaging dropouts did not increase over time, a larger proportion of dropouts chose to re-engage. The increase in reengagement means that there were fewer dropouts in each cohort, which was one of the ultimate goals of Project U-Turn.

Figure 14.
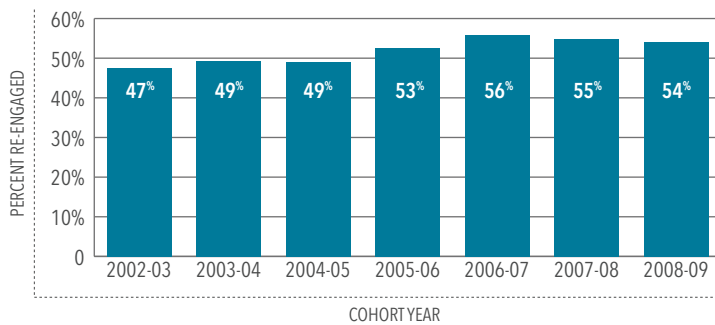
PERCENT OF DROPOUTS WHO EVER RE-ENGAGED

Table 2. **PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS**

Service or Program	Description	Target Population	Partners
Accelerated High Schools	The Accelerated High Schools are small high school programs where students can accumulate credits at an accelerated pace and earn a diploma in less than three years. These programs offer teacher- and computer-based instruction.	Off-track and out-of-school youth ages 15–21 who are two or more years behind in school with fewer than half of the credits required for graduation accumulated.	Operated by providers contracted by SDP.
Gateway to College	Located at the Community College of Philadelphia, Gateway to College is a dual enrollment program that lets students simultaneously earn their high school diploma and college credits.	Youth ages 16–21 with 21 or fewer high school credits. Eligible students must demonstrate the ability to read at the 8th-grade level or higher and complete requirements for high school graduation before or during the year of their 22nd birthday.	Operated by the Community College of Philadelphia through a contractual agreement with SDP.
Educational Options Program	Formerly known as "Twilight Schools," the Educational Options Program lets students and adults continue earning credits toward a high school diploma through afternoon and evening classes at select SDP high schools.	Youth over age 17 with at least eight high school credits, but who are not currently enrolled in a regular day school.	Operated by SDP.
GED to College	GED to College provides a pathway for out-of-school youth to earn a GED while also receiving support for enrolling and persisting in college. This model focuses on connecting pre-GED programming to post-GED success in college.	Out-of-school youth ages 17–21 without a secondary credential. Eligible students must test at or above the 7th-grade level in reading and math.	Operated by providers contracted by PYN.
E³ Centers	E³ Centers offer a holistic approach to preparing out-of-school youth and youth returning from juvenile justice placement to achieve long-term educational, career, and personal goals. Services include low-literacy supports, GED-prep classes, post-secondary access and planning, and intensive work-readiness programming that prepares participants for unsubsidized employment. Other services include job-readiness training, subsidized internships, community-service and service-learning opportunities, and job search assistance.	Youth ages 16–21 who have dropped out of school and/or are returning from juvenile justice placement.	Operated by providers contracted by PYN.
Occupational Skills Training Program	The Occupational Skills Training Program offers opportunities for technical-skill development in targeted industries specifically for out-of-school, over-aged youth. The program helps young people improve their academic skills and offers wrap-around services that foster success in attaining a GED, an industry-recognized credential, employment, or access to an advanced occupational-skills training institution or other higher-education institution.	Out-of-school youth ages 17–21 with or without high school credentials. Eligible students must test at or above a 6th-grade reading and math level and meet federal Workforce Investment Act eligibility (income and barrier) requirements. Some programs serve youth up to age 24.	Operated by providers contracted by PYN.

How many students eventually enrolled in post-secondary institutions?

> ### Although graduation rates increased, rates of enrollment in two- and four-year post-secondary institutions failed to keep pace.

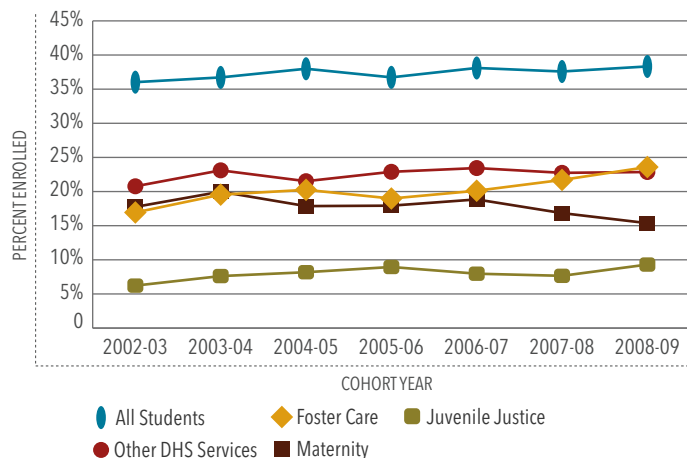### POST-SECONDARY ENROLLMENT

KEY FINDINGS:

- Enrollment in post-secondary institutions for all students marginally increased.

- Students involved in DHS and adolescent mothers continue to lag far behind in post-secondary enrollment, and students in juvenile justice enroll in post-secondary education at substantially lower rates than all other DHS categories.

Enrollment in post-secondary education reveals a different story than that of gains in graduation and decreases in dropout for the 2002–2003 through 2008–2009 cohorts. For this study, enrollment rates in post-secondary institutions were reported for *all* first-time ninth graders across all seven cohorts, not just those who graduated from high school. Later enrollment in either a two- or four-year institution hovers between 36 and 38 percent across all cohorts.[22] Foster care–involved youth show positive trends, as the percent of students enrolling in post-secondary institutions increased by approximately 7 percentage points from the 2002–2003 to 2008–2009 cohorts. Adolescent mothers' enrollment in post-secondary institutions declined between the 2002-2003 and 2008–2009 cohorts.

Limitations

While the evidence reveals some important gains in high school graduation among SDP students, the data were evaluated only through the end of the 2011–2012 school year. Since then, significant cuts in public education funding for SDP resulted in highly publicized staff reductions in neighborhood schools. The district has taken actions in an attempt to compensate for the $304 million dollar cuts in State and Federal funding. Over the two years, the District has cut over 5,000 positions, closed 32 schools, cut its administrative costs by over 50%, and negotiated givebacks from two of their unions. At the school level, this has meant larger class sizes and severe cut backs on services such as nursing and counseling services, arts and music programming, afterschool activities, and sports programs. The gains in re-engagement are robust for the years of this study, however, as with school staffing, budget cuts may have had a significant impact on dropout prevention and intervention programs. What makes the findings of this report significant is that they coincide with a time of increased funding to SDP, which may have helped to augment services to students. With the funding reductions in recent years, it will be important to monitor early warning indicators (for example, early math and reading proficiency, and school absenteeism), and indicators at the high school level for evidence to discern whether the trends reported in this study are now at risk.

Many of the re-engagement programs included in this report support students in obtaining a GED. However, GED data were not obtained for this study. Therefore, even if a youth obtained a GED at some point, the student was counted as a high school dropout in this study. Lastly, while we could track participation in Project U-Turn programs and knew which students earned diplomas, we could not link the two directly to determine which students or how many had earned their diplomas while enrolled in one of the intervention programs. As such, the credential attainment rate of different programs could not be measured.

Figure 15. **POST-SECONDARY ENROLLMENT**

Note: Enrollment rates in two- and four-year institutions for all first-time ninth graders in each cohort, as of April 2014.

CONCLUSIONS

The data presented in this report provide evidence that graduation rates have increased while dropout rates have decreased for Philadelphia public school students over time, yet enrollment rates in two-year and four-year post-secondary institutions have not kept pace. Graduation rates for higher-risk populations, such as students with DHS involvement and female students who gave birth prior to and/or during high school, remain below the overall cohort graduation rate. In addition, male students continue to graduate at lower rates than female students. The data also demonstrate that a higher percentage of high school dropouts are re-engaging in Project U-Turn-affiliated programs. Despite this, the graduation rate for dropouts who re-engaged remained fairly steady.

This report shows that Philadelphia public schools are graduating considerably more students than in the past. More can be done, however, to ensure that those being left behind receive the support needed before they drop out. Keeping students on the path to on-time graduation is key to reducing the number of high school dropouts. The findings in this report provide the City of Philadelphia, SDP, and other partners and stakeholders with the evidence for continued systemic change to ensure a better future for Philadelphia's students. The findings also affirm the benefit of data sharing between SDP and DHS to track the educational outcomes of students in child welfare, who were found to be at the highest risk. Data sharing among public systems enables alignment of resources to meet the needs of the varied student population in Philadelphia public schools. Given limited public resources, it is important to provide support for our most at-risk populations. With the high proportion of at-risk youth enrolled in SDP, aligning support and services to engage students around school persistence and academic achievement will be critical to continued improvement.

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APPENDIX 1

DESCRIPTION OF HIGH SCHOOL TYPES[23]

Special Admission Schools: Magnet schools offering a rigorous curriculum with highly competitive entrance requirements related to achievement and behavior. These schools select the students who best meet admission criteria. Any student throughout the city may apply.

Citywide Schools: Schools offering specialized courses that concentrate on academics, career, or technical programs. Admission is determined by competitive entrance requirements, space availability, and selection by computerized lottery. Any student throughout the city may apply.

Neighborhood Schools: Open admission schools that give preference to students living within a neighborhood boundary. Students within the boundary are not required to submit an application if they have proof of residency.

Traditional Charter Schools: Independently operated, nonprofit and nonsectarian public schools funded with private funds as well as federal, state, and local tax dollars.

APPENDIX 2

DATA, VARIABLES, AND METHODS

Data for this project were derived from the following sources: (1) School District of Philadelphia (SDP) enrollment, student demographic characteristics, and achievement data for seven cohorts of first-time ninth-grade students (2002–2003 through 2008–2009 school years) and an annual look at all high school students enrolled in the 2011–2012 school year; (2) DHS records for matched students summarizing varying levels of involvement in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice system beginning from the first instance when the child became known to DHS until May 2014; (3) birth certificate records from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Office of Vital Statistics from 2002 through 2012; (4) enrollment in Philadelphia's dropout recovery programs for the 2008–2009 through 2011–2012 school years.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at both The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the City of Philadelphia reviewed the research protocol, and approvals from all agencies were obtained. Identifying information (first name, last name, date of birth, and gender) was initially used to link SDP student records, DHS records, and birth certificates (to identify student-mothers). All identifiers were removed once the initial match was conducted to protect the privacy of the students in this retrospective data set. Thus, this population-level analysis was conducted only on a de-identified data set.

Variables

SDP student data includes gender, race/ethnicity, grade level, special education status, limited English proficiency, absences, suspension, grade promotion, and final enrollment status. Final enrollment status consists of four categories: dropped out, graduated, continuing, or transfer. Students continuing are those that remain enrolled and those who transfer to any school outside of SDP.

Students were also identified if enrolled in the Educational Options Program, Accelerated High Schools, or Gateway to College program offered through SDP. Through SDP, the National Student Clearinghouse data was provided for post-secondary enrollment, which identified any student enrolling in a two and/or four year institution.

Students involved with both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems (that is, "crossover youth") were hierarchically classified so categories were mutually exclusive and students were not double-counted in this analysis. Each student was classified as: 1) juvenile justice 2) foster care 3) other DHS 4) no DHS involvement. This was considered so that students at highest risk would be labeled as such, and students who were only served by DHS were placed in a lower risk category. Thus, a student who received foster care and juvenile justice services at various points in time would be included only in the "juvenile justice" category. A student who received both foster care and other services, such as prevention services, would be included only in the "foster care" category.

Methods

Dropout by Grade: Using the 2011–2012 school year snapshot of all students in high school, the dropout rate for each grade was calculated by selecting any student with a final status of "dropout" at the end of the school year and dividing by the total number of students starting each grade at the beginning of that school year.

Graduation and Dropout calculation: Four-year dropout and graduation calculations were based on the final status of the student provided by SDP, which included dropped out, graduated, continued, or transferred out of SDP. These were calculated for each cohort.[24] GEDs and diplomas obtained outside the district were not included in the calculation of graduation or dropout. Rates do not include students who began in a charter school in ninth grade or students transferring outside of SDP after starting ninth grade. Students transferring into SDP schools were not included in the calculations.

Probability of dropout: Discrete time hazard models were used to examine the effect of a student's change in high-risk status (for example, receiving child welfare services or having a child) on the risk of dropout. Discrete hazard models account for time and other variables, such as grade and race/ethnicity, and model the "time-to" an event—in this case, time to drop out.[25] Each student began an observed risk period upon entering ninth grade. When a student dropped out, the risk period ended. Every student who graduated was right-censored so as to not incorrectly be counted as a dropout. Right-censoring allowed for graduating students to leave the statistical model as a graduate or continuing student, rather than counting as a dropout. Robust standard errors were used to account for the correlation due to clustering of students within schools. These models were calculated separately for each cohort and adjusted for other student characteristics over time, including race/ethnicity, gender, DHS involvement, special education status, limited English proficiency status, and school year.

ENDNOTES

1 Rumberger & Lim, 2008

2 Dianda, 2008

3 Neild & Balfanz, 2006

4 Description of the data is available in Appendix 2.

5 See http://www.projectuturn.net/ research.php for research and reports generated since 2006.

6 The percentage of students in each grade transferring to schools outside SDP ranged between 1 and 4 percent, with the lowest percentage in twelfth grade.

7 These analyses do not include ninth-grade students starting in charter, private, or parochial schools. Students who started in an SDP school in ninth grade and subsequently transferred to a charter school are included in these analyses. A description of high school types is available in Appendix 1.

8 Neild & Balfanz, 2006

9 Stetser & Stillwell, 2014

10 Neild & Balfanz, 2006

11 SDP student enrollment numbers also declined during this period.

12 Schoeneberger, 2012

13 Chang & Romero, 2008

14 Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2013

15 DHS categories are hierarchical and mutually exclusive.

16 Hwang, Griffis, Song, & Rubin, 2014

17 Aud, et al, 2010; Rumberger & Lim, 2013; Kim, 2011; Aron & Loprest, 2012; Sheng, Sheng & Anderson, 2011

18 Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2011; Basch, 2011; Hirschfield, 2009; Hjalmarsson, 2007

19 Other factors examined include gender, race/ethnicity, grade level, receipt of special education services, limited English proficiency, and school type.

20 Students involved with DHS and teen mothers often stay in high school longer than other students. Therefore, lower dropout probabilities may be an artifact of including students still enrolled in high school who may drop out after their fourth year in high school.

21 In terms of demographic backgrounds, the dropouts who chose to re-engage were no different than those other dropouts who remained out of school. The percentages of students by gender, ethnicity, limited English proficiency, special education, foster care placement, juvenile justice, and maternity were the same for re-engaging students and dropouts who never returned.

22 Post-secondary enrollment records were available through spring 2014, giving the 2002–2003 cohort of ninth graders up to eight years after anticipated high school graduation to enroll in a post-secondary institution, compared to only two years for the 2008–2009 cohort. Thus, post-secondary enrollment rates for more recent cohorts could still rise slightly as some students enroll in post-secondary schooling for the first time more than two years after their expected time of high-school graduation.

23 Derived from listings on the School District of Philadelphia, Office of Student Enrollment and Placement website http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/ offices/s/student-placement/school-selection-process and from Hwang, Griffis, Song, & Rubin, 2014, p. 8

24 Rates are based on August 2014 data and reflect an individual's status four years after entering high school.

25 Allison, 1982.

project
u·turn