

## Beating the Odds in Our Urban Schools

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Education Week  
November 3, 2010

“Graduating from high school is an economic imperative,” proclaimed President Obama. High school graduates are less likely to receive public assistance and face incarceration and are more likely to secure employment and gross higher lifetime earnings. And yet, one study cites that only half of the high school students in the nation’s 50 largest cities are graduating in four years. This grim statistic is even more dismal for under-represented minorities and students with special needs.

The 2001 version of the Elementary & Secondary Education Act (aka No Child Left Behind) that required the reporting of disaggregated data made this condition evident to all. Those of us who have been engaged in teaching poor, urban students have been aware of this issue for quite some time, particularly those of us who were educated in the very schools experiencing this phenomenon. We remember vividly that more than 60% of our peers from high school never walked across the stage at graduation. For us, correcting this opportunity gap is not only a moral and economic imperative; it’s a matter of life and death.

Because of the economic and social impact of an unprepared workforce, we know that we are in a national crisis. Our drop-out crisis and achievement gap has now been quantified by McKinsey & Co and has captured the attention of those outside public education, from small community-based organizations to the largest businesses, and from City Hall to the White House.

There have been many studies of the factors contributing to students dropping out of high school; factors external to school control include poverty, family circumstance, minority status, limited English language proficiency, and challenging neighborhood conditions. While much has been done to identify risk and protective factors, few studies incorporate the viewpoints of successful students who, despite facing the

same challenges as drop-outs, overcame the multiple risk factors present in their lives.

A recent study in the Rochester City School District (RCSD) does exactly that. The majority of students who graduated in the RCSD class of 2009 faced similar challenges as those who failed to graduate. For example, approximately 20% of the graduates were not living with either parent but rather in foster care, with grandparents, or with siblings or friends. More than 92% of those students identified themselves as a member of a minority group, primarily African American, Hispanic, and biracial. In addition, 70% of the participants were receiving free or reduced-price lunch, an indicator of their economic status. The study focused on what helped students in such high-risk situations beat the odds and graduate from high school. It found that successful students experienced multiple protective factors such as caring relationships with an adult in multiple places - school, neighborhood, home, social services organizations.

This study adopted the use of the term “gateway protective factors” to describe protective factors which operate in concert with one another to provide youth with a gateway out of adversity that helps them achieve educational success as measured by high school graduation. By providing youth with exposure and progressive, dynamic access to other forms of protection, gateway protective factors enable those youth to overcome barriers presented by poverty, low expectations, family instability and other adversities. As important as any one protective factor may be, this study shows that students succeed when protective factors operate synergistically in their lives.

Furthermore, graduates in the RCSD class of 2009 appeared to have benefited in a way dropouts had not - by having at least one relationship with an adult who 1) believed in and held high expectations for them, 2) modeled successful behaviors, and 3) was consistently present in their lives. Graduates’ stories often included strong references to robust relationships in multiple areas of their lives (at home, at school, among their peers and within their communities). One relationship led the student to another, and when loss was experienced, the others provided a safety net.

While graduates and dropouts faced similar challenges (e.g., both groups included students who had spent time in foster care), one-on-one interviews revealed that graduates' relationships served as gateways to other important mitigating factors. One graduate described how a track coach made a significant impact by expecting the entire team to be successful and go on to college. That relationship led the student to participate (on a long-term basis and in a meaningful way) in school activities, set goals and gain exposure to peers with similar, positive aspirations. The coach's expectations went beyond the track to the team members' academic achievement and extended into summer activities, such as connecting the students to employment and the community recreation center.

In addition, internal assets also serve as mediating factors protecting students against risk behaviors and promoting positive academic outcomes. Internal assets include cooperation, a sense of community, self-efficacy, empathy, problem solving, self-awareness, and the holding of goals and aspirations. The study found that both graduating students as well as those who dropped out possessed the internal assets to succeed. Dropouts actually possessed a higher mean level of internal assets than graduates, though the difference was not statistically significant. While internal developmental factors may be equally present in both groups, there are other factors affecting students' levels of academic success. What does this mean? Internal assets alone will not guarantee high school graduation. Multiple mitigating factors are *required* if a student is to overcome adversity and achieve academic success as measured by graduation from high school.

The evidence from the graduates in this study documented what we already knew: regardless of children's social and economic challenges, they all have the internal capacity to graduate from high school and will do so when the appropriate support to mitigate the risks they face are provided to them within the school and the communities in which they live.

For example, when the Superintendent decided to keep schools open on a cold winter day, some were of the opinion that schools should close because children did not have warm coats and families did not have cars to drive students to school. He countered

that the solution was not to close schools but for the community to provide warm clothing for its young people. In conjunction with Volunteers of America and City Hall, the district launched an initiative to secure warm clothing for children who were in need. Rather than playing to the deficit, this cooperative action provided the opportunity for children to be resilient against the barrier that poverty can create to receiving a quality education. We cannot do much about family circumstances and poverty, but as educators we can commit to educating our children to protect them against the odds.

Schools have tremendous “holding power” to influence students to stay in school by encouraging stronger student relationship with teachers, coaches and other educators who can help mitigate the risk of students dropping out. In addition, school climates, policies and practices all strongly impact students’ academic achievement levels and sense of belonging in the school environment. Use of a strength-based approach that helps students succeed despite adversity requires a shift in all of us - community, policy makers, parents and caregivers, school administrators and teachers - to focus on those factors over which we have control. For example, community members may not be able to directly influence a child’s family environment but they can provide supplies such as warm coats to protect children on their way to school on a harsh winter day.

Schools have dominion over student discipline, student-educator relationships, rigorous and relevant curriculum, and academic and extracurricular support systems. Focusing on the student deficits can be likened to viewing the “glass as half empty” and lead to lowered expectations. Since Rosenthal and Jacobson’s landmark study regarding the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy emerged in 1968, a wealth of research has documented both the immediate and long-term impact of educators’ expectations on students and their levels of academic achievement. A warning needs to go out to communities, parents and caregivers not to fall under the self-fulfilling prophecy of expecting less of our kids than they are capable of.

Educators, families, caregivers and community leaders must be aware that students who face multiple adversities must experience multiple protective factors to mitigate

that risk and to succeed - as measured by high school graduation - with a diploma in hand. What must be present is a gateway to success that is paved with protection. This protection must come from multiple places - the school, the family, and up to the White House. This approach guarantees significant improvement in the graduation rate of our students throughout our urban settings.

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