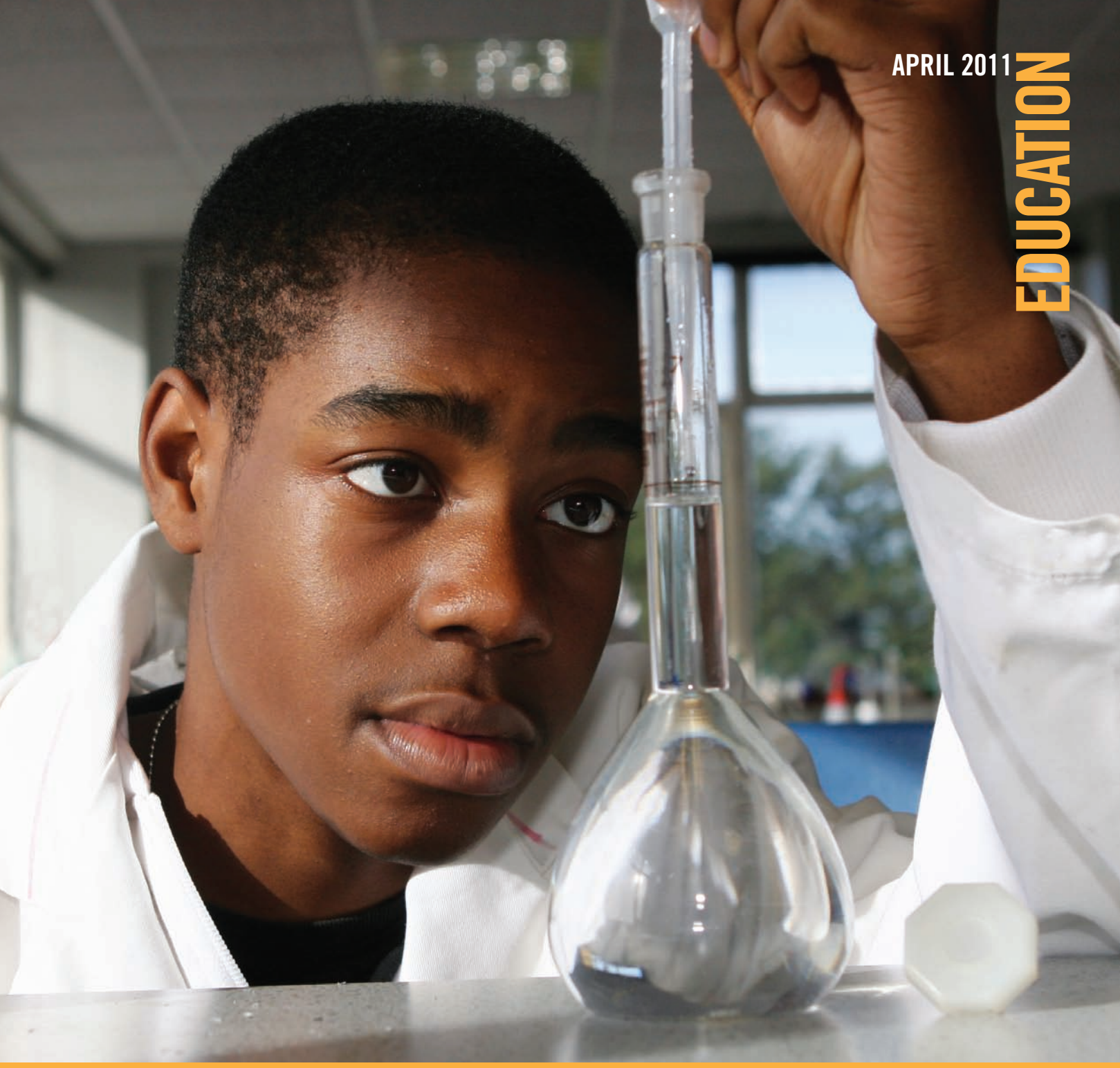

APRIL 2011

EDUCATION

EDUCATION
RESEARCH OVERVIEW

United Way

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INTRODUCTION

United Way has put a stake in the ground: the number of high school dropouts must be cut in half by 2018. With our network of 1,276 state and local United Ways and our national, state and local partners, we seek to mobilize the country around better educational opportunities and outcomes for our children.

United Way wants to engage individuals and institutions across America to be part of this change effort. United Ways are uniquely positioned to make a difference, bringing assets in three critical areas that can help fuel educational improvement:

1. **A national network with demonstrated success in mobilizing communities to change lives;**
2. **A diverse array of national, state and local partners with knowledge, expertise, resources and tools for change;**
3. **Public engagement capacity, connecting with individuals and organizations to give, advocate and volunteer. United Way has an unparalleled network – 10 million donors in more than 500,000 workplaces, and more than 2.5 volunteers – that can make change.**

We want our donors, volunteers, partners and supporters to give, advocate and volunteer to drive research-based strategies that can help move the needle on education. That is United Way's focus and strength: our ability to recruit people with passion, expertise and resources from all across the community to get the job done.

This *Education Research Overview* is designed to give state and local United Ways and their partners a more detailed picture of the research grounding our cradle-to-career education continuum. It's organized around United Way's five education focus areas, dedicating one section to each:

1. **School readiness**
2. **Early grade reading proficiency**
3. **Middle grade success**
4. **High school graduation**
5. **Success in college, work and life**

Each section frames the case for action (rooted in the latest research), offers strategies that experts suggest work, and gives examples of best practices underway and innovative ideas from United Ways. Wherever possible, we've listed additional resources, including URLs for partners and successful efforts that can be replicated.

ONE CAUTION: THIS OVERVIEW IS NOT A RECIPE. IT IS MORE LIKE A LIST OF THE BEST INGREDIENTS.

Being informed by national research-driven strategies is important. But communities must also investigate local conditions, focus on populations of greatest concern and establish specific target outcomes for those populations. Here's how United Way sees that process:

The action strategies presented in this overview go beyond what a United Way might do, in many cases. This is by design. We want to lay out the broader picture of what needs to be done. (A separate effort is underway with United Way field leaders to develop a prioritized roadmap that United Way Worldwide will concentrate on over the next few years.)

Which strategies a United Way should hone in on – and how, with whom – depends on that community's vision, its current challenges and its resources, both human and financial.

Community Conversation

That's why it's vital that education impact strategies be tackled in the context of mobilizing – or galvanizing – communities. That starts with **community engagement**, which in turns starts by listening. More and more United Ways are "turning outward," through community conversations, to discern a community's aspirations for education. These conversations include voices often unheard – especially parents, students and teachers. These community conversations and the insight gleaned from them should ground any impact initiative, and can help United Ways build broader, more diverse coalitions to drive action. Find out more and get tips and tools for education community conversations at **http://online.unitedway.mobilization**.

Mobilization Basics

These are the basic components of galvanizing the community around education:

- **Engaging the community,** including community conversations but also gathering data and working with the community to create a shared vision, goals and priorities around education.
- **Creating and deepening relationships with individuals and institutions,** including developing and executing an online and offline individual engagement plan as well as seeking out strategic education partners.
- **Developing strategies** with a diverse array of stakeholders (always including parents, teachers and students).
- **Mobilizing resources,** which includes generating financial resources but also tapping into volunteer opportunities to drive strategy and advocacy opportunities that include but aren't limited to public policy. It's a give, advocate and volunteer call to action.
- **Executing the plan and sharing accountability** with partners, which also requires aligning investments, impact strategies and how we do business within the United Way organization.
- **Measuring, evaluating** and communicating results and course-correcting along the way.

United Way cannot reach our national goals without galvanizing people and resources to generate action – across the cradle-to-career education continuum.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While it's laid out in more detail throughout this *Education Research Overview,* the bottom line is this: four key strategies must be in place – across the age continuum – to ensure that all children are afforded the educational opportunities they deserve.

THE CHALLENGE IS THE OPPORTUNITY

Looking at the big picture — from cradle to career — these are the kinds of things communities must do to improve education:

1. Engage students in learning while in school.

If students are not engaged in school their attendance suffers. When children "check out" from school, they are in the fast lane to dropping out. For example, in Philadelphia, among sixth graders who missed at least a day of school per week on average, more than 80% failed to graduate high school. Disengagement starts early, often connected to undiagnosed disabilities, developmental delays or a lacking of critical school readiness skills in the first few years. Some students disengage because they are bored or because they don't feel known and understood by anyone at school.

Experts say engaging our children – meeting them where they are, having high expectations and challenging them – is critical. Throughout their school careers, connecting them with as many supportive adults as possible can nurture their strengths and make sure help is directed where it is needed most. Gathering and analyzing early warning data can identify which students are checking out at which points, which can help family-school-community partnerships create the right interventions at the right points.

2. Support families to improve academic achievement.

Research shows that when families are actively involved in their child's learning, it improves that child's attendance, behavior, social skills, grades and chances of staying in school. This is true for young children as well as for middle and high school students.

Although many disadvantaged parents express high aspirations for their children's educational success, this does not always translate into high levels of engagement with schools. The barriers they face – socioeconomic status, language, transportation, knowledge of available resources, access to services or simply knowledge about how to help their children move along the education continuum – suggest that schools must develop new approaches to family engagement.

Community-centered strategies for parent involvement, respecting community culture and parents' abilities to contribute to their children's education, are sorely needed. Facilitating stronger family-school-community partnerships can make a difference. We also need a holistic definition of family involvement that goes beyond engagement in schools and values contributions beyond school-based involvement. Studies cite higher levels of engagement of low-income/minority parents in supporting academic success at home rather than simply "face time" in schools.

3. Connect students with the resources they need outside of school.

Only about 20% of a student's waking hours are spent in school, so out-of-school-time learning is a key part of the success equation. Children learn in every aspect of their life – from the minute they're born – so a community web of social, cultural, educational and economic resources should be in place (and sustained) to encourage learning.

This means that before- and after-school programs, weekend activities, summer camps, cultural institutions (like libraries and museums) and informal child care settings must be considered part of the learning environment. This also includes community "wrap around" supports for kids who need more, and early warning systems that help identify kids who may be headed off track – and trigger effective interventions – before it's too late.

Supports such as community- or school-based mentoring, tutoring and family-focused services offered in schools have been shown to improve outcomes for children and youth. Viewed in this way, United Way's call to action – *Give, Advocate and Volunteer* – is a call for strengthening community resources that support success for children and youth of all ages, in and out of school.

4. Build stronger systems to support children and youth.

Fragmented community systems – such as schools, health care, human service and juvenile justice systems – deal with children and families from one particular perspective. Too often, those efforts are not connected. For example, housing and health systems correlate factors to school performance, yet the data they collect isn't used to coordinate services that could support student success. And while chronic absences, behavior and grades can signal problems as early as third grade, few schools are gathering, sharing or acting on the data in a coordinated way as a prevention strategy.

Research shows that when leaders of schools, health care, family support, youth development, child welfare, justice and other systems find ways to work together to support student success, children and youth benefit from higher quality, more coordinated services. Developing mechanisms that identify obstacles to coordination and delivery of needed services and referring them for system-level action can promote sustainable educational supports for students and their families.

HERE IS A SNAPSHOT OF STRATEGIES FOR EACH FOCUS AREA:

SCHOOL READINESS STRATEGIES

1. **Provide Resources and Supports for Families and Caregivers**
   - Connect parents to information, resources and supports.
   - Provide supports for family, friend and neighbor caregivers.
2. **Improve the Quality of Early Care and Education**
   - Improve early care environments.
   - Improve the training and qualifications of providers.
   - Support the development and implementation of quality rating systems.
   - Collect and evaluate data to make sure programs are effective.
3. **Provide Books to Children**
4. **Build Awareness of the Early Development Instrument (EDI) as a Population-Data Tool**
5. **Engage the Public and Educate Policymakers on Early Learning**
   - Conduct public education campaigns.
   - Implement system building efforts.

EARLY GRADE READING PROFICIENCY STRATEGIES

1. **Provide Support to Students Struggling With Reading**
   - Tutor struggling readers.
   - Support summer reading.
   - Support effective out-of-school reading.
2. **Develop Effective Principals and Teachers Who Keep Students Engaged**
   - Engaged in Learning
   - Strengthen teacher and principal preparation and professional development in reading instruction.
   - Support improved state reading standards and assessments.
   - Ensure that textbooks, techniques and curricula are grounded in best practice.
   - Promote formative assessments to drive classroom instruction.
   - Help teachers teach in ways that engage children.
3. **Help Families Help their Children Become Strong Readers**
   - Help families identify reading problems early.
   - Inform families of effective home-based strategies to help their children learn to read.
   - Strengthen family literacy.
   - Partner with families to boost school attendance.

MIDDLE GRADE SUCCESS STRATEGIES

1. **Strengthen Academic Effectiveness and Enhance Professional Development**
   - Reduce the number of chronically absent students.
   - Enhance professional development for teachers.
   - Improve assessments to ensure students are on track.
2. **Make Curricula More Hands-On, Relevant, and Engaging**
   - Make coursework relevant.
   - Engage students in a variety of ways.
3. **Create Transition Programs that Provide Social and Academic Support**
   - Provide enhanced academic support for struggling students.
   - Provide extra structure and personal interaction with adults.
   - Support collaboration among middle and high school teachers, counselors and administrators.
   - Enhance peer support.
4. **Provide Quality Out-of-School Opportunities that Reinforce and Enhance Learning**
   - Offer expanded learning opportunities that support social and emotional development.
   - Provide exposure to careers and keep students engaged.
5. **Develop Systems that Provide Early Warning Data to Prevent Failure**
   - Develop and use data systems based on grades, attendance and behavior to monitor progress and trigger interventions.
   - Ensure that early warning data is readily accessible to and used by teachers, counselors, administrators, families and community organizations.
6. **Increase Family Involvement and Connections**

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION STRATEGIES

1. **Improve the Quality, Rigor and Relevance of Instruction in High Schools**
   - Improve effective teaching.
   - Make high school curricula more rigorous.
   - Make high school curricula more relevant to the real world.
   - Create new schools to better meet the diverse needs of students.
2. **Create a Supportive Learning Environment for All Students**
   - Personalize learning communities.
   - Expand out-of-school opportunities.
   - Increase access to support services.
3. **Use Early Warning Data Systems to Identify and Help At-Risk Students**
   - Identify students at risk of dropping out with an early warning data system.
   - Provide at-risk students with targeted interventions.
4. **Re-Engage Dropouts in School**
   - Support the development of dropout recovery programs.
   - Support multiple pathways to graduation.
5. **Engage Families More Effectively**

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS IN COLLEGE, WORK AND LIFE

1. **Improve High School Preparation and Promote Better Coordination Between the K-12 and Post-Secondary Education Systems**
   - Improve the rigor and relevance of high schools.
   - Support state and community efforts to better coordinate the K-12 and post-secondary systems.
2. **Expand Out-of-School Efforts to Help Students Connect to Careers and Develop Career-Ready Skills**
   - Expand and enhance youth employment programs.
   - Support out-of-school programs that develop college and career skills.
3. **Develop Policies and Practices to Help Students Plan for, Access and Pay for College**
   - Promote a college-going culture for all students.
   - Expand mentoring and other community-based supports for college access.
   - Develop innovative financial aid options.
   - Create alternative pathways to post-secondary education and careers for disconnected youth.
4. **Provide Supports to Help Students Succeed in College and Complete a Degree or Credential**
   - Provide continuing academic and social support for students once they are in college.
   - Reform the remedial education system.

SCHOOL READINESS

THE CASE FOR ACTION

Quality early learning experiences for all children are critical to a community's economic success, a key driver of school readiness – and vital to improving high school graduation rates. Studies show that children entering kindergarten with the cognitive, social and emotional skills necessary for success are more likely to graduate high school.

That's because a child's early years, from birth until school age, are a unique period of growth and development: learning to walk and talk, beginning to think independently, understanding how to communicate and learning to control thoughts and emotions. All of those are critical early learning skills that build a foundation for successful future learning.

Four decades of research show that high quality early childhood experiences, inside and outside the home, can make a significant difference for children, creating a vital pathway for success in school and life.[1] Children's brains are being "hard-wired" in the first five years for future learning: communications, social/emotional skills and critical early learning skills are formed in the early years.

- Research in neuroscience shows the critical impact that relationships between children and caregivers have on the developing brain during the first months and years of life.[2]
- Brain development research also demonstrates that social, emotional and intellectual learning are inextricably linked. Supportive relationships and healthy interactions actually shape brain circuits and lay a foundation for academic and developmental successes. Developing positive behaviors during the early years is critical, because brain circuits are developing actively then.[3]
- Positive early learning experiences, at home and in other settings, can make a significant difference for children from the moment they're born.[4] In fact, 85% of the brain's development happens before kindergarten.[5]

Just as a solid foundation can support a house, the fundamental support of early learning makes a tremendous difference in the long run. It impacts not just how children do or behave in kindergarten, but whether they'll be reading well by third grade, succeeding in eighth grade or graduating high school. The skills we look for in workers – critical thinking, problem solving, working on teams – are all built on the foundation of those early years. On the other hand, chronic stressors in the early years[6] – like persistent poverty, poor health and nutrition, absent parents and homelessness – can dramatically weaken that foundation.[7]

Achievement Gap Starts Before School

Many children enter school lacking the fundamental skills necessary to succeed. In particular, children of color and those from low-income families are more likely to enter school with fewer language, literacy, social and other skills needed to ensure school success, compared with more advantaged children.[8]

Unfortunately, the arc of failure starts early. A child who starts behind falls even farther behind, long before school. Disparities in child outcomes are evident by nine months.[9]

That achievement gap widens in school. For every 50 children who don't learn to read in kindergarten, 44 of them will still have trouble in third grade.[10] These disparities exist across cognitive, social, behavioral and health spectrums. Children without reading skills by third grade are unlikely to graduate. Low grades and high absenteeism rates by third grade are predictors of high school dropouts.

Early Learning Opportunities

One factor that undercuts a child's positive development (and contributes to disparate outcomes) is a lack of quality early learning experiences. The need for quality care and education is a common one across America. In 2007, 60% of mothers with children under three held a job, while 78% of mothers with children age six through 17 worked.[12]

About half of the nation's youngest children are cared for by family, friends and neighbors in informal care settings. The fact that a child isn't in regulated care doesn't mean the care is lacking, but too often these caregivers – especially grandparents – are isolated from formal and informal supports. Family, friend and neighbor caregivers often lack information about what children need to be ready for school.[13]

For many families, especially those with low incomes, the demand for affordable early care that promotes healthy development and early learning far exceeds the supply.[14]

In general, quality early learning experiences support long-term child development and are linked to higher vocabulary scores, math and language abilities and success in school. Negative impacts of low-quality care are more likely felt among children who are at increased risk.[15] Yet the children who need help often aren't getting it. Head Start and Early Head Start, federally funded comprehensive programs for families living at or below the federal poverty line, provide quality learning opportunities for pregnant women and children birth to age five. But currently, Head Start serves only 50% of eligible children and Early Head Start serves 3% of eligible families.

Unfortunately, cost remains a major obstacle to good, affordable child care.[16] While families below the poverty level are eligible for publicly funded child care assistance in all 50 states,[17] eligibility does not mean access – especially in today's economy. In 2009, 19 states had waiting lists for subsidized child care.[18] Many working families earn too much for subsidies but too little for good child care. A two-parent family with just one child earning $36,620 could pay almost 25% of that income for full-time care of one infant in a child care center, and almost 20% for a preschooler.[19] This often leaves too little to cover basic living expenses.[20]

Families

Parents are a child's first teacher, but they often underestimate their contribution to their children's school readiness. Families and others who care for young children understand that the early years are important. Yet many don't know exactly what to do to encourage early learning, or feel they don't have time to do what it takes to prepare their child for school.

In parent focus groups conducted by United Way for the *Born Learning* parent engagement campaign (**www.BornLearning.org**), parents from all economic walks of life were surprised to learn that talking with kids everyday can mean the difference between a child having a vocabulary of 3,000 or 15,000 words by kindergarten.

Language and Literacy

Wherever children are in the early years, their experiences contribute significantly to the language and literacy skills that drive success at school.[21] Children are building language skills even before they can speak. Parents with access to child development information may know that speaking with children in full sentences, using advanced words, telling stories and singing songs can help children build pre-literacy skills, but that's a rarity in low-wage families.

For example, children from low-income families do not develop (on average) the same vocabulary as their peers in middle-income families. One study showed that by age three, children from middle-income families know about 1,100 words, while children in low-income families know about 525 words or less.[22]

Children who enter school with poor language and communication skills often have a hard time catching up.[23] Furthermore, children who enter school with untreated health conditions or social and emotional developmental concerns struggle to acquire language, communication and cognitive skills in classroom settings.[24]

Research shows that early grade reading mastery is one of the best predictors of children's success in school.[25] Early language and literacy development plays a key role in supporting learning experiences that are linked with academic achievement, reduced grade retention, higher graduation rates and enhanced productivity in adult life.[26]

Return on Investment

As global competition demands for high workforce skills increases, the U.S. economy is producing fewer educated workers. "This is a major drag on our competitiveness," says Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman. That's why many of America's top economic thinkers are calling for stronger support for early learning, saying that a strong Return on Investment (ROI) in early learning is especially strong for young, at-risk children. Heckman says investing in early education pays off, especially for young, poor children. The ROI includes higher graduation rates, better job skills, increased homeownership and less chance of criminal activities.[27] According to Heckman, "evidence from economics, sociology, and public policy suggests that... early interventions that partially remedy the effects of adverse early environments can reverse some of the damage done... and have a high economic return relative to other policies. Data shows that early childhood interventions are more effective than interventions that come later in life."[28] Policymakers should invest in young children, because the ROI is stronger than in low-skill adults, Heckman says.

"Investment in human capital breeds not only economic success for those being educated, but also for the overall economy," says Arthur J. Rolnick, Senior Vice President and Director of Research of the Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis. "Early childhood development programs are rarely portrayed as economic development initiatives and... that is a mistake."[29]

Viewed through any lens – economics, education, brain development or family support – it is clear that providing all children with a strong foundation of good early learning experiences in the first five years can be part of a strategy to build a stronger community and country.

SCHOOL READINESS CHALLENGES

In order to help young children succeed in school – and graduate from high school – we must address several challenges, including:

1. Socioeconomic disparities.
2. Access to affordable, stimulating early learning opportunities.
3. Reaching families who are disconnected from traditional supports and services.
4. The availability of data about children's strengths and vulnerabilities before and at kindergarten entrance.
5. Awareness about the importance of investments in the early years.

CHALLENGE 1

Socioeconomic Disparities in School Readiness

The research is clear: compared with their more affluent peers, children from lower-wage households are much more likely to arrive at school without the critical skills necessary for school success. Low-income families are more likely to have parents with lower levels of education, and maternal education is one strong predictor of future student success.[30] Poverty also affects parents' ability to meet their family's basic needs, which further jeopardizes a child's ability to have consistent paths to growth and development.[31]

On average, children in low-income families get less literacy and language support at home. For instance, children in higher-income families hear an average of twice as many words per hour as children living in poverty, which fuels their learning.

- Children living in poverty are less likely to attend any type of center-based early care and education program, are more likely to have trouble with their schoolwork and more likely to repeat grades in school.[32] [33]
- Children living in poverty are significantly more likely to be in poor health and are less likely to receive adequate treatment for health conditions.[34] Health conditions can seriously impair cognitive skills and behavior.[35]

Numerous studies comparing the outcomes of preschool children from different socioeconomic backgrounds find large differences in cognitive skills in children as young as three or four years old.[36] A report by the Brookings Institution notes:

"[C]ompared with kindergarteners from families in the bottom fifth of the socioeconomic distribution (measured by a combination of parental education, occupation and income), children from the top fifth of all families are four times more likely to have a computer in the home, have three times as many books in the home, are read to more often, watch far less television and are more likely to visit museums or libraries. These differences in early environments contribute to large gaps in test scores, which show up at a very early age".[37]

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, children in the lowest socioeconomic groups, on average, start school months behind their middle-class peers in pre-reading and pre-math skills. This gap almost triples when the poorest children are compared to the most affluent 20%.[38]

CHALLENGE 2

Access to Affordable and Engaging Early Learning Opportunities

Given the high percentage of families with working parents, the importance of quality, affordable and accessible early learning opportunities that appropriately supports early development and learning cannot be overstated. Such programs help families—especially low-wage families—find and keep work and prepare young children for school success. In today's economy, access to child care could be the difference in keeping one's job.

Employers want workers to be on the job, productive and focused – and access to quality, affordable care is part of the equation. Child care breakdowns are associated with parent-employee absenteeism, tardiness and reduced concentration. One study estimates child care-related absences cost employers three billion dollars a year. The average employee misses eight to nine days of work a year – and for many low-wage parents, that absence is directly linked to the lack of child care.[39]

High Cost of Programs

Cost is a critical factor when choosing child care arrangements. The high price of child care is a burden on household budgets, and families may have to choose lower quality options in order to make ends meet.[40]

Low-income working families whose children would benefit the most from quality child care are least able to afford it. A family with both parents working full-time at minimum wage earns just $24,300 a year.[41] In fact, half of families with children under age six earn below 200% of the poverty line.[42] Full-day child care for one child, however, can easily cost up to $15,900 a year.[43]

In 2008, the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA) found that 37 states and the District of Columbia reported that the average price of care for an infant in a center exceeded 10% of the median income for a two-parent family. In 12 states, the average price of care for a four-year-old in a center also exceeded 10% of the two-parent median income.[44] In the same report, NACCRRA also noted that care in an accredited center can cost over 30% more than in other places.

That data covers only regulated child care, but many of America's youngest children are cared for by family, friends and neighbors. Often, those informal caregivers are not getting connected to resources and information as well as formal providers.[45]

Uneven Quality

The quality of care arrangements, whether in formal or informal care, especially for children spending many hours in care, is a key determinant to how well prepared children are for school. A study released by the University of North Carolina in 1999 found that "children in high quality child care demonstrated greater mathematical ability, greater thinking and attention skills and fewer behavioral problems than children in lower quality care. These differences held true for children from a range of family backgrounds, with particularly significant effects for lower-income children."[46] Children in poor quality child care may also have delayed language and reading skills.[47]

Unfortunately, there are more poor or mediocre quality programs for young children than high quality program options.[48] While most states have established their own quality standards for their pre-kindergarten and child care programs, they vary widely from state to state and community to community. Each state, for instance, determines its own pre-kindergarten eligibility criteria, guidelines for access, curriculum, teacher standards, class size and funding levels. Differences between states are dramatic.[49]

Likewise, child care licensing regulations, which provide a floor below which children would be in danger, vary widely across states on a variety of dimensions, including: health and safety requirements, staffing ratios, qualifications of staff, materials and curricula being employed and the characteristics of facilities.[50] States also vary substantially in the degree to which they license and regulate family child care home providers.[51]

Furthermore, most state licensing standards do not come close to meeting expert recommendations for safe care. For instance, The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recommends that a single caregiver be responsible for no more than four infants, four or five toddlers, or 10 preschool age children.[52] However, the Children's Defense Fund reports that only eight states mandate that licensed centers meet these standards.[53]

It's important to note that these statistics pertain only to licensed or regulated care. Nearly half of young children and the majority of babies (birth to three years) are cared for by family, friends and neighbors, or in other informal settings,[54] with less data available on these scenarios.[55]

Access to Quality Programs for All Families

Across the country and in every state there are few high quality, affordable programs for low- and moderate-income (and even upper-income) families:

- Only one in six children eligible for federal child care assistance currently receives help.[56]
- In 2008, 19 states had waiting lists for child care subsidies.[57]
- Head Start serves only half of all eligible children and Early Head Start serves only 3% of eligible families.[58]
- In the 38 states that fund preschool, state pre-kindergarten programs serve only 25% of all four-year-olds and only 4% of all three-year-olds.[59] Twelve states have no state-funded pre-kindergarten programs.[60]

Additionally, families often face an array of programs that are uncoordinated and disconnected. This is true across systems—child care, pre-kindergarten, Head Start, home visitation and other community programs, as well as across ages—from birth to school-age.

Those who are able to find programs for their infants and toddlers often have difficulty finding quality programs for their three-year-olds; they are too old for infant and toddler programs but not old enough for pre-kindergarten. This lack of continuity in quality care can jeopardize gains made during the early years and prevent children from coming to school ready to succeed.[61]

Lack of Continuity of Care

When babies' needs are met, they form secure attachments, creating a foundation for healthy growth and development in the early years and throughout childhood.[62] Studies show that young children who have secure attachments to their caregivers are more likely to play, explore and interact with others while in child care.[63] This relationship between infants and their child care providers is an important complement to the relationship between children and their families.

Many young children, however, face regular disruptions in out-of-home care. The combination of high turnover rates for providers, transitions in parental employment and housing and eligibility criteria for programs all contribute to these disruptions. And these disruptions often lead to interruptions in learning that can have effects for many years to come.[64] Due to the often hectic work schedules of many families and the lack of full day and/or non-traditional hour care, many young children spend time in more than one setting every day.

At the same time, research shows that when parental bonds are strong, or when children are connected to at least one loving, consistent adult, they are more likely to do well. The best early care programs also strengthen families and prevent abuse and neglect that can result from economic stress, lack of social connections, lack of knowledge about child development and lack of concrete support.

It is particularly challenging to ensure high quality early learning experiences for two groups of young children: infants and toddlers and children from immigrant families. These two groups of children often receive care from providers who have less formal training and operate outside of traditional support networks.

CHALLENGE 3

Difficulty Reaching and Supporting Informal and Immigrant Caregivers

Lack of Supports for Informal Caregivers

There are about 12 million children under age three living in the United States, and one in five lives in poverty.[65] Significant evidence warns us that without proper care and nurturing, infants and toddlers are at risk of long-term developmental delays.

Whether children are with their parents or in other care, it is important for families and caregivers to understand that children are born learning, to understand how children learn and to understand how to support the learning that's happening every day, wherever the child is. Yet parents and caregivers dramatically undervalue their role in school readiness – one in three incorrectly believes their loving interaction has little impact on their child's learning capacity.[66]

Correcting that misunderstanding is one of the underlying premises of United Way's *Born Learning* campaign, which provides national public service advertising, online parent resources (at www.BornLearning.org) and research-based parent education and community mobilization tools that 1200 state and local *Born Learning* campaigns are using.

Most young children spend some time in non-parental care, and the quality of child care settings for infants and toddlers is often much lower than for older children. Infants and toddlers with employed mothers spend an average of 25 hours per week in child care, and 39% are in child care for 35 hours or more each week.[67]

Data from the 2005 National Household Education Survey indicates that more than half of infants and toddlers from low-income households are cared for by family or friends. Family, friend and neighbor care (also called kith and kin, informal, unregulated and license exempt care) is a broad term that refers to care by extended family members, nannies, friends, neighbors and other unrelated adults, often without pay.

For the most part, this child care choice is embedded in relationships between caregivers and parents that begin—especially for relatives—long before the child care starts and continues long after the child care ends. Many family, friend and neighbor caregivers intend only to care for their grandchildren, nieces or nephews or their close friends' children.[68] Because of the informal nature of this care, few providers are connected to training, resources or support. On top of that, most initiatives designed to improve the quality of child care focus on regulated providers (child care centers, preschools and family child care providers), leaving out informal caregivers.

At least two-thirds of family, friend and neighbor caregivers are grandparents, who are often isolated from community supports for parents and are not informed on current child development research. While there are many advantages of this informal care – stronger bonds with the children, lower child to adult ratios, good communication between parents and providers and support for flexible work hours for parents – communities must put the spotlight on supporting these caregivers as part of larger early care and education initiatives.[69]

Lack of Supports for Children from Immigrant Families

Children from immigrant families are the fastest growing group of children in the United States. Some 22% of all children under the age of six, or more than five million young children, are children of immigrants.[70]

According to a report by the Center for Law and Social Policy, "Children of immigrants are more likely than children of U.S.-born citizens to face economic hardships and significant barriers to healthy development, making them less ready to succeed in school and beyond." They are also less likely to take part in early education programs, like pre-kindergarten. And they're more likely to be in family, friend and neighbor care, bringing to bear the issues raised previously about lack of access to resources or community supports.

Quality early learning has great potential to address issues of school readiness and English language acquisition, helping children of immigrants start school with more advanced English skills that increases their chances of success. Culturally

competent early learning opportunities may also ease children's and families' integration into American society and schools, while sustaining cultural ties and appreciation of diversity.

Immigrant families face barriers related to demographics, language, culture, immigration status, and, in too many instances, prejudice and discrimination. Each of these barriers must be addressed to ensure that children have access to early care opportunities that promote school readiness.

CHALLENGE 4

Availability Of Data About Children's Strengths and Vulnerabilities Before and at Kindergarten Entrance

While many states and communities are increasingly focused on school readiness as a key element of education success, there is no national school readiness measurement. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, approximately 27 states collect school readiness data on children entering kindergarten. The data are used to informing classroom instruction, school improvement and accountability and child screening and placement.[76]

Yet decision makers need concrete, quantifiable information to help inform decisions for public programs, policies and budget priorities. That's why United Way is working with UCLA's Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities to pilot the Early Development Instrument (EDI), a population-based measure of children's readiness. The EDI measures five areas of child development proven to affect school readiness:

- Physical health and well-being.
- Social competence.
- Emotional maturity.
- Language and cognitive development.
- Communication skills and general knowledge.

Maps are generated based on the EDI data that give local leaders a highly detailed profile of what is happening in their communities, highlighting neighborhoods where children are vulnerable as well as areas needing greater attention. The EDI is not only valid and reliable as a measure of children's readiness; it has also been proven to have predictive validity up to fifth grade in language and literacy. (More details in Strategy 4.)

CHALLENGE 5

Public Awareness and Political Will About the Importance of the Early Years

Unfortunately, the time when children's brains are developing the fastest is when public focus and investment in early learning is at its lowest.

In order to ensure that every child arrives at the school door ready to succeed, both policymakers and parents need good information and useful tools.

As United Way and the Ad Council found in our *Born Learning*-related research, parents understand that the early years are important. Yet many don't know exactly what to do to encourage early learning. Across all socio-economic lines, too many parents don't realize that learning starts at birth and that children are learning in important ways *all the time*. Parents and families need information about how to encourage the development of language and literacy skills and to support social and emotional development, as well as strategies for supporting their children's learning on a daily basis.[77]

Parents need support from policymakers, and policymakers need the facts. To build political will for strategic investment in early care and education, policymakers and elected officials must be educated about the latest brain research and how it impacts the choices before them. They need support – and sometimes pressure – to allocate limited public resources wisely to support success in the early years and beyond.

The challenge is two-fold. First, leaders need to understand and act upon information that shows how prevention produces better outcomes than remediation, and that investments in young children make sense from a moral as well as an economic standpoint.[78] Second, leaders need good data to make sure that programs are using strategies and approaches that are effective—and that information is in short supply.

EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL READINESS

Research and practice suggest a variety of approaches that states and communities can take to improve the odds that youth and children will start school ready to succeed. These approaches fall into five categories, each of which addresses one or more of the challenges identified earlier in this chapter:

1. Provide resources and supports for families and caregivers.
2. Improve the quality of early learning opportunities.
3. Provide quality age-appropriate books to children.
4. Build awareness of EDI as valid and reliable population-based measure of children's readiness for school.
5. Engage the public and educate policymakers about early learning.

STRATEGY 1

Provide Resources and Supports for Families and Caregivers

As the primary caregivers of young children, families play a key role in preparing their children for success in school. Yet, many families are unaware of the critical learning that takes place in the earliest months and years of life and the best ways to nurture early development. The following approaches can help families better prepare their children for success in school and life.

Connect Parents and Families to Information, Resources and Supports

Many United Ways are using creative methods to connect families with information, such as evidence based home visiting programs (e.g. Nurse Family Partnership, Parents as Teachers, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters); neighborhood-based "coffee hours" with grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren; and working with employers to provide *Born Learning* and local resource and referral materials to employees in the workplace. Linking early learning providers with quality supports and services is a win-win for United Ways and their corporate partners.

The **United Way of Greenville County** in South Carolina launched *Partners in Productivity,* bringing business leaders, early childhood experts, child care providers and community volunteers together to build family-friendly work environments and educate employees about identifying and securing high-quality child care.

Almost 12 years ago, community leaders in Eugene, OR were galvanized by a number of high profile, tragic child abuse cases and Lane County's ranking as one of the highest rates of child abuse in the state. This group of community leaders became the **United Way of Lane County's** Success By 6® Leadership Team, developing and executing strategies to educate the public, providing parents with information and creating a 24-hour help line. As a result, Lane County was the only county in Oregon with a five-year declining trend in child abuse rates, dropping to the middle of the pack. The group is now developing a model of the Harlem Children's Zone, leading the way on kindergarten assessment, continuing to elevate the issue of early learning in the community and honing in on literacy efforts. While the initial focus was child abuse prevention, some 4,000 parents and caregivers of children under six dial the hotline every year to get information, referrals and support on a wide variety of parenting concerns, including development, sleep and discipline.

Others are using 2-1-1 and local child care resource and referral agencies to help parents locate key resources such as well-baby care and immunizations, child care, parenting classes and more. Family Resource Centers, or "one-stop shops" in disadvantaged neighborhoods, can also help parents with human service support, job training, English Language Learning opportunities and family literacy.

Another important resource for supporting the education of young children is *Born Learning*. Created by United Way, *Born Learning* tools for parents and caregivers help turn everyday activities at home such as laundry, meals and bedtime into learning experiences. Educational materials for caregivers are available both in English and in Spanish. Evidence shows that this approach is working—15 million parents have been reached with advertising and materials, and 61% of parents who recalled seeing the ads reported doing more in everyday activities to support early learning.[79] To learn more about *Born Learning*, go to **www.bornlearning.org**.

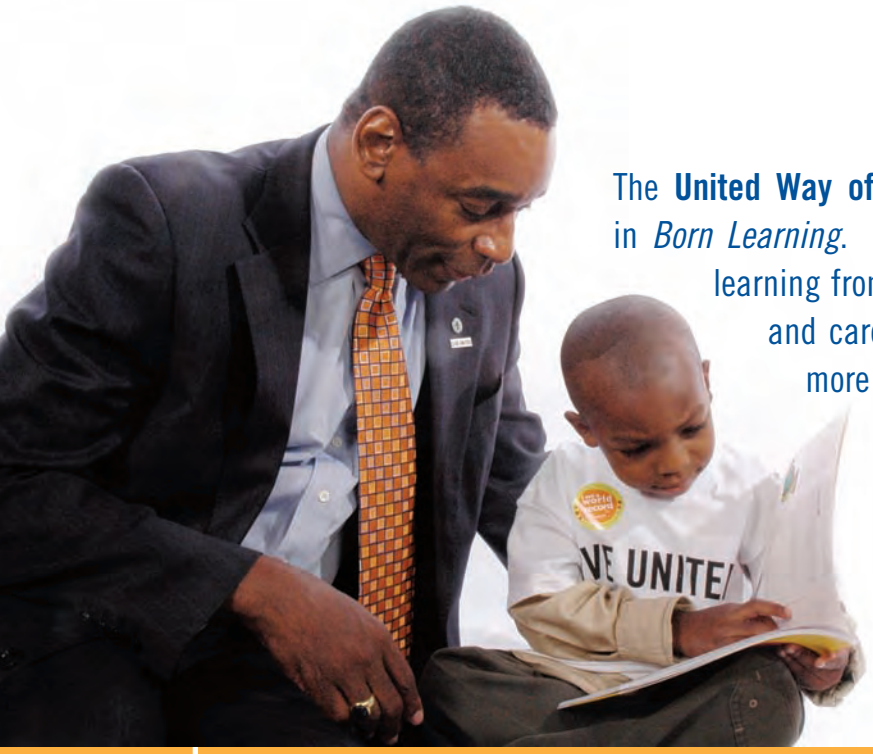
Provide Support for Family, Friend and Neighbor Caregivers

Many states and communities are partnering with community organizations, such as libraries, faith communities or retailers to share child development tips with informal caregivers. Some cities are including family, friend and neighbor providers in their systems, and using strategies to engage providers outside the traditional system.

A growing number of states are giving informal providers the same positive development learning opportunities, materials and toys as regulated providers receive, in an attempt to improve environments and enhance learning. Other states are seeking ways to enable informal providers to participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program.[80] The state of Minnesota was the first in the nation to dedicate funds to community-wide partnerships that support informal caregivers.

But the most important strategy for reaching and helping providers is through partnerships with other groups that touch these caregivers – immigrant service centers, libraries, faith communities, shopping malls and other intermediary groups – equipping them with knowledge and resources to share.

United Way has created a number of tools to support family, friend and neighbor care, both in the *Born Learning* campaign and as part of other projects.



The **United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta** engaged faith leaders in *Born Learning*. Pastors talked about the importance of early learning from the pulpit; church programs included parent and caregiver education materials; churches provided more space for parent education classes. At the same time, African-American beauty shops partnered with United Way and others to provide mothers, grandmothers and aunts with information, resources and referrals to support school readiness.

STRATEGY 2

Improve the Quality of Early Learning Opportunities

Improving quality requires:

- Creating environments that ensure children have access to toys, books and spaces that promote learning.
- Engaging and supporting families as their child's first and most important teacher.
- Providing training and establishing licensing and monitoring systems that support qualified and well-compensated providers who are steeped in current research based child development practices and have ongoing supports.
- Building systems to ensure programs that meet quality standards.

At the same time, communities must look beyond regulated child care to support family, friend and neighbor caregivers and the quality of their care as well. And this must be a focus of public-private partnerships, so that business, faith, schools and other leaders are part of a community-wide effort to improve early learning for young children.

Improve Early Learning Environments

A young child's development is directly affected by his or her environment.[81] Much work has been done over the past two decades to articulate and design environments that allow children to explore and discover at their own pace.

Quality early learning environments include safe, healthy and inviting equipment and a variety of play materials, sufficient and uncluttered space for active play and places for quiet time. They also have books and other games to promote early literacy and numeracy, as well as social-emotional development.[82] Many of the requirements for quality early care environments are articulated in state early learning guidelines. For more information on these guidelines, see **http://www.nccic.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/goodstart/elgwebsites.html**.

United Ways should work with corporate, community and funded agency partners to provide support for parents and children wherever families are – where they play, pray, shop, work and live.

Early learning environments are not just in child care. Children learn wherever they are. In **Florida, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama**, United Way has partnered with Publix grocery stores to adapt *Born Learning* materials to enrich the shopping experience for young children. Shoppers see signs and tips in the store, encouraging them to use the shopping trip to reinforce learning – like playing silly games about colors in the produce section. Weekly ads, store magazines and online newsletters reinforce the message with *Born Learning* tips, and Publix has worked with local media to elevate public service advertising that helps parents use everyday moments to reinforce learning.

Improve Training and Qualifications of Early Learning Providers

Professional development programs and training for early learning providers helps ensure that those caring for our youngest children have the resources and skills to help young children love learning.

Many states have established qualifications, credentials and learning opportunities for early learning professionals as a key component of improving the quality of care. Some states have developed their own credentials or follow national standards. In some cases, professional development is linked to higher education degrees or certificates. Professional development can include pre-service as well as ongoing training and education.

The most ambitious systems involve career ladders that allow participants to continually improve their skills and knowledge and progress into supervisory and management roles.[83] The National Child Care Information Center contains information and resources on professional development systems in the United States.

- The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Project is a national model for improving the qualifications and training of providers. T.E.A.C.H. is a scholarship program for early childhood professionals. The project began in North Carolina in 1993 as part of Smart Start, the nation's first comprehensive early childhood education system, and now supports licenses in 21 other states. T.E.A.C.H. also maintains the Early Childhood® National Technical Assistance Center, which provides resources to programs and providers nationwide.[84]

Support the Development and Implementation of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) are methods for assessing, improving and sharing information about the level of quality in early learning settings. A QRIS is systemic, addressing multiple aspects of early learning programs through a uniform approach that is available throughout a state.

QRIS usually have the following five common elements: standards; accountability; program and practitioner outreach and support; financing incentives specifically linked to compliance with quality standards; and parent education.[85] In 2009, 19 states had a QRIS with all five components.[86]

Quality rating improvement systems are sometimes considered a "report card" for early learning facilities. Most states and some communities have established such systems to help parents know what they are buying and use quality improvement resources for programs and teachers as incentives to continuously improve the quality of care. But in today's fiscal crisis, many states are underfunding the improvement aspect. Simply imposing a ranking system without supports for program/provider improvement does not allow them to rise in the rankings.

United Way supports the QRIS model, and has resources on United Way Online, including *Stair Steps to Quality: A Guide for States and Communities Developing Quality Rating Systems* (2005). This guide is designed as a hands-on, practical planning tool for United Ways to use as they consider how to develop a new QRIS or review and improve an existing one.

STRATEGY 3

Provide Quality, Age Appropriate Books to Children

Building literacy and language skills early is essential for children to come to school with the skills required to succeed. Studies show that 88% of first graders who are below grade level in reading will continue to read below grade level in fourth grade.[87]

Access to quality, age-appropriate books is key to developing reading skills. Studies confirm that the number of books in the home directly predicts reading achievement. Children who grow up with books in their homes reached a higher level of education than those who did not. According to one study, having just 20 books in the home has a strong effect on educational attainment. The more books added to the home, the greater the benefit.[88]

Yet nearly two-thirds of low-income families have no books. Around 80% of the pre-schools and afterschool programs serving children in need do not have a single book for the children they serve. In some of the lowest-income neighborhoods in the country, there is only one book available for every 300 children.[89]

"Access to books and educational material is the single biggest barrier to literacy development in the United States and beyond. If we can solve the problem of access, we will be well on the road to realizing educational parity – a goal which has eluded this country for generations."

Susan B. Neuman, Ph.D. University of Michigan,
Ctr. for Improvement of Early Reading Achievement

A number of efforts have focused—with some success—on getting books into the hands of parents and children and promoting regular parent-child book reading in low-income families.

- **First Book** (**www.firstbook.org**) connects book publishers and community organizations to provide access to new books for children in need. So far, 80 million books have been donated to more than 25,000 programs or groups. First Book distributes books in three ways:
  - ❏ The First Book National Book Bank distributes free books to programs that serve at least 80% children from low-income families.
  - ❏ The First Book Marketplace is an online store selling discounted books and educational materials 50 - 90% off retail prices to programs that serve at least 50% children from low-income families.
  - ❏ First Book Advisory Boards make community level grants enabling programs that serve at least 80% children from low-income families to receive free books.

Evaluations find that "high interest in reading" triples among children who received new books from First Book, and 99.2% of programs that get First Book books are able to increase their literacy efforts and offer new curriculum activities, including parent engagement programs. First Book also improves literacy in the home: more than 70% of children who received books through First Book reported increased reading at home.

- **Raising a Reader** (**www.raisingareader.org**) works with at-risk families to encourage reading with young children every day. RAR provides high quality, multicultural-focused books on a weekly basis to families with children who often have limited exposure to books. It encourages parents to engage in a daily routine of "book cuddling" with their children from birth to age five to foster healthy brain development, parent-child bonding and early literacy skills. In 10 years, it has reached more than 800,000 children at 2,500 sites in 30 states.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (www.imaginationlibrary.com) is seeing results. The program sends one book every month to each enrolled child until his or her fifth birthday. Since United Way and Dolly Parton's Imagination Library formed a partnership in 2009, more than 225 United Ways have launched local Imagination Library programs to get books to children, boost children's pre-literacy skills and help parents and caregivers nurture those skills as well. Many United Ways have used Imagination Library as an impact strategy that can be framed as an investment strategy, and many Women's Leadership Councils have adopted it.

In **Middletown, OH**, an evaluation by the Middletown Community Foundation found that 98% of participating low-income parents increased the frequency with which they read to their children. About 95% of low-income parents saw increases in their child's excitement and enthusiasm about books, and every single low-income parent said their child is more interested in books as a result. That benefit extends into school, as incoming kindergarteners who'd taken part in Middletown's Imagination Library for between one and nine months scored on average 4.2% higher than their peers on kindergarten entrance literacy assessments.

The **United Way of Berks County** in Reading, PA has incorporated Raising a Reader into its Nurse Family partnership program, helping parents boost their young children's language and literacy skills from the beginning. Home visitors help parents learn how to promote an interest in books with their children, and teach them the importance of telling stories and reading with their children on a regular basis. United Way is partnering with 14 early care and education sites in the city of Reading, including Head Start classrooms, child care centers and home visitation programs to provide this program to approximately 1,000 children and their families.

- **Reach Out and Read** (**www.reachoutandread.org**) partners with pediatricians to promote early literacy and school readiness in pediatric exam rooms nationwide by giving new books to children and advice to parents about the importance of reading aloud. The program has reached nearly four million families so far, and evaluations show participating children enter kindergarten better prepared to succeed, with larger vocabularies, stronger language skills and a six-month developmental edge over their peers.
- **Reading Is Fundamental** (**www.rif.org**), the largest children's literacy nonprofit in the U.S., delivers free books and literacy resources to children and families who need them most. A network of 400,000 volunteers work in schools, homeless shelters, churches, migrant centers, health clinics and community centers to distribute 15 million books, stage reading motivation activities and promote the importance of literacy in their communities.

Libraries are also changing the way they support low-income children and families. One promising model is **Family Place Libraries™** (**www.familyplacelibraries.org**), a network of 300 libraries in 22 states that operate as community hubs for families with young children.[91] A Family Place Library offers a five-week parent/child workshop for toddlers and parents, involving local professionals and facilitating early intervention, and teaching parents strategies for healthy child development and early literacy. The library space is redesigned to be more welcoming, and books, toys, videos, music and other materials for babies, toddlers and parents are added.

STRATEGY 4

Build Awareness about the Importance of Data on Children's Readiness to Learn

Decision makers need concrete, quantifiable information to help inform the decisions of community leaders, school administrators and policy makers regarding programs, policies and budget priorities. In most communities, data on the status of children is sorely lacking. When available, these data can show decision-makers exactly where the children who need help are—by census tract, neighborhood, school district or city. And seeing these data in light of resources that are or aren't available helps inform decisions about how communities invest in future resources.

One innovative measurement tool is the **Early Development Instrument (EDI)**, a research-based population measure of children's readiness to succeed. EDI provides schools and communities with an easy way to gather critical population-level information about young children—including health, safety and school readiness information—neighborhood by neighborhood.[92] By combining the EDI results with local data on resources and other key factors through a geo-mapping process, communities can "map" children's status against various socioeconomic factors and neighborhood resources.

That's why United Way is working with UCLA's Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities to pilot the Early Development Instrument and is helping policymakers make research-based, data-driven decisions that will help improve community resources and supports for young children.

This proven tool (developed in Canada where it has been used for 10 years and has been used in Australia for two years) is now being piloted in 20 communities, including New Orleans, Louisiana; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Hattiesburg/Petal, Mississippi; and Los Angeles, California. These communities have signed up to test-drive a new, easier way of gathering critical information about young children — neighborhood by neighborhood. This new data can add value to planning and decision making for community services, helping policymakers see which neighborhoods need what kind of services to boost children's school success.

Each year in the spring, kindergarten teachers fill out a questionnaire about each child's physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language skills, which research shows are foundational skills for success in school, work and life. Teachers are given time or stipends to encourage completion.

The data is not used to diagnose or screen children, but to tell a community what percentage of its children are vulnerable in each of the critical areas of child development.

Combining the EDI results with local data on resources and other key factors can paint a picture about the children's status and how that relates to socioeconomic factors. It can show decision makers exactly where the children are who need help, by census tract, neighborhood, school district or city.

This means school and community leaders can determine exactly which children are behind and in which communities – and use that data to make decisions about community services.

EDI data doesn't assess programs or services, but has been shown to have predictive validity up to fifth grade in language and literacy and helps inform how children in a given neighborhood are progressing on physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language skills.

Evaluations in Canada and Australia show that policy makers using EDI and other local data have been able to plan more effectively and make more informed decisions on community strategies, policies and levels of funding affecting disadvantaged children.

One evaluation in British Columbia found that school districts re-evaluated resource allocations based on EDI results, and ended up adding family support and literacy centers, and improving nutrition, dental, vision and hearing screening programs. In fact, the researcher reported that "many (school) districts confirmed that the hard data presented by the EDI gave them the courage to make decisions to respond."

That study found that "school districts have begun to embrace a new role and responsibility by examining developmental indicator data at school entry, by planning interventions in response to the data, and by partnering with other agencies to serve the needs of young children and their families. While a number of districts had already begun to move in this direction, the EDI process and the resulting numerical data provided to school districts have played a significant role in establishing the need and the confidence to move forward."[93] For more information on United Way's national pilot with UCLA, contact **Elizabeth.Groginksy@unitedway.org**.

STRATEGY 5

Engage the Public and Educate Policymakers on Early Learning

There are several emerging methods communities are using to educate the public and policymakers.

Conduct Public Education Campaigns

Too often, community leaders don't fully understand how important the first few years are to building a vibrant, prosperous community. Many United Ways have undertaken public awareness efforts to change this dynamic, putting children front and center in the debate. United Way's *Born Learning* public engagement campaign was designed to make it easy for United Ways and their partners to do just that.

Born Learning is the only national early learning public engagement campaign *specifically designed* to be adapted by local communities to support local efforts. The campaign structure is an unusual mix of national messaging (Ad Council public service advertising), educational materials that can be localized (vetted by experts), and a web site (**www.BornLearning.org**) with easy access to tools and expert community mobilization tips (provided by Families and Work Institute).

Too many awareness campaigns fizzle out, due to limited resources. PSAs may not get run because it's prohibitively expensive. Materials may not be based on the latest research, are not high-quality in appearance or are created without end users in mind. And unless it's a strategic part of a larger community mobilization plan, such campaigns eventually lose momentum.

With *Born Learning*, United Way carved out a different path, with a focus on long-term systemic change, supported by awareness, education and action tools for anyone who wants them. The campaign includes:

- Educational material that makes it simple and easy for parents, grandparents, informal caregivers and professional child care providers to find out about, understand and apply the latest research to help children come to school ready to succeed.
- A mobilization guide that helps any community's early learning efforts, providing tools, templates and training.
- A growing coalition of local, state and regional organizations – from non-profit, public and for-profit sectors and cultural institutions – working together to educate, persuade and galvanize community leaders and policymakers to provide what's needed for children's school readiness.

Our goal is to equip parents, caregivers, teachers, community advocates, service providers, civic leaders and decision makers across America to ensure quality early learning for young children.

For more information on *Born Learning*, contact **Mariana.Florit@unitedway.org**.

Implement System Building Efforts

These efforts, increasingly underway in states and communities across the United States, are an important way to weave together often disconnected programs and services for our youngest children. They enable communities to collect and share community-wide, statewide or even interstate data with community members and policymakers to improve outcomes for all children.

Several notable system-building efforts follow:

- The **Birth to Five Policy Alliance** (**www.birthtofivepolicy.org**) is working to promote innovative and successful state policy ideas that shift the odds for very young children and narrow the achievement gap. The Birth to Five Policy Alliance invests in three strategies: strategic and broad-based leadership to build new champions for early childhood policy; state-based advocacy; and knowledge development and dissemination including research/policy analysis.
- The **BUILD Initiative** (**www.buildinitiative.org**) is a multi-state partnership that helps states construct a seamless framework of policies that promote high quality services and incorporates what we know about brain development into best practices for care and learning. It supports state efforts to create comprehensive early childhood systems – coordinated, effective policies that address children's, physical and mental health, nutrition, early care and education, family support and parenting programs and services for children with special needs.
- The **Ready by 21 Partnership** (**www.forumfyi.org/readyby21**) supports state and local leaders committed to ensuring that all young people are ready for college, work and life. By providing grants and technical assistance from a group of national partners, this partnership is working to improve outcomes across the age continuum. United Way is a signature partner.
- The **Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Initiative** (**www.state-eccs.org**) supports all 50 states and the territories in their efforts to build and integrate early childhood service systems. Project THRIVE at the National Center for Children in Poverty provides policy support to this initiative.
- The **ZERO TO THREE State Self-Assessment Checklist** from the National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families provides states with clear guidelines for building effective early childhood development systems. This checklist is available at: **http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/policy-toolkit/checklistsinglesmar5.pdf**.

THE WAY FORWARD

One of the strongest roles United Ways play in making real community change is that of a mobilizing force, recruiting people with passion, expertise and resources to make a difference. In the case of early learning, United Ways are often the lead in galvanizing stakeholders to examine issues, develop strategies and execute action plans on the issues that matter most.

Some 80% of the United Way network supports early learning, but there is a great deal more that needs to be done – particularly around boosting literacy and providing books to children. Providing all children with a good start in the first few years is about more than school readiness. It's also a critical step toward improving graduation rates.

United Ways must scale up their early childhood work, connect it to kindergarten through twelfth grade, and in particular, bridge literacy efforts in kindergarten through third grade. Many national early childhood leaders – like the National Association for Education of Young Children – are now defining early childhood as birth to age eight, so it makes sense to look at early childhood and early grade reading as two parts of a whole strategy.

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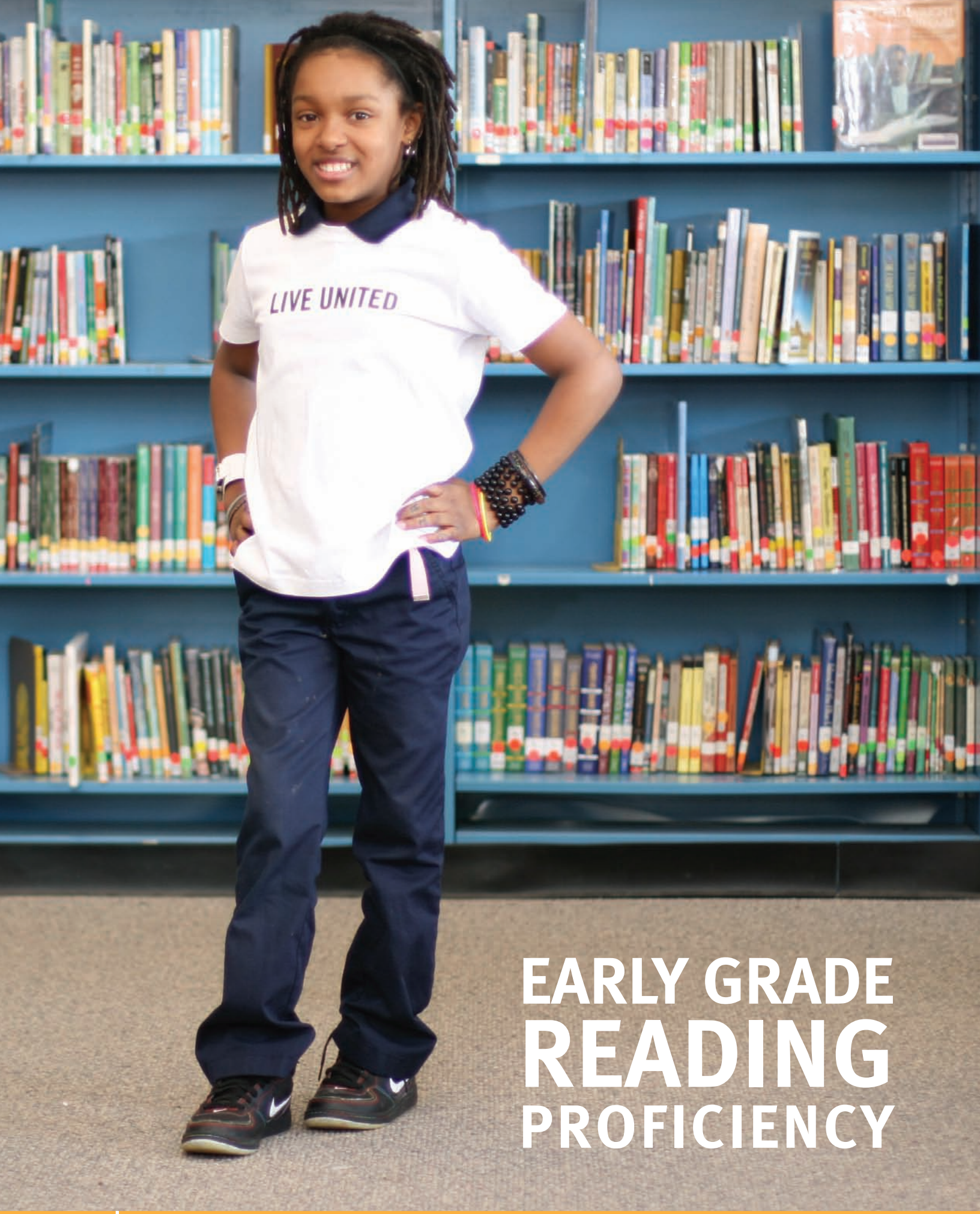

EARLY GRADE READING PROFICIENCY

THE CASE FOR ACTION

Reading is a critical predictor of high school success—or failure. That's because children are learning to read until fourth grade; after that, they're reading to learn.[1]

Students who don't read on grade level by the time they are in fourth grade typically don't catch up.[2] In later grades, coursework gets harder, reading becomes more challenging, and those with reading troubles have difficulty coping. This can lead to bad grades, bad behavior, "checking out" from school – and eventually dropping out.

For children to become strong readers, they need a literacy-rich environment. Ideally, their parents and caregivers surround them at an early age with books; use the local library regularly; and read with them daily. Starting in kindergarten, children learn the skills they need to sound out new words and find meaning in written text. By third grade, they may be reading chapter books to their parents, and are hopefully developing a love of reading that promotes future learning. By fourth grade, their strong reading skills are supporting increasingly harder academic work. Reading skills build a strong foundation for academic success and high school graduation. These successful readers will better understand the world around them, and will be able to use those skills to succeed in a demanding workplace and to be a fully engaged citizen.

But today:

- Only 33% of fourth graders read proficiently,[3] according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the nation's only national assessment of reading.[4] That means 67% cannot demonstrate solid academic performance and competency in relation to challenging subject matter in reading.[5]
- Even worse, one in three fourth graders scores below "basic" in reading on NAEP, which means that the child can barely read, and lacks even partial mastery of fundamental knowledge and skills.[6]

The statistics are even grimmer for poor children and children of color. Some 50% of poor students scored below "basic" in reading, compared with 21% of their better-off peers.[7] Similarly, 54% of black students and 51% of Hispanic students scored below "basic" in reading, compared with 23% of white students.[8] Children whose first language is not English reach the "basic" level less than half as often as their English-speaking peers.[9]

Other children who often have early grade reading problems include children who are chronically absent from school, children with hearing or oral language problems and children whose parents and families had trouble learning to read.[10] In addition, some students have undiagnosed learning disabilities that make it harder for them to learn to read.

Language and literacy skill development does not start at school. Experiences in the first few years, at home or in child care, contribute significantly to young children's language and literacy abilities.[11] Children who start school with poor language and communication skills often have a hard time catching up.[12] (The School Readiness section of this overview takes an in-depth look at the unique period of development from birth through age five, including pre-reading and literacy issues.)

The implications of poor reading in early grades are significant. Despite the fact that most struggling readers can learn to read if given the additional help they need in the early grades, far too many students fail to catch up.[13] One study found that 44 out of 50 students who were poor readers at the end of first grade remained poor readers at the end of fourth grade.[14]

Parents and caregivers don't always understand this. Some 73% of Americans wrongly believe that if children enter kindergarten unprepared to read, they will catch up in elementary school.[15]

As poor readers enter middle school, they are more likely to fail courses and to eventually drop out of school.[16] Poor reading ability in early years leads to behavior problems in the classroom later.[17] Dropouts, in turn, are more likely to be unemployed, to earn low wages and to end up on welfare or in prison.[18]

Research shows that early grade reading mastery is one of the best predictors of children's success in school,[19] work and life. Early language and literacy development plays a key role in supporting learning experiences that are linked with academic achievement, reduced grade retention, higher graduation rates and enhanced productivity in adult life.[20]

EARLY GRADE READING CHALLENGES

Young children need to hear language to learn to speak and to develop early language abilities. Providing children with a language-rich environment during the early years helps pave the way for reading success, but children typically need to be taught how to read. Teaching a child to read is no simple task. As one report noted, "teaching readers is rocket science." To become good readers, children must also master the five components of reading:[21]

- **Phonemic Awareness**—the ability to notice, think about and work with the individual sounds in spoken words.
- **Phonics**—the relationships between letters and the individual sounds of spoken language.
- **Fluency**—the ability to read a text accurately and quickly.
- **Vocabulary**—the acquisition of words individuals must know to communicate effectively.
- **Text Comprehension**—the ability to understand, remember and communicate about texts.

Research suggests these skills must be taught in the right order and in the right way.[22] First, phonemic awareness and phonics are foundational skills that allow students to sound out unfamiliar words. Children must have learned phonemic awareness and phonics before they can be taught how to read fluently. Children learn fluency through practice, reading aloud with feedback and guidance. Teachers, parents and families should also be working to ensure comprehension at each of these stages – by working on vocabulary and a child's ability to follow the story line or remember what happened in texts they read or that are read to them. A strong vocabulary is an often-overlooked skill necessary for proficient reading, and this, too, must be taught beginning in the early grades. Studies have found that vocabulary contributes substantially to the ability to comprehend what is being read as children progress in school. Using these methods, the vast majority of children are able to learn to read.[23]

So why isn't that happening? Underlying challenges undermine children's literacy development in the early grades.

CHALLENGE 1

Reading Instruction Is Falling Short

Training

Few teachers are well trained in reading instruction, experts say. Only 15% of education schools prepare our future teachers on the basic science of reading.[24] And less than 2% of textbooks used in teacher training reading courses are rated as "acceptable" for use as a general comprehensive textbook.[25] On-the-job training in reading is also lacking. Just 45% of elementary school teachers rate their reading instruction professional development experiences as "useful" or "very useful."[26]

Testing

Compounding this problem, many state reading standards and assessments fail to appropriately cover key aspects of reading. According to a 2003 analysis of state reading standards in kindergarten through third grade, just 55% covered fluency appropriately, and just 35% covered it in the proper level of detail.[27]

Too few teachers are using in-class assessments of student learning to tailor reading instruction and to identify students who need extra reading help. If caught early, the vast majority of struggling students, including the 5-17% of students with dyslexia, can successfully learn to read.[28] However, they need additional explicit and systematic instruction tailored to their particular needs in order to do so.

Effective Curricula and Class Size

Many textbooks, programs and curricula used at the local level are ineffective. These materials may be lacking because they are not aligned to appropriate state standards or because they are not well grounded in the science of reading instruction, among other reasons. Of the 153 early grade reading curricula, programs and software evaluated by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse, only 24 had meaningful evidence of effectiveness.[29]

As today's budget crisis continues to drain state coffers, the issue of class size reduction must be carefully considered. While class size reduction has been shown to increase achievement in the early grades, it can also impact the number of qualified teachers available particularly in schools that serve predominately low income and minority students.[30] Furthermore, a Harvard University report on Florida's mandated universal class-size reduction policy found in 2010 that it had "little, if any, effect on cognitive and noncognitive outcomes."[31]

Even critics of class size reduction acknowledge that young, low-income, disadvantaged and minority students in particular may benefit from careful targeting of such a reform.[32] Yet the intervention is a costly one, and may not be a strategy available for school improvement for some years. This is one place where United Ways' education volunteer engagement could fill gaps – with trained volunteers using proven tutoring curricula with the most disadvantaged children.

CHALLENGE 2

Families Face Barriers to Supporting their Children's Early Literacy

Families Don't Seek Help

Parents don't want to believe their child is behind. Too often, parents wait before seeking help for their children's reading problems, expecting the children to outgrow the problem. Some 44% of parents who noticed their children exhibiting learning difficulties waited a year or more before acknowledging that their children might have a problem.[33] Others might not recognize a developmental delay or learning disability and may not know where to go for expert help or referrals.

And some families may choose not to seek help at all, for fear of having their child labeled as learning disabled. About 28% of parents said they would not talk to their child's teacher if they suspected a learning disability, like dyslexia.[34] In addition, 50% of parents think that it causes children and adults more trouble to be labeled as learning disabled than to struggle privately with the problem.[35]

Parents need to know that 88% of first graders who are below grade level in reading will continue to read below grade level in fourth grade without intervention.[36] But they also need to know what to do in response.

Families Need Information

Most families want to help their children learn to read, but many do not know what reading strategies are most helpful. While most parents know they should read out loud to their children, they don't know what else they should do. During early childhood, reading aloud to children helps with language development. Other strategies, described later, more directly allow children to break the reading code.

Adult Literacy and English Language Challenges

Adult literacy challenges can also pose significant barriers for children. Among English-speaking adults, 14% scored below "basic" on prose literacy.[37] One survey found that, among parents scoring below "basic" who had children under age 8, some 41% did not read to or with their children in the previous week.[38] Parents with literacy challenges may have difficulty reading with their children, making it more difficult to support struggling readers.

Increasing numbers of children come from households where English is not the primary language spoken. In 2007, 21% of school-age children spoke a language other than English at home.[39] And, in 2003 (the latest year for which national data is available) 11 million U.S. adults, or 5% of the population, were non-literate in English.[40]

Reading, talking and singing to children in *any* language is a good strategy in the early years. Non-English speakers can help their young children be more ready for school by reading to them early in life in their native language.[41] Doing so helps children develop vocabulary and listening comprehension.[42] These are essential elements in reading and learning in any language and will help when the child learns to speak and read in English.

Literacy-Rich Environment

Children need literacy-rich environments – with books, storytelling and singing. But low-income families are less likely to have reading materials at home or have access to public libraries. One study found that during the summer before first grade, only 46% of disadvantaged children went to a library, compared to 80% of their peers from higher-income families.[43]

Access to books is critical. Studies confirm that the number of books in the home directly predicts reading achievement. Children who grow up with books in their homes reached a higher level of education than those who did not. According to one study, having just 20 books in the home has a strong effect on educational attainment.[44]

Yet nearly two-thirds of low-income families own no books. Around 80% of the pre-schools and after school programs serving children in need do not have a single book for the children they serve. And in some of the lowest-income neighborhoods in the country, there is only one book available for every 300 children.[45]

Chronic Absence

One out of 10 kindergartners and first graders nationwide are chronically absent, missing nearly a month of school over the course of a school year.[46] When students are not in class, they miss key learning. They may also miss the instructional time they need to master the skills necessary for reading success. In fact, chronic absence starting in kindergarten predicts lower performance in reading and other subjects, especially for children living in poverty.[47]

Of course, families living in poverty face economic challenges (joblessness, homelessness, unstable housing, lack of access to health care, unreliable transportation) that create ongoing barriers to getting children to school every day. Yet those children – and those families – are often the hardest to reach with extracurricular enrichment that would help the children make up for what they missed in class.

CHALLENGE 3

Many Children Lack Access to Extra Reading Help

Too many struggling readers fail to receive the extra help they need for success. Given that children spend only 20% of their waking hours in school, this help should be provided during school but also in after school programs, at home, on the weekends and through out-of-school efforts like summer learning, tutoring, arts and mentoring programs.

Children living in poverty often lack literacy-rich environments outside of school, and have no books at home. This is a particular problem in the summer, where students can lose what they've learned the previous year if they are not engaged in classes, recreation, cultural or camp experiences. Low-income students **lose the equivalent of two months of reading instruction during the summer** compared to their middle- and upper-income peers.[48] This summer learning-loss accumulates over time and explains much of the achievement gap evident by high school.[49] According to one longitudinal study in Baltimore, about two thirds of the achievement gap in reading as of ninth grade was due to differences in summer learning from kindergarten through fifth grade.[50]

Access to Quality Programs

A dearth of programs focused on early literacy is available. Two thirds of low-income and minority parents report difficulty in finding high quality afterschool and summer programs for their children.[51] Even if tutoring, afterschool or summer programs are available; they may be unproven or ineffective when it comes to boosting reading scores. Some programs have shown gains in reading. Those that have the biggest impact are tailored to the needs of each child, and are tightly integrated with schools. Unfortunately, these two criteria are not always met. Too often, the students who need extra help the most are the least likely to participate in afterschool or summer learning programs.

EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES FOR EARLY GRADE READING PROFICIENCY

Fortunately, America is well positioned to tackle the early grade literacy challenge. There has been consensus on how best to improve reading instruction since the National Reading Panel published its landmark report on teaching children to read.[52] And the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 created a policy environment that values improvements in student reading ability.

While achievement gains in recent years have been smaller than some had hoped, there is momentum: fourth grade reading scores are improving. Over 15 years, from 1992 to 2007, NAEP's fourth grade reading scores rose from 62% to 67%. Over the same time period, the percentage of fourth graders reading on grade level increased from 29 to 33%.[53]

Research and practice suggest concrete steps to advance students' reading achievement. These fall into three broad categories, each connected to a challenge identified earlier in this section:

- Provide support to students struggling with reading.
- Develop effective principals and teachers who keep students engaged in learning.
- Help parents help their children become strong readers.

STRATEGY 1

Provide Support to Students Struggling with Reading

When parents, teachers or others determine that a child is having reading difficulties, that child should receive extra assistance as soon as possible. For children with learning disabilities, early and intensive intervention is crucial to overcoming neurobiological differences that are a significant barrier to achieving reading fluency.[54]

Tutor Struggling Readers

Community volunteers can serve as reading tutors to children, as long as they're well trained and well deployed. They can provide extra help during school time, enabling teachers to reduce instructional group size, increase time on task and better tailor instruction to meet children's needs. However, tutors should be instructed in the best ways to help a child learn to read, following an individualized plan prepared by a reading teacher for each child.

Tutoring—teaching or instructing a child one-on-one or in small groups—has been shown to have positive effects on academic performance, especially with at-risk children experiencing reading problems.[56] Training is a key ingredient, both in training volunteers to be effective tutors, but also to provide teachers with professional development so they welcome the volunteers into the classroom.

Tutoring models fall into three basic categories:

- In *instructional tutoring*, the tutor provides instruction on a specific content area, whereas students are expected to develop new knowledge and become proficient in topics that went previously un-mastered.
- In the *assignment assistance tutoring* model, tutors meet with individuals or small groups who have difficulty completing class assignments to support them with specific tasks.
- In the *strategic tutoring* model – a combination of the other two—tutors support students in completing assigned class work while helping them understand how to problem solve.[57]

Some Experience Corps and AmeriCorps programs have underscored the power of tutoring to enhance learning outcomes. Elementary school students who participated in Experience Corps have demonstrated significant improvements over the course of the academic year on standardized testing. Program effects were often stronger when children received at least 35 Experience Corps tutoring sessions.[58]

The benefits of one-on-one adult tutoring are exemplified by AmeriCorps tutoring programs, which have produced academic achievements in reading as well as improvements in classroom behavior over the course of tutoring engagements.[59] With AmeriCorps volunteers in the classroom, 900 struggling readers in first-third grade in 93 communities ended the (1999-2000) school year at or near grade level. Students at all grade levels made significant increases in achievement through the AmeriCorps program. Reading gains occurred for students regardless of ethnicity or gender.[60]

Tutoring can be an effective intervention for children and youth, but it is critical that tutors be used effectively. Several characteristics can improve the effectiveness of tutoring.

- Programs can develop guidelines for volunteer implementation.
- Programs can also analyze the role tutors can play and develop a robust training program geared towards the needs of the tutors and the students.[61]

Although individuals without subject expertise can sometimes be effective tutors, teachers and highly trained teacher's aides can be extremely effective, particularly when the program is structured with tutor manuals, student materials and training procedures. However, the additional training involved in developing highly structured programs can be cost prohibitive for many school districts and communities.[62]

Qualities of effective tutoring initiatives to boost reading have been well researched.

- When applied together, the following practices are most likely to increase reading scores:[63]
  - ❏ Tutoring sessions are frequent, with tutor and tutee meeting at least 3 times a week.
  - ❏ Program evaluation occurs throughout the program.
  - ❏ Tutors receive training prior to and during the tutoring program.
- The relationship between tutor and student is significantly associated with reading gains. Students who form good relationships with tutors may feel more positively about relationships with teachers and parents.[64]
- Program effects are strongest when tutoring occurs more than 25 times in a school year.[65]
- Tutor expertise and development of instructional skills are essential to improving the nature of tutoring interactions at the elementary, secondary and postsecondary levels. Even subject experts benefit from tutor training.[66]
- Capitalizing on the professional and/or subject expertise of educators can significantly advance achievement outcomes in tutoring programs.[67]

United Way of Central Indiana's elementary education strategies focus on ensuring kids are healthy, attending class and reading at grade level by sixth grade. Through ReadUP, a collaboration between United Way and Indianapolis Public Schools (supported by Eli Lilly and Company and other corporate partners), volunteer reading tutors directly impact children's academic success. ReadUP tutors spend one hour each week (or every other week, if they're working with a partner) working with fourth graders who need help the most. It's also become a major community focus, with public service ads, an endorsement from the head coach of the NFL's Indianapolis Colts and a public push from the Central Indiana Corporate Volunteer Council. The Council, made up of major employers and corporate leaders, has endorsed the initiative. Business leaders are not only giving their employees time off to volunteer, they're making presentations to Indianapolis organizations to ask them to do the same.

In **United Way of Dane County's** Schools of Hope Literacy Project, volunteers are trained to be tutors, and they coordinate with teachers and school leaders to improve students' reading skills. The results of Dane County's work have been impressive. From 1995 to 2004, the percentage of African American students in Madison, Wisconsin reading below grade level dropped from 29% to 5%.[68]

What works? The U.S. Department of Education's **What Works Clearinghouse** (WWC) can serve as a useful tool for sorting through the many options for reading intervention programs to find those that are supported by randomized controlled experiments. WWC reviews and synthesizes research and evaluations that meet quality standards and provides ratings of both the effectiveness of an intervention and the size of those effects.[69] However, WWC is limited by the available research; a lack of evidence indicates a lack of sufficient research and does not indicate that an intervention is necessarily ineffective.[70] Here are two proven approaches:

- **Reading Recovery** is a successful, typically in-school, tutoring program. Reading Recovery is a short-term one-on-one tutoring intervention for first grade students who score in the bottom 20% on reading tests. Generally conducted as pull-out sessions during the school day, the tutoring is conducted by trained Reading Recovery teachers for 30 minutes daily over 12–20 weeks. Reading Recovery is a time-tested program that has moderate to large positive effects on students' general reading achievement and is the highest rated program of its kind according to WWC.[71]
- An innovative reading-tutoring program is **In2Books** (**www.in2books.epals.com**), a literacy curriculum-based eMentoring program that connects caring adult volunteers with third-fifth grade students from under-resourced communities. From September to June, students and their adult pen pals read up to five books selected by the students and exchange ideas about the books via online letters. The program is supervised by classroom teachers, who access online professional development and practical teacher-tested learning activities, provide genre instruction and teach reading, writing and thinking skills appropriate to the genre.

Support Summer Reading

One approach that United Ways could adopt is to support or launch summer reading activities. These initiatives can be low cost, highly scalable and very effective.

A voluntary summer reading intervention developed by Harvard researcher James Kim boosted reading scores among low-income, black and Hispanic elementary school students by an average of four months over the summer—more than making up for the summer slide.[72] Students in the program received books matched to their reading levels and interests, along with oral reading and comprehension instruction from their teachers prior to the end of the school year.[73] Parents received a letter asking them to have their child read aloud and to provide feedback on the reading.[74]

United Way has created a Volunteer Reading Guide for United Ways, which can be downloaded at **www.liveunited.org/volunteer/**.

Support Effective Out-of-School Reading Programs

Adults can work with before- and after-school programs to provide children with additional reading help and the opportunity to build supportive relationships.

The key is to find high quality programs that produce results. When developing partnerships with programs, groups should ask questions such as the following: Does this program positively impact reading scores? Does it reach students who most need help? How many low-income or English Language Learner students does the program serve? What results have they experienced?

- **United Way of Greater New Haven**, for example, partners with Experience Corps to provide afterschool assistance to students in grades K to three using adults over age 55 as tutors. An evaluation of Experience Corps' impact on over 800 students in the early grades across three cities found that, over a single year, students with Experience Corps tutors made 40% more progress than similar students not served by the program on grade-specific reading skills.[75]

- Another effective afterschool reading program is the James Irvine Foundation's CORAL initiative, which serves elementary school youth in five **California** cities. In the most recent evaluation of the program, participating students gained, on average, nearly half a grade's worth of reading more than a control group.[76] CORAL provides literacy programming three to four days per week for 60 to 90 minutes each day. Program leaders train staff on teaching strategies to support student literacy, monitor staff activities, coach staff as necessary and collect and analyze data to track progress.[77]

Volunteer Tutors Step Up in Grand Rapids

The **Heart of West Michigan United Way** is zeroing in on first through third graders in its most disadvantaged neighborhoods. Its Schools of Hope initiative is modeled after United Way of Dane County's work in Madison, WI.

The Grand Rapids community has come together around 900 young students who need the most help. Some 1,200 community volunteers – including college students and retirees – work one-on-one with kids in schools for 30 minutes a week. More than 60 companies give employees paid time off to tutor. Congregations host after-school and family literacy programs. It's working. Students in the Schools of Hope program are making greater reading gains than their peers. And those in the afterschool program are gaining one and a half years worth of academic growth in just nine months.

Training and testing are a critical piece. Each tutor attends a two-hour training session, held throughout the week at different locations to accommodate volunteers' schedules. The literacy coordinator provides expanded trainings for tutors upon request. School-based staff members prepare materials and lesson plans for the tutor and assist as needed.

Schools of Hope conducts pre- and post-tests to monitor progress of participating students. But these voices from Grand Rapids give another view of the program's success:

Schools of Hope builds confidence in children. They don't believe they can do it until someone else believes in them.

Misti Stanton
Schools of Hope Coordinator at Brookside and Harrison Park schools

When we survey our teachers and ask what programs have the most impact on student achievement: the reading tutor program always is at the top.

Maryann Prisichenko
Principal, Sibley Elementary

I never used to read books. I didn't even like reading, but now I enjoy reading. I feel good about myself because I learned how to read better all because of my tutor.

Child who participates in Schools of Hope

My weekly visits are the highlight of my week. I have grown so much from the experience. The children open themselves up and work so hard. It gives me strong feelings of hope about their futures, as well as the future of our community.

Mike Pfennig
Schools of Hope Reading Tutor

Boosting Summer Reading in Massachusetts through Collaboration

The summer usually represents a break from school and can lead to a loss of academic skill and knowledge among students—especially low-income children and young people. In order to keep students engaged, **United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, United Way of Central Massachusetts and United Way of Pioneer Valley** joined forces with the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care to form a Summer Literacy Collaborative. The Collaborative focused its efforts on creating sustained summer reading and learning opportunities for children and young people throughout the summer break. It accomplishes this through a four-part approach:

- Forming a public-private partnership—a collaboration between United Ways, non-profits, and the school system.
- Strengthening resources, aligning curriculum and connecting school and out-of-school-time staff.
- Making learning fun through an engaging summer curriculum.
- Fostering family involvement, collaboration and community engagement.

Partners carried out different roles. United Way served as the fiscal agent for the project, led the learning community that solved problems and coordinated across hubs, oversaw evaluation and conducted fundraising, marketing and public relations. The Community Literacy Coordinators at each hub oversaw the program and partnerships with schools at sites. Trained School Literacy Coaches mentored and trained out-of-school-time staff and linked the program to school personnel and curricula. Program Staff supervised children, promoted engagement and partnered with families and schools.

The Summer Literacy Collaborative featured 21 sites with 1,822 participating children. This translated into nearly 2,000 hours of literacy activities and 2,080 hours of coaching for children and families. Participating children experienced several benefits, including:

- Avoiding typical learning loss (85%).
- Maintaining or increasing reading skills (72%).
- Increasing reading skills (68%).

STRATEGY 2

Develop Effective Principals and Teachers Who Keep Students Engaged in Learning

Several evidence-based approaches have emerged that can strengthen early reading instruction in schools, including:

- Supporting improvements in teacher preparation and professional development programs.
- Promoting local adoption of scientifically sound reading materials.
- Using formative assessment to drive instruction and intervention.

Strengthen Teacher and Principal Preparation and Professional Development in Reading Instruction

Teacher preparation programs should do more to prepare principals, early education and elementary teachers to teach reading effectively. Some state education systems are beginning to take action on this front.

For example, the **Louisiana** Department of Education partners with the Louisiana Board of Regents to identify teachers whose students show the most academic growth on state student achievement tests. The partners then use this information to analyze which teacher preparation programs turn out the most effective teachers. The results of this analysis drive improvements in teacher preparation programs across the state.[78]

Oklahoma has adopted professional development institutes as a means to improve reading instruction. The institutes include 30 to 45 hours of initial training that is grounded in strategies to increase student performance, aligned with state standards. Participating teachers receive follow-up support to help them integrate what they learn into their classroom practice. Furthermore, teachers evaluate each institute so that the professional development commission can improve its offerings over time.[79]

Communities can also support the efforts of school districts and states to provide ongoing evidence-based professional development in reading instruction. One example of a statewide strategy that municipal/corporate leaders and United Way are supporting is the **Minnesota Reading Corps.**

It's a statewide initiative to help every Minnesota child become a successful reader by the end of third grade. The program places AmeriCorps members in schools to implement a researched-based early-literacy effort to help struggling readers. The Minnesota Reading Corps strategies are designed for both preschool-aged students and kindergarten to third grade students. Minnesota Reading Corps members can choose to serve in a preschool setting or a kindergarten to third grade setting.

The **Greater Twin Cities United Way** in Minneapolis and Target, based in Minneapolis, are active partners in this effort. United Way invests in comprehensive strategies that help students learn to read: one-on-one tutoring, parent engagement and early identification of student needs. For example, United Way is partnering with Saint Paul public schools to support one-on-one tutoring in more than 30 schools. More than 7,200 children in kindergarten through third grade have gotten help in learning to read. At the same time, United Way is working with Target to train its associates to be reading tutors and volunteers.

Support Improved State Reading Standards and Assessments

At the national level, states are joining together to voluntarily adopt common standards for core curricula. Common Core Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and families know what they need to do to help them.

To date, 40 states and the District of Columbia have now adopted the Common Core Standards, and the remaining states have committed to a process to develop the standards.[80] The standards are evidence-based, internationally benchmarked and designed so that students who graduate from high school having met the standards are ready for college and work.

The U.S. Department of Education has committed up to $350 million to help states develop assessments tied to the Common Core State Standards. United Way supports the Common Core State Standards.

Ensure that Textbooks, Techniques and Curricula are Grounded in Best Practice

Communities can also work with local school districts to ensure that districts adopt textbooks, curricula and instructional approaches that line up with rigorous state standards and assessments.

Cooperative peer-learning programs, for example, show great promise for improving student reading achievement. In these learning groups, children work in pairs, taking turns as teacher and learner, to learn a structured sequence of literacy skills. Students in these programs score, on average, 18 percentile points higher than students in classes that do not use these techniques.[81]

Professional development leaders in schools can train teachers to tailor instruction based on proven practices to enhance literacy instruction in their classrooms. The National Literacy Institute offers a **guide for early childhood administrators and professional development practitioners** to equip them with best practices for promoting literacy development in the early grades.[82]

Promote Formative Assessments to Drive Classroom Instruction

Schools that use real-time data from student assessments to drive instructional practice are getting strong results in reading. At the state level, **Indiana** is the first state to have adopted formative assessments for kindergarten through second grade in reading and mathematics.[83]

For English Language Learners (ELL), schools need to ensure appropriate instructional interventions and assessment tools that adequately measure the progress of children who speak two languages. Using multiple assessments in an ongoing manner is the most effective way to assess ELL students.[84]

Help Teachers Teach in Ways That Engage Children

Children need to be engaged in new ways to read, think and communicate. Edutopia, George Lucas' educational foundation, seeks to empower and connect teachers, administrators and families with innovative solutions and resources to better education – and showcases multi-media approaches to learning (**www.edutopia.org**). United Ways and their corporate partners can support schools to invest in these innovative teaching methods.

STRATEGY 3

Help Families Help their Children Become Strong Readers

Parents and primary caregivers are children's first teachers, but may need to understand more about language and literacy development – and how to help their child navigate that territory. It's important to build a true reciprocal relationship with families, honoring and respecting what parents and families bring to the table. This is also a prime opportunity for broader public awareness and public engagement efforts.

Help Families Identify Reading Problems Early

Parents know their children better than anyone else and can identify when their children are having reading troubles—if they know what to look for. Communities can raise awareness among parents of the importance of early action and they can help parents learn what problems to look for and where to turn for help.

Families may not know it, but the longer caregivers wait to get help for a child, the harder it is to bring that child up to grade level. If struggling readers get help in fourth grade, instead of kindergarten, **it takes four times as long to improve their reading skills by the same amount.**[85] And delayed action can lead to life-long difficulties. Three in four children who fail to get needed reading help until age nine or later struggle throughout their entire school careers.[86] Conversely, nine in 10 children with reading difficulties may still achieve grade level in reading if they get help by first grade.[87]

Communities can support efforts to help parents know what age-appropriate reading progress looks like and how reading troubles manifest themselves at early stages. Spoken language is the foundation for written language. This means that there may be signs of risk for a reading problem observed in children before they are expected to read.[88] For example, in the preschool period, delayed language or difficulties in spoken language, mispronunciations, problems retrieving words or long pauses before responding to a question may be very early indicators of a problem in getting to the sounds of spoken words – the underlying difficulty in struggling readers.[89] Later on, by the end of kindergarten, children should be able to recognize all of the alphabet's letters, rhyme words, know some letter-sound relationships and ask and answer questions about stories.[90]

Partnerships with school leaders and "trusted advisors" – like pediatricians – can be effective. **Reach Out and Read,** detailed in the School Readiness section of this overview, promotes early literacy and school readiness in pediatric exam rooms nationwide by giving new books to children and advice to parents about the importance of reading aloud. The nearly four million families served annually by Reach Out and Read are shown to read together more often, and their children enter kindergarten better prepared to succeed, with larger vocabularies, stronger language skills and a six-month developmental edge over their peers.

United Ways can partner with PTAs and PTOs, faith communities, employers and community groups to spread the word to parents and to connect parents with resources to help their children read well.

There are many valuable resources available for helping parents identify whether or not their children are on track to becoming readers, including The National Institute for Literacy report, **A Child Becomes a Reader: Proven Ideas from Research for Parents, Kindergarten through Grade 3**, and the book *Straight Talk About Reading: How Parents Can Make a Difference in the Early Years*.[91] The **Colorín Colorado** website has additional resources in both English and Spanish to help parents identify if their children are on track. Pam McKeta's book, *Seeking Help for a Struggling Reader: 8 Steps for Parents (Reading Rockets*, 2004) provides fodder for tip sheets for parents that could be distributed at Parent Resource Centers, libraries, churches,

recreation centers, parks and health clinics. Parent Information Resource Centers (local centers can be searched at **www.nationalpirc.org**) can also offer parents additional information on how to support a child with reading difficulties.

Wherever parents work, play, pray or live, communities should develop high-profile awareness efforts to let them know about resources and the importance of detecting and addressing reading problems as early as possible.

Inform Parents of Effective Home-Based Strategies to Help their Children Learn to Read

Opening the door for low-income families to get books is critical. Some communities are running library card drives. Others are partnering with First Book or Dolly Parton's Imagination Library to get free books to poor children, with support for their families to help children's literacy skills.

Once books are available, letting parents know what to do – the best way to read aloud, how to use everyday activities to support reading, extending the literacy learnings from a certain book, specific exercises to use at home – can be a valuable resource, and can be woven into other programs – at companies, churches or social gatherings – serving parents. ***Born Learning***, United Way's public engagement campaign that helps parents, grandparents and caregivers explore ways to turn everyday moments into fun learning opportunities, also offers tips for building reading into everyday activities, like running errands or going to the grocery store.[92]

The best way to encourage better reading ability is to encourage kids to read aloud. The average child in kindergarten through third grade whose parent listens to him or her read scores 19 percentile points higher on reading.[93] Parents should know that their children will make errors, and that it is important to gently model the correct pronunciation of words rather than getting upset with their children.

Schools and community-based organizations can help parents of struggling readers by providing tools, access to resources and parent education classes to expose parents to specific exercises they can do at home with their children. Using specific exercises to teach a child to read has led to average gains in student reading achievement of 37 percentile points.[94] Practice exercises can focus on topics such as teaching children to read one-syllable words, recognizing and saying beginning and ending sounds in words and blending beginning and ending sounds to sound out new words.[95]

Strengthen Family Literacy

Family literacy is an essential strategy to boosting a child's literacy. As the National Center for Family Literacy reports, children's reading scores improve dramatically when their parents are involved in helping them learn to read.

Providing books, family learning events and opportunities, helping families use libraries and public awareness activities around literacy (especially on multi-media platforms) can support family literacy. Communities can also provide support through English as a Second Language or English Language Learner (ESL or ELL) programs and reading instruction for adults with limited literacy skills. This instruction can be provided in various settings, including community-based literacy centers, family literacy programs, prison literacy programs, workplace literacy programs and two-year colleges.[96]

For example, since 2003, Toyota has partnered with the National Center for Family Literacy to strengthen English language ability and literacy among immigrant parents of children enrolled in kindergarten through third grade. The program also helps parents learn how to help their children read even if they cannot read themselves. The program currently serves 25 communities and 75 elementary schools across the nation.[97]

United Ways can partner with schools and community-based organizations to bring books into the homes of families who need them. **The United Way of Coastal Fairfield County**, located in

Westport, Connecticut, for example, held several family literacy nights at Geraldine Johnson Elementary School for hundreds of parents and children. While parents received coaching on how best to read with their children, students received books for their home libraries donated from the United Way's Day of Caring partners.[98]

In West Michigan, the United Way tackled family literacy while boosting English language skills. **Heart of West Michigan United Way** worked in partnership with the Literacy Center of West Michigan, Greater Grand Rapids Reads, West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and other organizations to support the development of the Schools of Hope family literacy program—an initiative that merges English as a Second Language instruction with hands-on parenting skills development.

The Literacy Center of West Michigan administers the family literacy program, which follows the National Center for Family Literacy model. The program has four components:

- Education for the parent—teaching parents English language and life skills.
- Education for the child—elementary school education for children.
- Parent and child time together—clasroom-based reading and educational activities carried out between participating parents and their children.
- Parenting discussion time—discussion among parents about how to support their children's success in school.

As a result, parents participating in the family literacy pilot:

- Increased reading levels by 87%.
- Engaged children in five or more literacy activities per week (86%).
- Witnessed an increase in children's standardized test scores from elementary school among participating families (36%).

The family literacy program serves over 60 families in three public schools in Grand Rapids, Michigan and plans to expand.

Partner with Families to Boost School Attendance

Students who are chronically absent in kindergarten, first or second grade are already at a disadvantage. This pattern of chronic absence often begins even earlier if children are enrolled in preschool.[99]

When schools, families and communities work together to monitor chronic absence and address barriers to attendance, significant improvements are possible.[100] An essential first step is educating parents, who are ultimately responsible for getting their children to school every day, that good attendance matters as early as preschool and kindergarten.[101] Parents, especially those who did not have a successful school experience themselves, may not understand that these early educational experiences are essential to preparing their children to succeed in school and sporadic participation does not serve their children well.[102]

At the same time, schools and communities can do more to identify and address systemic barriers to good attendance.[103] If data reveals that poor attendance affects a large group of students, then school communities must determine whether part of the work to improve attendance involves addressing common challenges such as lack of public transportation, community violence or inadequate access to health care.[104]

Too often, schools are not aware that they have a significant problem, because they only track school-wide attendance data or truancy – both of which can mask large numbers of children missing school for extended periods of time due to excused and unexcused absences.[105] Early warning data systems (described in the School Readiness section of this overview) are a promising strategy for combating this challenge and improving student attendance. Such systems can flag students at risk of eventually dropping out of school because of attendance, behavior or academic problems.[106]

Community leaders can play a critical role in helping schools and communities use attendance data to establish early warning data systems. By flagging students who have attendance problems early on, teachers, counselors, other school staff, and community partners can intervene to help

address the issues causing the student to miss school. Equally important, community leaders can help schools and communities work together to monitor and analyze data on the levels of chronic absences in the early grades to determine whether additional interventions are needed for particular schools, neighborhoods or populations of students.[107]

The **United Way of New York City**, for example, was a key partner in helping to finance the first analysis of chronic absence among public school students.[108] The analysis found that one in five elementary school students were missing a month or more of school.[109] These results have led to changes in the way the city's Department of Education analyzes its attendance data and the data have helped to inspire the creation of a new mayoral task force to reduce chronic absenteeism and truancy.[110]

Westbrook Children's Project: Strengthening Parents and Families in Maine

The **United Way of Greater Portland** in Maine created, with community partners, a broad family engagement initiative that has dramatically increased attendance. The United Way led a community engagement process to explore how it could better support parents and families in promoting academic success. United Way brought together school officials, parents, community advocates and government representatives to develop a common vision. The result was the Westbrook Children's Project—a collaboration of United Way of Greater Portland, Westbrook School Department, People's Regional Opportunity Program and other partner organizations. The project focuses efforts on at-risk children in kindergarten through second grade with the goal of improving attendance and keeping kids in school.

One key focus of the Westbrook Children's Project is supporting parents in helping their children succeed in school. A broad range of community supports are used to engage parents effectively by:

- Creating a Summer Lunch Program and using it as a space to provide families with meals and child/family enrichment programming.
- Using door-to-door visits to dialogue with parents.
- Developing a Parent Resource Room to engage parents—a parent resource library, a space with information on community resources, a clothing closet and free children's books.
- Setting up "Coffee Talk with Parents" at schools.

The Project also developed a training session on poverty to assist teachers and school staff in better engaging at-risk parents and families.

The multi-sector approach of the Westbrook Children's Project has produced results. The number of at-risk students who were absent eight or more times has decreased by 51% and 55% in the two participating schools. These reductions are significantly greater than those among students not from the target community. Out of classroom referrals for students with behavioral issues has also seen a significant dip—decreasing by as much as 19%.

THE WAY FORWARD

One of the strongest roles United Ways play in making real community change is that of a mobilizing force, recruiting people with passion, expertise and resources to make a difference. In the case of early grade reading, United Ways are beginning to shape the community conversation, to convene stakeholders to examine issues, develop strategies and execute action plans on the issues that matter most.

To move ahead on early grade reading, United Ways can engage with their communities, helping to convene citizens and key stakeholders to build an understanding of the nature of the early grade reading challenge in their neighborhoods and to develop a collective approach to solving it. Communities should develop action plans to enable all children to become readers. These plans should help strengthen schools, empower parents and provide extra help to struggling readers.

By mobilizing institutions and individuals around shared early grade reading goals, United Ways can help recruit donors, advocates and volunteers to the cause and partner with key players in the school system and in local and state government.

If communities are successful in developing and executing their early grade reading strategies, in learning from their mistakes and in building on their successes, they can expect to see children develop the reading skills they need for success in school and in life.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Information for parents

- Reading Rockets (**www.readingrockets.org**)
- Colorín Colorado (**www.colorincolorado.org**)
- LD Online (**www.ldonline.org**)
- The National Institute for Literacy publication, A Child Becomes a Reader: Proven Ideas from Research for Parents, Kindergarten through Grade 3. (**http://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/readingk-3.pdf)**
- National Center for Family Literacy (**www.famlit.org**)

Research on programs that work to improve early grade reading

- What Works Clearinghouse (**www.whatworks.ed.gov/**)
- Best Evidence in Education (Grades K-1, Grades 2-5) (**www.bestevidence.org/reading**)
- National Center for Family Literacy
- National Reading Panel Summary Report and Full Report (**www.nationalreadingpanel.org/**)
- Reading Research in Action (**www.brookespublishing.com/store/books/mccardle-69643/index.htm**)

Potential Partners / National Reading Campaigns

- First Book (**www.firstbook.org**)
- In2Books (**www.In2Books.epals.com**)
- Reading is Fundamental (**www.rif.org**)
- Reach Out and Read (**www.reachoutandread.org**)
- The National Education Association's Read Across America (**www.nea.org/readacross**)

Student Performance Data

- For more information on what U.S. students know and can do in reading, visit National Assessment of Educational Progress (**www. nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/**)

Information on Community-Based Literacy Programs

- Guide to Performance Management for Community Literacy Coalitions (**www.lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/NIFLCommunityLiteracyReport.pdf**)

Information on School Attendance

- Attendance Counts (**www.attendanceworks.org**)

Resources for Engaging Parents

- America's Promise Parent Engagement Toolkit (**www.americaspromise.org/parentengagement**)

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MIDDLE GRADE SUCCESS

CASE FOR ACTION

The middle grades play a critical role in young people's lives. These years that connect elementary school and high school are a key transition time for young people, and the time when students build the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for high school success.

A successful transition into ninth grade, a year when many students are held back or drop out, is especially important to high school success.[1] While declines in academic achievement are typical during this transition, students with the greatest amount of decline are the most likely to drop out.[2]

The middle grade years are also a crucial time for social and emotional development. Students at this age are especially susceptible to risk factors that can heighten the chance of dropping out.[3] Many middle grade students experience negative attitudes towards school, social alienation and disengagement.[4] Healthy academic and social engagement can make a difference by improving attitudes toward school.

Steady Academic Declines

Academic performance often declines in the middle grades. By eighth grade, gains in student achievement made during elementary school are often diminished.[5] For example, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) —the nation's "report card"— for the 2008-2009 school year show that a lower proportion of eighth graders in the U.S. (33%) scored at the proficient level on state math assessments than fourth graders (38%) did.[6] Furthermore, NAEP scores for fourth graders in math, reading and science have improved to a greater extent than scores for eighth graders have over the last 35 years.[7] And, American 13- and 15-year-olds are more likely to be educationally disadvantaged compared with their peers in other developed nations.

Significant Adolescent Development

New research on brain development shows that adolescence is a very active period of growth and change. According to experts at the National Institute of Mental Health, "If a teen is doing music, sports or academics, those are the connections that will be hard wired. If they're lying on the couch playing video games or watching MTV, those are the connections that are going to survive."[8] This research suggests that the middle grade years should be filled with enriching experiences, inside and outside the classroom.

Declining Parental Involvement

At the same time, parental involvement declines significantly in these years. The percentage of parents who attend a general school or PTO/PTA meeting drops from 91% in elementary school students to 76% in middle school.[9] This decrease is rooted in changes in both school structure and adolescent development.[10] Middle schools are typically more complex than elementary schools, with more teachers who spend less time with each student. Meanwhile, developmental changes lead to adolescents' increased desire for independence and autonomy and increased decision-making abilities. Yet middle grade students benefit greatly from developmentally appropriate parental involvement—that is, when parents communicate the value of education and help connect the choices adolescents make to their long-term goals, while at the same time giving them room to develop their independence.[11]

The Critical Juncture

If students do not experience success in middle grades, they are much less likely to experience success later on. *Middle school students who are held back are seven times more likely to drop out, and 80% of students who repeat a class more than once are likely to drop out as well.*[12] In fact, the highest proportion of students drop out of school between ninth and tenth grade—just one year after middle school.[13] In some states, dropout rates between these grades can be as high as 20%.[14] Racial disparities also exist—while 7% of white students drop out between ninth and tenth grade, 17% of Hispanic students and 20% of African American students do so.[15]

Yet middle grades are also the time when fewer after-school opportunities are offered in many communities, and more students are home alone

after school. Educators call the hours between three and six in the afternoon the "danger zone" for young adolescents, because that's when they can get into trouble—crime, teen pregnancy and substance abuse—without supervision or other healthy activities.

It's time for a brighter spotlight on the crucial middle years. It is essential that students have the necessary social and emotional supports, and access to rigorous and engaging academic work that promotes subject mastery while providing opportunities for exploration. Middle grade students need to see the connection between work and school, and need opportunities for engaging activities outside of school. Both inside the classroom and out, they need experiences to provide them the knowledge, skills and resources needed to succeed in high school, college, work and life.

MIDDLE GRADE CHALLENGES

Middle school is designed to serve as a bridge between elementary school, (with its emphasis on developmental needs and mastery of basic skills), and high school, (with its focus on academic rigor and career readiness). Yet experts say that:

- Middle school is not preparing students adequately for a rigorous high school course of study.
- Students are disengaged.
- There are insufficient supports for the social and emotional development of adolescents.
- Communities lack quality out-of-school and summer opportunities for older children and youth.
- There is a dearth of robust data systems that provide "early warning data" to signal the need for intervention.
- There is not enough parent and family engagement.

CHALLENGE 1

Schools Are Not Preparing Students For Success

Many courses students take in middle school are not sufficiently rigorous to prepare them for success in high school. More than eight in 10 students in eighth grade lack the knowledge and skills they need to enter successfully into high school.[16]

According to Dr. Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University who has done groundbreaking research on the drop out issue: "The most critical challenge is finding ways to improve the quality of middle grades coursework and course performance. Students who receive high-quality instruction and course assignments will learn and advance and, ultimately, graduate college-ready. Those who do not,[17] will not." Experts working with United Way have also noted lack of support for transitions, from elementary school and into high school.

Today, *the majority of eighth graders fail to reach the proficient level in mathematics, reading and science*, according to NAEP results. This is particularly true for Hispanic and African-American students, who continue to lag behind their white counterparts.[18]

This challenge is compounded by the way we prepare our middle school teachers, and by the lack of rigorous and relevant curriculum. Current teacher certification programs focus either on elementary or secondary levels, and many teachers who are certified at the secondary level are not prepared to teach basic skills such as reading. According to a National Governors Association Center for Best Practices report:

"Often middle school teachers view themselves as content-area specialists. They sometimes ignore the problems of their struggling readers or compensate for them by giving students notes from a reading assignment or reading a text aloud instead of helping students learn to extract information from a text themselves. These teachers do not have the training or knowledge to do more."

Teachers who are certified for elementary school may lack the content knowledge needed for middle school courses, as well as knowledge of instructional methods. Research comparing middle grade teacher preparation in the U.S. to that in five other countries found that "mathematical knowledge among future teachers... was highest in Taiwan and Korea on all five areas of mathematics—algebra, functions, numbers, geometry and statistics—while U.S. performance lagged behind."[85] The lack of adequate preparation for middle school teachers has generated much attention in policy circles, with a growing chorus of critics calling for a separate middle school certification.

CHALLENGE 2
Students Are Disengaged

The transition from middle to high school is marked by increased disengagement and declining motivation, particularly for low-performing youth.[21] Disengagement usually snowballs over time, building into problematic behaviors like skipping school, misbehaving in class and failing courses. One exacerbates the other: poor attendance can be a symptom of disengagement but it can also fuel disengagement as it puts the student further behind academically. This is a straight line to dropping out.

One reason students disengage is that schools can feel isolated from other community serving organizations. In many places, little effort is made to connect communities and schools in ways that provide students with meaningful learning opportunities and highlight the potential relevance of what students are studying.[22]

Too often, middle school doesn't seem relevant: it doesn't connect to the real world or students' future careers. Many students express the view that school often seems out of touch with their everyday lives. In a recent survey of high school dropouts, 81% said that if schools provided opportunities for real-world learning, it would have improved their chances of graduating from high school.[23] Disengagement can also stem from poor-quality curricula that is insufficiently rigorous and classroom instruction that doesn't connect with students.

CHALLENGE 3
Insufficient Supports for the Social and Emotional Development of Adolescents

For students to succeed in school and life, they must have their physical, social and emotional needs met—as well as their academic needs. This is summed up by the notion of supporting "the whole child," which has become increasingly popular in education circles in the last few years.

"If students are to master world-class academics, they need to be physically and emotionally healthy. They need to be well fed and safe. They need to be intellectually challenged and have supportive adults who know them well and care about their success. And they need to be interested and engaged in what they're learning," writes the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, in defining the need for providing support for, "the whole child."

Students in the middle years must navigate many big changes in their lives, including larger schools, multiple teachers, new friends and more freedoms. Without supports that address their emerging needs, students can feel isolated and "check out," laying the early groundwork for dropping out.[24]

CHALLENGE 4
Lack of Quality Out-of-School Opportunities

On average, children spend only 20% of their waking hours in school. Afterschool, weekend and summer programs offer supports and experiences that help students succeed in school. As the Afterschool Alliance says, "Afterschool programs effectively address and help resolve many of the issues that lead to dropout."[25]

The challenge comes in both quantity and quality. Many states and cities have invested in afterschool programs for younger children. There are far fewer programs, however, that meet the developmental needs, interests and schedules of older youth. For instance, only 20% of 21st Century Community Learning Center programs—the largest federally funded afterschool program—target middle grade students, and only 5% target high school students.[26]

While the out-of-school hours provide many opportunities to engage young people and support them as they move through middle grades and into high school, finding resources to increase the number of these programs is an ongoing challenge. At the same time, ensuring that content of out-of-school programs is relevant, and connects to the real world, is equally challenging.

Not only is there a relative dearth of programs designed specifically for middle school youth, but also the quality of the existing programs varies considerably. Research shows that if out-of-school programs are not high quality, youth are unlikely to benefit from participating.[27] High-quality programming is especially important for middle grade students, because they are less compelled by their parents to attend after-school programs than are elementary school students. To successfully engage this age group, programs need to be challenging, interesting and fun and must offer youth opportunities to engage in positive interactions with adults and peers.

CHALLENGE 5

A Dearth of Robust Data Systems that Provide "Early Warning Data" to Signal the Need for Intervention

Districts and schools need a consistent way to find students who would most benefit from prevention programs, so that the right interventions reach the right students at the right time. Yet, many schools lack robust data to identify students at the highest risk for dropping out.

New data systems that focus on a set of "early warning indicators" can predict whether students are on the right path toward graduation. The most powerful predictors of whether a student will complete high school include course performance, behavior and attendance during the first year of high school.[28] We also know that students who fall behind in reading and math in middle grades are more likely to fail ninth grade – and ninth grade failure is one of the strongest indicators that a student will ultimately drop out. In addition, students who fall behind in acquiring credits for graduation are at a higher risk for dropping out.[29] Data systems that produce early warning indicators can be tailored to meet the needs of local communities and provide students the supports that they need.[30]

Finding ways to expand systems for early identification of students at risk of dropping out is a large and immediate challenge.

CHALLENGE 6

Parents and Families Aren't Sufficiently Engaged

There are many reasons families tend not to be as engaged in middle school as in elementary school.

First, this is a time when students may conflict with parents or caregivers in the home.[31] The transition to independence challenges parental authority and requires parents to adapt (not lessen) their involvement. Research shows that adolescents fare best, and their family relationships are happiest, in households in which parents are both supportive and accepting of the child's need for more independence – but are still involved. When parents are disengaged, young people are more likely to experience difficulty.[32]

The transitions in middle school are tougher for students to navigate if their parents didn't navigate them well. Parents who didn't have positive educational experiences often have a harder time guiding their children toward educational success.[33] Families need help to stay engaged and support their children as academic demands grow (and as adolescents become more independent). Families without a college-going culture need information about college possibilities, processes and financial aid to support their child's success.

Second, families – especially disadvantaged families – need more access to and more clarity about important information, data and resources that can help them support school success. That ranges from school policies (like attendance requirements) to data on their child's individual academic performance (like grades, report cards, assessments and how the child is doing compared to their peers).

EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES FOR MIDDLE GRADE SUCCESS

Based on research and emerging best practices, these are the strategies innovative schools and communities across the U.S. are using to prepare adolescents for success in middle grades:

- Reform and improve middle schools to ensure student learning and success, including strengthening academic effectiveness and teachers' professional development.
- Revise middle grade curricula to be more hands-on, relevant and engaging.
- Create transition programs that provide social and academic support and prepare students for high school.
- Provide high quality out-of-school time opportunities that reinforce and build upon school day learning.
- Develop data systems that provide early warning information to prevent failure.
- Increase parent and family engagement to boost student success.

STRATEGY 1

Strengthen Academic Effectiveness and Enhance Professional Development

Research suggests several ways to strengthen middle grade academics so that students enter high school poised for success.

Reduce the Number of Chronically Absent Students

As noted in Early Grade Reading section of this paper, chronically absent students are at a severe disadvantage as early as kindergarten. When schools, families and communities work together to monitor chronic absence and address barriers to attendance, significant improvements are possible in those early elementary years.[34]

But by the time students are in middle grades, families may not be the ones getting the child to school – and may not be as aware of absences. Experts say addressing absence issues head-on may be one of the most direct ways to improve middle grade achievement.

Recent research shows that poor attendance is a primary driver of course failure in the secondary grades and that course failure is at the root of high dropout rates.[35]

As Dr. Robert Balfanz writes, "every absence needs to elicit a response." In **Georgia**, where they have introduced middle school graduation coaches, attendance is the number one priority. Graduation coaches are employed full-time in every middle school in the state where they track student attendance, pinpoint reasons for student absences and apply "creative ways to encourage students to attend school."[36]

Too often, schools are not aware that they have a significant problem because they only track school-wide attendance data or truancy – both of which can mask large numbers of children missing school for extended periods of time due to excused and unexcused absences.[37] For example, it is possible to have school-wide average attendance in the 90% range but have 15% of students chronically absent each year and 40% of students experiencing chronic absenteeism at least once over multiple years.[38]

That's why it's important to look beyond school-wide data and to put a zoom lens on at at-risk students' absences (excused or unexcused). Early warning data systems are one promising strategy for combating this challenge and improving student attendance. Such systems can flag students at risk of eventually dropping out of school because of attendance, behavior or academic problems.

Community leaders can play a critical role in helping schools and communities use attendance data to establish early warning data systems. By flagging students who have attendance problems early on, teachers, counselors, other school staff and community partners can intervene to address particular issues causing the student to miss school. Equally important, community leaders can help schools and communities work together to monitor and analyze data on the levels of chronic absences in the early grades to determine whether additional interventions are needed for particular schools, neighborhoods or populations of students.[39]

Enhance Professional Development for Teachers

Effective teaching is the single most important in-school factor affecting students' academic performance.[40] Yet research shows that many middle school teachers lack subject expertise or specific preparation related to this age group. Ongoing professional development for middle grade teachers is one way to improve learning for students in middle schools. Additional preparation that helps teachers deepen their subject matter knowledge, as well as gain a better understanding of the best methods for engaging middle grade students, could help improve teacher effectiveness.[41] For experienced teachers who have gaps in content knowledge and skills, districts can offer online modules or alternative training to improve content knowledge in targeted areas. Districts may also require that teachers retake subject-area tests after completing these online modules or participate in alternative training.[42] Additional training and professional development may also be needed to help teachers use student data to improve instructions and interventions, especially in connection with the early warning system data.

In addition, districts can strengthen pre-service requirements for teachers to ensure that new teachers have taken subject area courses in their respective departments. Furthermore, districts can require that new teachers have training specific to adolescent literacy needs—the Education Commission of the States (ECS) Adolescent Literacy database indicates that 16 states have strengthened teacher preparation or certification requirements to address student literacy needs in grades four through twelve, but this is just the beginning of the work.[43] Finally, districts can raise the qualification requirements for new teachers—increasing hiring thresholds on qualifying exams, for example.

While professional development may not be an issue in which United Ways see themselves getting involved, United Ways partnering with the private sector, teachers' unions, professional organizations and parent organizations can create a visible support and even funding for this critical area.

Improve Assessments that Ensure Students Are on Track

There are several ways to improve current assessments for the middle grades. First, districts can implement formative and diagnostic assessments for middle grades reading and math. While common in the elementary grades, formative and diagnostic assessments are less frequently required by state policy in the middle grades. But only 13 states require middle grade students performing below grade level on state reading assessments to be targeted for diagnostic reading assessments.[44]

Second, states and districts can implement end-of-course assessments for middle grades. These exams can test common statewide measures to determine that students passing core courses have met agreed-upon thresholds for knowledge and skill levels. While end-of-course assessments are increasingly common at the high school level, few states have explored the development of such tests for middle grades courses.[45]

Middle School Principals in Los Angeles County

Middle school students in Los Angeles County—especially many Hispanics and African Americans who live in generational poverty—face challenges that can lead to high school dropout. In fact, significant numbers of students in the county leave school by tenth grade. **United Way of Greater Los Angeles** and California League of Middle Schools (CLMS) joined forces to address this challenge through Principals to Watch—a program that trains middle school principals on proven strategies and best practices for raising student achievement levels.

Principals to Watch is specifically designed to provide middle school principals with management tools to increase support and academic expectations for all students, especially those in poverty. The program has two parts: a set of resources for middle school principals and a free academy training program for those L.A. County middle school principals serving schools in which 40% or more students qualify for free or reduced price meals.

The Principals to Watch Academy educates participants program for middle school principals. It educates participants on the characteristics of high performing, learning-centered schools. It also includes tours of model middle schools in the Taking Center Stage program, mentorship from the principals of model schools, and participation in school-wide evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of their own sites with their entire teaching staffs. The principals develop three-year school improvement plans based on their schools' needs and the features of successful middle schools: academic excellence, developmentally responsive practices, socially equitable practices and organizational support and processes.

The Principals to Watch program has trained 30 principals from nine districts, representing over 16,000 students.

STRATEGY 2

Make Curricula More Hands-On, Relevant, and Engaging

Research demonstrates that a curriculum that is more hands-on and relevant helps keep students engaged—and translates into academic success.

Make Coursework Relevant

Making it interesting matters. Studies show that, "the extent to which students [in grades five to eight] found mathematics classes interesting and exciting … had significant effects on both students' level of effort in math class and their attendance," and that "the extent to which students believed that the mathematics they were studying would be useful in life… was the strongest predictor of student effort."[46]

Engage Students in a Variety of Ways

Recent research also suggests that hands-on learning improves engagement. There is a correlation between higher eighth grade NAEP scores and specific practices in eighth grade science classrooms—including doing hands-on activities in science, talking about results and measurements from hands-on activities and working with others on science activities or projects.[47] Teachers can improve student engagement by relying on a variety of activities that apply to various subjects or specific content. These activities can engage students in the varied ways that they learn beyond listening and recalling. Physical activities can help students unleash pent-up energy, while other activities create personal time that encourages reflection.[48]

Education Nation, a book written by Milton Chen, the former head of Edutopia and The George Lucas Educational Foundation, suggests how to "put the edge into education" and revolutionalize learning through innovative classroom practices and technology. Today's digital age offers a variety of new ways to teach and learn: laptops and handheld devices, wikis, interactive classroom tools (like Smart boards), open source curricula, teacher-parent communication platforms, video-sharing, "serious games," social media and GPS devices. (Learn about innovative engagement practices at **www.edutopia.org**)

Yet there is a disconnect between the technology our society is increasingly relying on, and how we use it to engage our students. As an example, Chen notes that Google has created a free, ultra-high-bandwidth network in its headquarters community of Mountain View, CA – but students in that school system don't have even the simplest of devices to access the network.

This too may present opportunities for United Ways to work with corporate partners to develop new ways and to underwrite cutting-edge ways to engage students in the classroom (especially since so many global corporate partners are taking advantage of those same opportunities to do business worldwide.) United Ways and partners can help schools leverage community assets and resources to supplement curricula in order to make learning come alive.

STRATEGY 3

Create Transition Programs that Provide Social and Academic Support

High school dropout rates are significantly lower in school districts that have explicit middle to high school transition programs.[49] In schools where transition programs are fully operational, researchers have seen dropout rates of 8%, while schools without transition programs averaged 24%.[50] Many of these programs include activities that span the eighth and ninth grades, creating a clear bridge between middle and high school.

Successful transition programs provide students with academic support, boost parental involvement, provide extra structure and personal interaction with adults, support collaboration among middle and high school staff and provide students with peer support.

Provide Enhanced Academic Support for Struggling Students

Many high school freshmen have weak or deficient basic skills, particularly in English and mathematics. Transition programs provide extra support both during the school day and in the afterschool hours to help students catch up or remain on track.

One approach currently growing in popularity is the **Talent Development High School** model.[51] It was designed to help students catch up when they entered high school, sometimes two or more years below grade level. During the ninth grade, students take "catch-up courses" designed to enhance their skills and enable them to succeed in traditional algebra and English classes. Students also take a Talent Development course, called Freshman Seminar, which combines study skills, personal goal setting and social group skills designed to prepare students for the demands of high school. An evaluation of this in five Philadelphia high schools found "it produced substantial gains in attendance, academic course credits earned (especially in algebra) and promotion rates during students' first year of high school."[52]

Tutoring can also be an effective strategy for middle grade students, and one that United Ways and their partners can fuel with volunteers. Tutoring – teaching or instructing a child one-on-one or in small groups — has been shown to have positive effects on academic performance, especially with at-risk children experiencing reading or other problems.[53] Many Experience Corps and AmeriCorps programs have underscored the power of tutoring to enhance learning outcomes. Research suggests effective tutoring interventions require a proven program, qualified and trained tutors and individual or small group intensive instruction. In addition, tutoring is even more effective when programs develop guidelines for volunteer implementation, analyze the role tutors can play and develop a robust training program geared towards the needs of the student.[54]

Provide Extra Structure and Personal Interaction with Adults

Many students need added structure and extra personal support as they make their way through the middle grades and into ninth grade. Likewise, teachers need planned opportunities to collaborate—on their teaching and around ways to support students.[55]

Some schools are adopting programs that increase opportunities for adult and student interactions in order to ensure that individual students do not fall through the cracks.

Georgia's Graduation Coaches program puts a coach in every public high school. These coaches work with students in eighth to twelfth grades who are at risk of dropping out to connect them with needed supports. Graduation coaches can connect students to community mentors, create individualized graduation plans for students and customize credit-recovery programs. Graduation coaches are trained by a partnership between Communities in Schools and the Georgia Department of Education.[56]

Advisory programs, when properly implemented, can be very effective in ensuring student engagement and providing support. Advisory programs guarantee students at least one teacher who knows them well, can advise them and can advocate for them.[57] Advisors can most effectively monitor academic achievement and promote social development when advisory class meetings are regularly scheduled and last at least 20 minutes, when advisory class sizes are limited to 10 to 20 students, and when advisors have significant training and planning time.[58] These programs also need the support of guidance, administrative and district-level staff in order to function effectively.[59] When these conditions are met, advisories can reduce dropout rates, increase student learning and engagement and help students learn to navigate more complex school systems and relationships with their peers.[60]

Support Collaboration among Middle and High School Teachers, Counselors and Administrators

Research shows that many students feel a lack of support from teachers and other staff as they move from middle to high school. To create appropriate social supports, some middle schools have enlisted the help of parents, teachers and older students.[61] New strategies also involve middle school and high school counselors working together to communicate requirements for course selection in ninth grade, in an effort to reduce potential barriers and ensure a smooth transition to high school.[62]

Teachers too are finding ways to work together—to ensure that middle grade teachers have a clear sense of the expectations for new high school students, and that high school teachers gain an understanding of what can be expected from middle grade students. States and districts are beginning to support policies that enhance this sort of middle to high school collaboration as well. A recently adopted program in **Tennessee**, for example, requires that "high school and middle grades faculty will collaborate in planning curricul[a] and the transition between middle grades and high school."[63]

Enhance Peer Support

Peer advising and mentoring provide very powerful student supports. One of the more prevalent forms of peer support relies on high school students to help integrate and mentor incoming freshmen.[64] Relationships between middle grade students and their high school mentors often start before the younger students enter high school. For example, a high school student may talk to an eighth grader about what it is like to attend high school. In turn, the younger student may shadow the older classmate both during the day and for extracurricular activities. The high school student may then help the younger student when school begins. In this way, the high school student serves as a source of support for the middle grade student prior to and during the transition process.

Peer tutoring is showing results too. **Peer Group Connection (PGC) for Middle Schools** is one example of a research-based program that supports and eases students' successful transition into middle school. The program taps into the power of eighth graders to create a nurturing environment for incoming middle school students. Once a week, pairs of eighth graders meet with groups of eight to 10 incoming sixth graders students in outreach sessions designed to strengthen relationships among students across grades. These peer leaders are simultaneously enrolled in a daily, for-credit, year-long leadership course taught by school faculty during regular school hours.[65]

Mentoring toward Life Achievement in Florida

The high school dropout rate for Duval County, Florida is double that of the overall state rate. United Way of Northeast Florida committed to responding to this challenge by convening a group of local education experts, corporate partners and community stakeholders to research the problem and develop a plan for addressing the issue. The participants selected middle school intervention as a strategy that could create the most good for the community.

United Way launched a pilot initiative called Achievers for Life in Jacksonville's toughest neighborhood. The Achievers for Life model has four parts:

- High quality mentoring for students.
- Parental training on how to motivate and equip their child for success.
- Social support to stabilize families.
- Counseling for students and families who need it.

United Way invests annually in the program, which has grown to six middle schools and shown results—particularly as an outcome of mentoring. After two years, middle school participants in the program have shown improvement in GPA scores (20%); less course failure in math and language arts (36%); and fewer absences (37%).

STRATEGY 4

Provide Quality Out-of-School Opportunities That Reinforce and Enhance Learning

While the school bell may ring at three in the afternoon, learning doesn't stop. The afterschool hours can be filled with activities that expand upon and enrich classroom learning. High quality out-of-school time programs can convey a number of benefits to middle grades youth by supporting social and emotional development and by providing exposure to careers to keep students engaged in learning.

Offer Expanded Learning Opportunities that Support Social and Emotional Development

An analysis of 73 afterschool studies concluded that afterschool programs using evidence-based approaches were consistently successful in producing multiple benefits for youth, including improvements in children's personal, social and academic skills as well as their self-esteem.[66]

One common theme in successful programs is service learning. Incorporating service learning activities into afterschool programs provides a valuable opportunity to encourage civic engagement, help youth connect with their community, give youth a voice and help youth develop academic, leadership, interpersonal and work skills.[67] Youth who participate in service learning are more engaged in school and less likely to engage in risky behaviors.[68] There are a variety of ways that afterschool programs can incorporate a service-learning component, from including a monthly service activity to designing the entire program around service learning.[69] Students can perform service learning as a direct service (such as tutoring younger children or reading to the elderly), as an indirect service (such as graffiti removal or environmental clean-up), or as advocacy (such as circulating a petition or educating the public about an issue).[70]

But here again, quality matters. A study comparing more than 2,400 students who participated in service learning to their non-engaged peers found certain elements of service learning to be associated with the highest outcomes. Those elements are: clear educational goals; adequate student preparation for service activities; challenging tasks that require critical thinking; tasks that address a genuine need and that have a significant impact; community involvement and collaboration; promotion of youth voice, leadership, and decision-making; promotion of diversity; a student reflection component; and evaluation of students' participation and of the impact of the service.[71]

Provide Exposure to Careers and Keep Students Engaged

Besides providing extra help with homework and school assignments, out-of-school programs can expose students to career opportunities that can spark interest and motivation. Students can engage in apprenticeships, learn from artists and musicians and have time for project-based activities not available in a school day focused on the core curriculum. Such programs also give students opportunities to connect with caring adults, peers, and community institutions and can help them acquire skills needed for success in high school and beyond.[72]

Recognizing that engaging students in career choices early on could strengthen school-work connections, **United Way of Allegheny County** in Pittsburgh partnered with the Jewish Healthcare Foundation to launch a joint venture, the Pathways to Health Careers Fellowship. It seeks to build knowledge and skills for at-risk youth to become ready for health careers, by offering training and professional development to seven afterschool program providers to help them build or improve their health-related career development practices and help at-risk youth become health career ready. As a result, middle-school age youth are exposed to and engaged in various health careers to inspire vocational dreams and motivation to succeed in school through planned lessons and activities, job shadowing and internship opportunities.

A growing number of school districts are looking to summer hours as an opportunity to help middle grade students prepare for and transition to high school. Whether an official transition program (see above) or a high quality camp experience, a growing body of research shows that summer is a vital time for getting and keeping students on track for high school graduation. In **Pittsburgh's** Summerbridge Program, 92% of participants graduated from high school and 80% went on to college, despite the fact that the program "recruits youth from under-performing schools in low-income neighborhoods with high dropout rates."[73]

In **North Carolina's** Support Our Students (SOS) initiative, some $8 million in-state dollars go out as grants to neighborhood and community based organizations to provide out-of-school programs for middle schoolers.[74] These organizations provide before- and after-school and summer activities for more than 20,000 middle school students in all 100 counties, designed to strengthen academic performance and keep kids out of trouble. An annual evaluation by the Harvard Family Research Project found that "[n]early 50% of youth served improved their math and language arts grades as a result of their SOS afterschool program", and that 86% of the students reported that the SOS program helped them do better in school and in completing homework."[75]

Across the state, SOS programs focused on one-on-one tutoring (usually with trained volunteers) and community service projects, such as reading to elderly residents in nursing homes, picking up trash, planting flowers, working at a food bank and collecting donations for a rescue mission. One site worked with organizations aiding women and children displaced due to domestic violence, prison or job loss and chronicled their experiences and interviews with clients and staff through a video documentary. The initiative is a public-private partnership rooted in volunteerism, with local business support and local community volunteers stepping up to tutor and mentor middle grade students.

Creative Partnerships Outside the Classroom

In Richmond, Virginia's Partnership for Out of School Time, a **United Way of Greater Richmond & Petersburg**-led coalition of youth organizations, is working to give every school-age youth in greater Richmond the opportunity to participate in quality out-of-school time programs. Even more, the initiative is focusing on the professional development of the staff involved to ensure that all who engage with youth are knowledgeable about their development and what they need most.

A core group of providers – some of whom had never worked together before – have been meeting and planning for months. They've not only built relationships with one another, they've built an innovative model for after-school programming that was piloted in fall 2010 at Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School and then replicated throughout the region. "We may not have all the same players at every site, but we will all use the same model," said Dr. Harold Fitrer, executive director of Communities in Schools of Richmond. The model includes a myriad of programming that especially targets at-risk youth. At no cost to the families, these students will have everything from tutoring to art lessons to social activities to dinner – all at their school.

STRATEGY 5

Develop Systems that Provide Early Warning Data to Prevent Failure

Most students who drop out in ninth grade follow identifiable patterns. In fact, one study of students in Philadelphia can now identify half of all eventual high school dropouts as early as sixth grade.[76] These patterns can be used to develop "early warning systems" that can change the outcome.

Develop and Use Data Systems Based on Grades, Attendance and Behavior to Monitor Progress and Trigger Interventions

Research shows that "on-track indicators" (such as grades, attendance and behavior) are especially good predictors of whether students will graduate. In **Chicago**, for example, researchers have found that the on-track indicator was 85% successful in predicting which members of the freshmen class would not graduate.[77]

Ensure that Early Warning Data is Readily Accessible to and Used by Teachers, Counselors, Administrators, Families and Community Organizations

For early warning systems to work, they must be part of the way school systems work. Everyone must be able to manage and use data effectively and to share information in a timely manner. Teachers, counselors and administrators need allocated time to meet and review student data on a regular basis.

Used effectively, early warning systems can trigger intensive interventions for students who are struggling. **The Data Quality Campaign** (**www.dataqualitycampaign.org**), a national collaborative, has developed guidelines for states and districts to help create and use data systems that will generate effective early warning data.[78] All 50 states have committed to 10 essential data elements (detailed on the site), but the Data Quality Campaign says "the most elusive elements are those that are most critical to informing today's policy conversations on teacher effectiveness and college and career readiness."

Assessing Afterschool Programs in Georgia

Afterschool programs can make a difference in the lives of children, but organizations that implement these programs do not always measure and track indicators and outcomes. In recognition of this need, **United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta** teamed up with the Georgia Department of Human Resources, the Governor's Office for Children and Families and a local family foundation to fund a pilot project involving 15 sites in the Atlanta metro area. This effort helped form a methodology for determining youth indicators and outcomes shared across funding sources to show the value of a program.

The program resulted in commitments from United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta and other funders to implement an Afterschool Program Assessment System (APAS) developed by the National Institute of Out-of-School Time (NIOST). The APAS system helps to improve program quality and direct programs toward achievable and appropriate outcomes for youth using two measurement tools: the Survey of Afterschool Youth Outcomes and the Assessing Afterschool Program Practices Tool.

NIOST evaluated APAS pilots in Atlanta and three other jurisdictions. It found that pilot participants:

- Benefited from a coach in implementing the APAS (90%).
- Found the coach to be a very useful support (94%).
- Felt that the APAS system helped them identify areas for improvement (63%).
- Made changes in programming based on what they learned through the pilot (63%).
- Reported that APAS made them more accountable to providing a clearer picture of their program (33%).

The Data Quality Campaign website highlights what each state is doing (or not). United Ways and their business, faith, community and school partners should know what their state is doing and what pieces could be informed, funded or otherwise supported at the local level.

But using data about students to trigger "early warning bells" and inform interventions doesn't have to be a statewide, massive undertaking. It can be done school-by-school, with nothing more than persistent analysis and a truly collaborative partnership with the schools. That's been the experience in **Brownsville, TX**, a small town on the U.S.-Mexico border with the nation's poorest children. Supported by the AT&T Foundation, the **United Way of Southern Cameron County** conducted a deep analysis of longitudinal student data to identify the risk factors most related to failure to graduate on time – which were not the risk factors the school leaders had been assuming.[79]

School leaders had assumed that income, limited English proficiency and behavioral problems were the best predictors of future dropouts, but the United Way's careful review of data showed instead that the real predictors were attendance and grades.

This data analysis challenged assumptions about which kids should be considered at risk for dropping out. As a result, the United Way targeted eighth graders with more than seven absences who had also failed two or more sections of the state-mandated eighth grade testing. These were the "quietly failing" students who weren't acting out, but weren't showing up or keeping up.

Even with a start late in the school year, school leaders were quick to adjust interventions based on the data. Principals quickly assigned 30 failing ninth graders to an intensive remediation program, which in turn helped maximize gains in student success. Brownsville's program dramatically boosted student performance in the target group, with a 45% improvement in student academic performance and 25% improvement in attendance. Now, those "quietly failing" students are completing the year with credits in four core subjects–and are on track to graduate.

"Our United Way learned some important lessons," said United Way CEO Traci Wickett. "We already placed a high value on data, but we had never taken as deep a dive into tracking students longitudinally as we did in our work to identify the true risk factors for not graduating on time. The conventional wisdom about risk factors for dropping out was not supported by scrutiny of student data. Discovering the best predictors for student failure allowed us to pinpoint the student population that could most benefit from our family engagement strategies."

STRATEGY 6

Increase Parental Involvement and Connections

Supportive relationships between parents and teens are particularly important when students are going through life changes, such as the transition to high school.[80]

Specifically, students whose parents monitor their activities and intervene positively (with school work, peer networks and direct participation at the school) are more likely to have a smooth transition from middle grades to high school.[81]

Yet parents may not understand the research around adolescent development. United Ways can partner with employers, faith communities, schools and funded agencies serving parents to educate parents on the middle years, and connect them with resources and supports.

Schools should also strengthen their connections with parents in middle years, especially since the more complex school environment is more intimidating for many parents. Research suggests that schools increasing their communication to parents generate more parental contact in response, "improving overall communication between the schools and families."[82] In fact, these teachers in higher-performing middle schools emphasize the importance of middle grades academics to both students and parents, according to a new report by Ed Source. Some of these schools even require that parents sign parental participation contracts.[83]

In response to a dropout rate that's nearly doubled in **Cape Girardeau, MO**, the **United Way of Southeast Missouri** worked with school leaders to target eighth graders performing below the district's reading and writing grade level expectations for an enrichment program during the summer.[84]

Supported by AT&T, the United Way convened focus groups with schools, parents and community partners – which revealed that many of the targeted students' families did not communicate with schools and did not feel welcome there. As a result:

- Schools hired parent liaisons to bridge the parent–school gap. Liasons also serve as advocates for students.
- Parents were provided with technology training to support their use of the student data system.
- Schools began holding student-led, parent–teacher conferences, allowing students to guide the conversation and help build relationships between parents and teachers.
- Community partners who have existing relationships with the United Way are providing tutoring, mentoring, enrichment activities and access to computer labs after school.
- Community partners are providing alternative settings for parent–teacher conferences and other meetings with school staff, so that parents have a neutral space in which to interact with teachers.
- Even in the planning stage of this project, results were evident. The parent liaisons reached 43 target students right away, connecting them with resources and improving the families' relationships with school staff. Of those students, 32 (74%) got back on track academically and were promoted to the next grade level. Plans are now underway to add a parent liaison for each grade level.

THE WAY FORWARD

Many of the strategies laid out in this chapter focus on changes made inside schools. But community leadership can fuel many in-school changes, as the United Way of Southern Cameron County did by pushing for data to illuminate the real risk factors. Other strategies are truly community based, such as parent engagement and improving out-of-school time. To boost middle grade success – and have a direct impact on high school graduation – United Ways can engage with their communities, helping to convene citizens and key stakeholders to build an understanding of the nature of the middle school challenge in their community and to develop a collective approach to solving it.

Fixing the leak in the education pipeline in the middle school years is an important step in improving graduation rates—an issue of high importance to communities and our nation. By arming teachers, parents, principals, students and superintendents—along with business and faith leaders, elected officials and other key stakeholders—with up-to-date information on the challenges and solutions to improving educational outcomes, United Ways can help set the stage for change.

Given that today's fifth graders are next year's middle schoolers – and the graduating class of 2018—there is increasing urgency to this work. Communities should develop action plans to enable all children to successfully navigate middle school, as measured by NAEP scores statewide and local school data around attendance, behavior and course work. These plans should help strengthen schools, empower parents and provide extra help to struggling middle grade students.

By mobilizing institutions and individuals around shared goals, United Ways can help recruit advocates, volunteers and donors to the cause and partner with key players in the school system and in local and state government.

If communities are successful in developing and executing middle school strategies, in learning from their mistakes and in building on their successes, they can expect to see middle schoolers come out on a stronger path to high school graduation.

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HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

CASE FOR ACTION

The high school dropout problem presents a daunting challenge to communities across the United States. The scope of the dropout problem is staggering. About 25% of all students—nearly one million each year—fail to graduate high school on time.[1] In some large urban districts, only half the students graduate on time. And only about one-third of high school graduates are ready to move on to college.

The numbers are especially grim for low-income, African-American or Hispanic students. Low-income students are about nine times more likely to dropout than high-income students.[2] An estimated 67% of African-American and 68% of Hispanic students graduate from high school on time, compared with 80% of white students.[3]

With at least one student in five dropping out of school,[4] this problem is weakening the social fabric of our nation and our communities. High school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, receive welfare, contribute to high health care costs, perpetrate crimes and end up in jail.[5]

One study estimates that U.S. taxpayers would save $45 billion annually if the number of high school dropouts were cut in half.[6] In fact, according to a recent analysis, if the nation's 50 largest cities and surrounding metropolitan areas cut their dropout numbers in half, each year those communities would:[7]

- Increase homes sales by $10.5 billion.
- Support 30,000 additional jobs, an increase of $5.3 billion in gross regional product.
- Boost earnings by $4.1 billion.
- Spend an additional $2.8 billion and invest another $1.1 billion.
- Increase tax revenue by $536 million each year.
- Spend an extra $340 million purchasing cars, trucks and other vehicles.

The economic benefits of a high school diploma can be felt at the individual level as well. Individuals with a high school diploma, including those who go on to higher education, will earn an average of $550,000 more over a lifetime than high school dropouts.[8] High school graduates are also more likely to be employed than dropouts. As of August 2010, 14% of high school dropouts were unemployed, compared with 10% of high school graduates.[9]

High school dropouts are more likely to have long-term health issues and to have less healthy children. Research suggests that higher levels of education area an effect of improved health outcomes.[10]

These statistics are particularly troublesome in light of the fact that there are 1,746 schools—across all 50 states—in which 40% or more of the ninth grade class fails to make it to twelfth grade on time.[11] Half the nation's dropouts come from these high schools and their feeder middle schools.[12]

Without question, cutting the nation's dropout rate is a critical foundation for a more prosperous future for individuals and our communities.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION CHALLENGES

In order to solve the dropout problem, state, district, school and community leaders must work together to solve many challenges, including:

- A lack of high quality, rigorous and relevant instruction.
- A lack of academic and non-academic supports provided by schools, parents and communities.
- Insufficient early identification of and targeted support for students at risk of dropping out of school.
- A lack of incentives and programs for re-engaging dropouts.

CHALLENGE 1

A Lack of High Quality, Rigorous and Relevant Instruction

In too many schools, the methods used to teach students are ineffective, and the content of students' lessons is not sufficiently rigorous or relevant to the real world to keep them engaged or prepare them for college or work.

Effective teaching is the single largest in-school factor that impacts student achievement.[13] One Tennessee study found that an average student with three years of effective teachers would score 53 percentile points higher in math than an average student with three years of ineffective teachers.[14] The weakest teachers in schools serving disadvantaged students are substantially less effective than the weakest teachers in schools serving advantaged students.[15]

In addition to variations in effective teaching, instruction in high schools often suffers from a lack of rigor. One clear indicator of the lack of rigor in high school curricula is the number of students who cannot currently meet the Common Core State Standards. Developed by state leaders, in partnership with teachers, school administrators and education experts, the Common Core State Standards establish a common body of knowledge and skills that students are expected to master. As of January 2011, 40 states and the District of Columbia have officially adopted the Common Core State Standards.[16] One recent study found that only 30-50% of eleventh graders nationwide are proficient in the math and English knowledge and skills that the Common Core Standards identify as necessary for getting a good job or succeeding in college-level coursework. The same study found that only 25% of students meet the Common Core Standards for college-readiness when it comes to reading scientific texts.[17]

While seemingly counterintuitive, a high school curriculum that lacks sufficient rigor can have a negative impact on student success. Curricula that are not rigorous leave students feeling bored or unwilling to work, and low expectations are met with low performance. In one recent survey, nearly 70% of high school students reported that expectations of them were moderate to low, and 88% reported that they would work harder if high school demanded more of them, set higher standards and raised expectations.[18] Dropouts share these sentiments: in one survey, two thirds of dropouts said that they would have worked harder if more had been demanded of them (in terms of academic standards, studying and homework).[19]

Furthermore, survey data suggest that high school students want to take more rigorous courses. In one survey, 64% of students said that high school would improve a great deal if there were opportunities to take more challenging courses.[20]

These survey findings are confirmed by studies that show that, *other things being equal, students actually do perform better, and drop out less often, in schools with more rigorous curricula*.[21]

Despite students' willingness, or even desire, to work harder in response to challenging courses, high schools may fail to institute rigorous curricula because teachers and administrators have

misperceptions about students' responses to more challenging work. One study found that 75% of teachers and 66% of principals do not think that students at risk of dropping out would respond to higher expectations by working harder.[22]

In addition to their lack of rigor, high school classes often fail to provide students with relevant preparation for their futures. This is problematic because when students feel that their courses provide relevant preparation for college, work or other real-world situations they will encounter, they are more likely to show up to class and stay engaged when they are there.[23] In fact, 71% of students report that high school would be greatly improved if opportunities for real-world learning were increased.[24]

Students' call for more rigorous and relevant high school classes is echoed by colleges and employers, who report that students often leave high school without the skills they need to succeed at college or work.[25]

Finally, a growing body of research demonstrates that not all students learn in the same way and on the same schedule. In fact, meeting the diverse needs of students is the reason educators strive to differentiate instruction. While many students can be successful in traditional settings, others need alternative learning environments to succeed. Alternative high schools can provide students with curricula that are more hands-on, career-focused or tailored to students' needs and interests than traditional high school curricula; different or more flexible schedules; or smaller, more supportive learning communities.[26]

Unfortunately, in many communities, students who have not been successful in a traditional high school face limited options. Some 36% of school districts report having no alternative school or program for at-risk students administered by the district or another entity.[27] Among those districts that run an alternative school or program, about 30% report being unable to enroll new students in alternative schools and programs because of staffing or space limitations.[28] Finding educational options that work for students will require collaboration among districts, schools and community partners.

CHALLENGE 2

A Lack of Academic and Non-Academic Supports Provided by Schools, Parents and Communities

Too many students attend impersonal high schools in which they feel that no adults at school know them well or care about them, leaving the students so disconnected from and uninterested in school that they end up dropping out.[29] In one recent survey of dropouts, only 56% said they could talk to someone on school staff about school problems, and only 41% said they could talk to someone on school staff about personal problems.[30]

At the same time, as students reach and progress through high school, parental involvement in students' education declines markedly.[31] This decline is likely caused by a variety of factors, including the complex structure of high schools, high school coursework that may be unfamiliar or intimidating to parents, the need to provide older students with more independence and a decline in school outreach to parents.[32] Research suggests, however, that high school students are more successful and less likely to drop out when their parents stay involved in their education.[33]

High school students are also less likely to have access to high quality out-of-school time (OST) programs, where students often develop close relationships with caring adults. While many communities have invested in OST programs for younger children, there are far fewer programs that serve older children and youth. For example, only 5% of 21st Century Community Learning Center programs—which together comprise the largest federally funded afterschool program—target high school students.[34] Quality OST programs for older youth are particularly scarce in low-income neighborhoods, despite the fact that many low-income and minority families report an unmet demand for these programs.[35]

Students living in poverty may need more support than schools, parents and OST programs alone can provide. For example, students without sufficient access to health care may have health issues that compromise their ability to succeed in school. Communities and schools must work to ensure that these students have access to health and social services. In high-poverty communities where many students need social service support, this task may be particularly challenging.

CHALLENGE 3

Insufficient Early Identification of and Targeted Support for Students at Risk of Dropping Out of School

The pathway to dropping out starts early in a dropout's high school career, if not before. We now know that indicators of student performance—such as grades, attendance rates and behavior problems—can be used to identify students who are at risk of dropping out. These indicators are impressively accurate[36] and can be used as early as elementary and certainly middle school. This is data that's available, but not often tapped. While information on grades, attendance and behavior are readily available, many schools are not using this information to diagnose and resolve problems that lead students to drop out.

Early warning data systems—systems that identify students at risk of dropping out—are relatively simple to create. The bigger challenge is creating targeted interventions for students who are identified by the early warning data as "at risk" or "off track." Teachers, administrators and community partners need training and tools to:

- Implement the interventions.
- Collect and review data that are used to measure the success of the interventions.
- Make appropriate adjustments to the interventions when they are not successful.

CHALLENGE 4

A Lack of Incentives and Programs for Re-Engaging Dropouts

While many communities suffer from the dropout problem, there is no established public infrastructure for re-engaging youth who have dropped out, and few incentives for states and localities to do so.[37]

As the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices explains, states exert leverage over their education systems by deciding how to allocate state funding for education. Most states, however, do not have an education funding formula that rewards districts or schools for recovering dropouts. That's largely because state dollars don't follow students as they enter or leave a particular school. Instead, state funding is typically allocated to districts, which in turn use their own formulae to allocate funding to schools. In most cases, schools have little incentive to spend scarce resources to re-engage dropouts, who may bring down test scores.[38]

Even schools and districts with good incentive structures in place may have limited capacity to reach out to dropouts or to provide them with needed supports when they are re-engaged in school.[39] Dropout re-entry programs, which provide needed supports to re-engaged students, are few and far between. As a result, many students who wish to return to school cannot find education programs that allow them to overcome the challenges that led them to drop out in the first place.[40]

EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES TO TACKLE DROPOUT CHALLENGES

Across the nation, communities are implementing innovative and promising strategies to stem the dropout tide. To address the high school dropout challenge, leading institutions and individuals can:

- Improve the quality, rigor and relevance of instruction in high schools.
- Create a supportive learning environment for all students.
- Use early warning data systems to indentify and help at-risk students.
- Reach out to dropouts and re-engage them in school.
- Engage parents and families more effectively.

STRATEGY 1

Improve the Quality, Rigor and Relevance of Instruction in High Schools

In order to reduce the dropout rate, states, districts, schools and their community partners must work to ensure that students are willing to attend their classes, and that these classes impart the knowledge and skills that students need to graduate ready for college or work.

Improve Effective Teaching

More than any other in-school factor, teachers have the greatest influence on how well their students perform academically.[41] Studies find that students with the most effective teachers learn up to an entire grade level more than students with the least effective teachers, annually.[42] Effective teaching has a greater impact on learning outcomes for low-performing students than it has on learning outcomes for higher-performing students.[43] Improving effective teaching, and ensuring equitable access to the most effective teachers, must be an essential part of efforts to help all students acquire the knowledge and skills they need to graduate from high school ready for college or work.

In 2010, United Way issued a guide for a group of United Ways developing a public policy strategy focused on improving effective teaching. This guide included three concrete steps that state and community leaders can take:

1) **Build the political will and infrastructure needed to measure and act on effective teaching data.**
2) **Improve teacher working conditions and reward teachers for their contributions in the classroom.**
3) **Abolish barriers to hiring effective teachers and establish fair protocols for firing continually ineffective ones.**

Build the Political Will and Infrastructure to Measure and Act on Effective Teaching Data

Currently, all states have longitudinal education data systems that allow them to track test scores and other indicators of academic progress for individual students over time.[44] States also collect data on individual teachers, including, for example, information about their educational background and certification.[45] Many states and districts are working on ways to measure effective teaching by pairing student records with the records of their teachers. For example, if the students of one

teacher tend to do significantly better than statistically expected on state tests (given their test scores in previous years), there is good reason to think that their teacher is more effective than the average teacher in that state. Individual school districts with robust data systems can measure effective teaching the same way.

Currently, **Ohio** and **Tennessee** measure student achievement gains attributable to teachers (often called "value-added data") to help evaluate effective teaching. In Tennessee, principals use this information as one component of teachers' annual evaluation process.

Improve Teacher Working Conditions and Reward Teachers for their Contributions in the Classroom

To improve working conditions, states and districts can survey teachers and use their feedback to foster positive changes. For example, **North Carolina** has conducted surveys of educators about their school conditions every two years since 2002. Findings from the survey highlighted the critical role of principals in retaining effective teachers in the classroom. The state's most effective teachers said that the quality of their principal would be the deciding factor in their decision to continue their career in the classroom.[46]

Offering teachers meaningful opportunities for evidenced-based professional development can help them improve the quality of their instruction and improve outcomes for their students.[47] In addition, providing teachers who show professional growth with the opportunity for career advancement can keep teachers motivated, allow effective teachers to share their insights with their peers and ultimately improve the quality of instruction that students receive.[48]

Moreover, some research suggests that linking teacher salaries with teacher performance—so that more effective teachers are paid more money—can raise student outcomes as well.[49]

While more evidence is needed to determine how to structure and evaluate performance-based compensation for teachers, early evidence suggests that performance-based systems are worth exploring.[50]

States and districts can also create market incentives to attract and retain teachers in hard-to-staff schools and hard-to-staff subjects. Guilford County, **North Carolina** did just that with its Mission Possible program. Mission Possible attracts and retains effective teachers in struggling schools using a Teacher Incentive Fund grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Teachers are offered incentives ranging from $2,500 to $10,000, depending on the grade and subject area taught. Teachers are offered more for harder to staff subjects, like algebra. Importantly, the program also entails ongoing professional development, collaborative support and smaller class sizes.

Abolish Barriers to Hiring Effective Teachers

States could expand the new teacher pool by removing barriers to entry for the profession and supporting alternative routes into the classroom. Research suggests that there is no reason to limit initial entrance into the teaching corps to those who have completed traditional certification programs or to those who are willing to take such courses during their first year on the job.[51]

States, district and community leaders could also offer communities start-up grants to pilot teacher preparation academies that use selective criteria for admissions and provide intense pre-service training to teachers.[52] For example, the **Chicago Teaching Fellows** program selectively recruits college graduates from various backgrounds with at least a 3.0 GPA to teach in Chicago Public Schools. The fellowship provides a pre-service institute to prepare fellows to teach, along with financial assistance to defray the costs of coursework for state certification.

State and community leaders should ensure that effective teachers can earn tenure, but they should make it difficult for the least effective teachers to get tenured positions. If schools simply set a minimum standard for teachers to earn tenure and then denied tenure to those who were below that standard, student achievement would rise substantially.[53]

One initiative that combines several of the above recommendations is **TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement**. Supported by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, TAP is a comprehensive school reform model that includes four elements:[54]

- Multiple career paths: opportunities for more responsibilities and commensurate pay.
- Ongoing applied professional growth: continuous on-site professional development embedded within the school day.
- Instructionally focused accountability: fair evaluations based on clearly defined, research-based standards.
- Performance-based compensation: salaries and bonuses tied to responsibilities, instructional performance and student achievement growth.

Research suggests that TAP schools consistently outperform similar non-TAP schools in terms of student achievement gains. In Louisiana, South Carolina, and Texas, where TAP has state-level support, students in TAP schools were able to achieve significantly more than one year of academic growth during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years.[55] These statistics are particularly impressive in light of the fact that the percentage of students in poverty at TAP schools was greater than the percentage of students in poverty at other schools in these states.[56]

Make High School Curricula More Rigorous

The rigor of students' high school classes is one of the best predictors of whether students will graduate from high school.[57] While this may seem surprising, research clearly suggests that other things being equal, high schools with more rigorous curricula have lower dropout rates.[58]

Increasing the rigor of high school classes can also increase students' chances of earning a college degree.[59] One study found that even after controlling for various characteristics of both students and schools—such as family income levels, a measure of students' motivation and abilities and school resources—a more rigorous math curriculum increases students' chances of graduating from college and increases their expected earnings.[60] There are many steps, both large and small, that states, districts and schools can use to offer students a more rigorous curriculum. Education leaders can:

- Require that students take more challenging courses in order to graduate.
- Increase the number of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes offered and encourage (and allow) more students—even those who aren't the highest achievers—to take available classes.
- Create opportunities for high school students to take college courses for both high school and college credit.
- Use technology to expand course offerings.

One recent step that many states have taken to increase high school rigor is the adoption of the Common Core State Standards. These common standards will help ensure that high school students are being held to the same minimum college and career-ready learning expectations from state to state. As of January 2011, 40 states and the District of Columbia have officially adopted the standards.[61] States that have adopted the new standards must now work to develop new curricula and new assessments.

Many communities have also reformed their high school curricula by instituting **early college** or **dual enrollment programs**. Early college programs (also called middle college programs) blend high school and college coursework into a single curriculum. Students in these programs can earn up to two years of college credit—without paying tuition—by the time they graduate from high school. One study found that an estimated 66% of students who begin ninth grade at an early college high school would graduate from high school on time, which is 14 percentage points more than the estimated on-time graduation rates for other schools in the early college high schools' districts.[62]

Dual enrollment programs (also called dual credit programs) allow high school students to take individual college classes, usually on college campuses, for both high school and college credit.

Controlling for student differences, researchers have found that dual enrollment participants were more likely to graduate from high school and succeed in college, and males and low-income students benefitted even more than their peers.[63] According to a 2008 scan of state policies, 46 states have policies allowing or requiring dual enrollment programs, but there is a lot of variation in how states and localities implement these programs and the number and kinds of students who participate.[64]

Make High School Curricula More Relevant to the Real World

Research has shown that one of the greatest predictors of academic success in high school is the extent to which a student sees a link between what he or she is studying in high school and his or her future goals. When students feel that their courses provide relevant preparation for college, work or other real-world situations they will encounter, they are more likely to attend and stay engaged in their classes.

One way for states, districts and schools to make curricula more relevant to the real world is to ensure that high school coursework prepares students for college. State and district leaders may do this by aligning high school graduation requirements with the entrance requirements for states' public universities. States, districts or schools may also create early college high school or dual enrollment programs, so that students are motivated to earn college credits in high school—without paying tuition.

Note: Additional areas of opportunity are highlighted in College, Work and Life section, in the context of post-secondary success, including college prep programs and more detail about early college and dual enrollment, strategies that are proving to motivate low achievers.

States, districts and schools can also create or enhance Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. CTE programs develop students' academic, career and technical skills in a broad array of fields, so that students leave high school with the skills they need to be successful in college and work. The What Works Clearinghouse explains that high-quality CTE programs offer a curriculum that blends technical and career-oriented courses with core academic courses that are rigorous, well-taught and designed to help students make connections between their coursework and a career path. The curriculum is designed to be rigorous and engaging so that students who complete the CTE program will be better prepared not only for careers, but for college as well.[67]

Some studies of high-quality CTE programs show that these programs help students to earn more credits and graduate at higher rates.[68] Effective CTE programs can help keep students engaged in high school, provide viable pathways to a broad range of post-secondary education options and contribute to sustained earnings gains—particularly for young men most at risk of dropping out of high school.[69] They can also help students develop knowledge and skills through real-world, hands-on coursework and offer students a clear path to college or other advanced training.

- To make learning more engaging and meaningful for students, California is investigating a statewide reform with an academic and technical core curriculum combined with work-based learning opportunities and support services.[70] California also has a statewide network of over 200 **California Partnership Academies** operating on the "school within a school" model and involving substantial business partnerships.
- **The National Academy Foundation (NAF)** operates a national network of over 500 public high school career academies serving predominately urban districts. NAF schools use career-themed curricula created in partnership with industry. Evaluations show that 4 out of 5 NAF students go on to post-secondary education, more than half as the first to attend college. Some 52% of NAF graduates earn a bachelor's degree in four years. Started in 1982 by Sanford Weill, former chairman of Citigroup, Inc., NAF serves over 50,000 students per year through its four academy program models in Finance, Engineering, Hospitality and Tourism, and Information Technology. NAF has been successful in attracting investments and participation

by major national corporations like Ernst and Young, Motorola, Xerox and Kelly Engineering.[71]

Create New Schools to Better Meet the Diverse Needs of Students

In order to serve all students effectively, communities need to provide multiple options for students to earn a high school diploma.

Alternative schools offer a non-traditional environment or curriculum that can better serve students who have greater out-of-class responsibilities or different learning needs. They are run by school districts, non-profits or other community-based youth-serving organizations and operate as separate schools or "schools within a school."

Indianapolis, Nashville, and Newark have partnered with the National League of Cities and the Association for High School Innovation (AHSI) to establish a portfolio of high school options that work for at-risk students, using models from across the country that are part of the AHSI network.[72] Among others, these models include:[73]

- Big Picture Schools, which focus on learning that taps into student interests and is relevant to the students' community. Big Picture schools graduate over 90% of their students each year.
- Diploma Plus, which offers students a competency-based path to a high school diploma. Students must complete real-world projects, an internship and one or more college courses.
- YouthBuild, which provides on-the-job training and a competency-based school program to students who previously dropped out of school.

Boston Public Schools (BPS) currently offers an array of alternative schools and programs for students who have not been successful in Boston's traditional schools or who prefer to pursue a high school diploma in a different setting. BPS runs six alternative schools and collaborates with community-based organizations to provide additional educational services.[74]

Make Ninth Grade Count

Research suggests that ninth grade is a make-or-break year when it comes to graduating from high school on time. In fact, academic success in ninth grade coursework is a better predictor of high school graduation than students' demographic characteristics or prior academic performance.[75] Yet more students fail ninth grade than any other grade in high school.[76] The "ninth grade bulge" in high school enrollments evidences this fact: nationally, student enrollments are 13% higher in ninth grade than in eighth grade the previous year because students who fail courses in ninth grade are held back.[77] While the percentage of students who complete ninth grade on time is low across all demographic groups, it is lowest among African-American and Hispanic students. For example, one study found that ninth grade enrollment is 23-27% higher than eighth grade enrollment for African-American students, but only 6 to 8% higher for their white peers.[78]

In cities with the highest dropout rates, *up to 40% of ninth grade* students repeat ninth grade, and only 10 to 15% of these ninth-grade repeaters graduate from high school.[79]

Taken together, the strategies outlined in this chapter can go a long way toward improving the odds that all students progress to graduation, but schools can take several steps that are specifically focused on helping ninth graders stay on track:

- **Offer skill-boosting classes.** Nearly two-thirds of ninth graders enter high school with below-grade-level reading and math skills.[80] One way to help these students is to offer semester-long intensive "catch-up" courses designed to strengthen these skills. Research suggests that these remedial courses can give students the tools they need for success in other high school classes; students who take "catch-up" courses are able to sustain gains in credits earned over time.[81]
- **Offer double-blocked classes.** Double-blocked classes, which meet daily for 80 to 90 minutes (instead of meeting daily for 50 minutes or every other day for 80 to 90 minutes) can help ninth graders stay focused in class and learn in a more intensive setting. In some schools, double-blocked schedules also allow students to attempt more credits during their freshman year, since double-blocked classes can cover a year's worth of material over the course of a semester.[82] When "catch-up" courses are combined with double-blocked scheduling, so that students are able to take double-blocked, "catch-up" courses, studies show significant positive effects on ninth grade students' academic performance.[83]
- **Improve effective teaching for ninth graders.** While ninth grade presents an academic challenge for many students, ninth grade teachers are more likely to be new to teaching, new to their schools, and uncertified in the subjects they teach.[84] In order to ensure that ninth graders receive high quality instruction, schools can offer their best teachers incentives to teach freshmen.[85] Research also shows that when ninth grade teachers collaborate, their students benefit. In fact, studies suggest that schools can reduce dropout rates by creating interdisciplinary teams of teachers for freshmen.[86]
- **Create freshman academies.** One way to combine the positive effects of "catch-up" courses, double-blocked scheduling and team teaching with the positive effects of a more personalized learning community (described under Strategy 2) is to create a "ninth grade academy"—a school within a school for ninth graders. Freshman academies can smooth the transition to high school by providing students with intensive, coordinated and (if necessary) remedial instruction in a smaller and more nurturing environment. These academies seem to offer promising results. One study found that students at a freshman grade academy earned more credits over two years and were more likely to move on to tenth grade than similar peers in a more traditional high school environment.[87]

STRATEGY 2

Create a Supportive Learning Environment for All Students

There are several steps that school and community leaders can take to ensure that students have the supports they need to be successful in high school.

Personalize Learning Communities

Research suggests that students' academic performance and level of engagement improve when they have the opportunity to learn in a more personalized setting—a setting in which students and adults know and have positive relationships with one another.[88] One study of ninth graders in Chicago Public Schools found that, "In general, grades, failure and absence rates were significantly better than expected, given the students served by the school, in schools characterized by…supportive relationships between teachers and students…In particular, student performance is better where students report high levels of trust for their teachers and where they report that teachers provide personal support to them."[89]

Schools can help create more personalized learning environments by creating smaller learning communities, such as groups of students who share the same space and set of teachers for their "core" subjects.[90] Whatever method schools use to create smaller learning communities, research cautions that smaller learning communities alone may not be enough to improve student outcomes.[91]

- **Des Moines Public Schools** used funding from the U.S. Department of Education to create smaller, more personalized learning communities in high schools. The reforms include freshman academies that serve as schools within schools, common planning time for teachers, a new scheduling model that provides struggling students with more time and support and a renewed focus on adolescent literacy. After implementing these changes, student achievement rose and the dropout rate fell.[92]

Schools can also personalize learning communities by creating a system of faculty advisors. These advisors pay extra attention to and offer additional support for their student advisees. They also provide students with a designated adult who can help them navigate problems in (or out) of school.[93] Nearly 75% of students participating in First Things First, a high school reform model that includes a faculty advisory system, reported that their advisor was either "very important" or "sort of important" in giving them someone to talk to when needed, helping them do better on schoolwork and recognizing their accomplishments.[94]

Provide Mentoring

While mentoring is best started in middle school, formal and informal mentoring can help a disaffected high schooler see the path forward more clearly. Adult mentors can provide emotional support, guidance that enhances self-esteem and self-control and advice that many teens would be uncomfortable seeking from their parents. These mentors can serve as positive school and work role models for disadvantaged youths from struggling homes or low-income neighborhoods – especially if the mentors share the teen's background, high school or neighborhood.

- **Big Brothers Big Sisters'** community-based mentoring is showing results, supported in many cases by United Way funding. Evaluations find that 10- to 16-year-old boys in a community-based BBBS program had significantly increased math and reading scores, compared to non-mentored peers in a control group.[95]

Expand Out-of-School Opportunities

High school students can also find academic, social, and emotional support in high-quality out-of-school time (OST) programs. High-quality afterschool and summer programs allow high school students to reinforce and expand upon what they learn in the classroom. In fact, for many high school students, OST is the only time they have to explore genuine interests and passions as budget pressures continually force schools to cut back on art, music and other activities. OST programs can also provide opportunities for career exploration, service-learning projects and mentorships.[96]

There is strong evidence to suggest that high quality out-of-school time programs improve student outcomes.[97] In fact, the Afterschool Alliance reports that, "Children and youth of all ages who participate in afterschool programs maintain better grades, have lower rates of truancy, are more engaged in school and attain higher levels of achievement in college."[98] Studies also suggest that in order for older youth to reap all the benefits of afterschool programs, they must participate in

these programs on a regular basis.[99] Since older youth are able to "vote with their feet," they are much less likely to attend programs that are not engaging or do not meet their needs. It is essential, therefore, that out-of-school time programs find ways to enroll and retain older youth.

- **After School Matters** (ASM) in Chicago offers a teen apprenticeship program that allows high school students to explore career opportunities in math and information technology, science, athletics, and theater, writing and communications. Operating after school and during the summer, ASM recruits skilled professionals to train students in their career fields, and in each case, participants have opportunities to apply and showcase their abilities. Students who participate in ASM miss fewer days of school than their classmates, have fewer course failures in core academic courses and lower dropout rates than peers.[100]

Increase Access to Support Services

Schools with high dropout rates tend to be located in high-poverty communities.[101] In order to ensure that the physical and emotional needs of students in these communities are met—so students can attend and stay focused in school—communities must ensure that students have access to health and social services.

Community schools are one means to provide students with easy access to additional services. In a community school, the school serves as a hub, providing students and families with access to health, social and academic support services. Communities in Schools, a national community school initiative, found that students in their schools were more likely to graduate on time with a regular diploma than similar students attending traditional schools.[102]

- In **Tukwila, Washington**, just south of Seattle, the Tukwila Community Schools Collaboration serves all of the city's schools. Tukwila's Foster High School is home to a significant immigrant and refugee population, and regularly engages over 400 of its 900 students in its community school services and activities. A site manager at the school helps to coordinate a variety of initiatives, including health services to students and families, and an extensive health education program integrated into the school day and after school. The community school also includes a youth-driven Multicultural Action Committee, an After School Study Table staffed with teachers and volunteers from the local university, and a credit retrieval program coordinated with the county's youth workforce program. In addition to programming for students, the school offers an extensive parent education and outreach program, engaging 300 families each month with language-specific parent nights, classes on navigating school and community resources and civic engagement.[103] The school's on-time graduation rate has increased annually since 2001.[104]

There are many different community school models, and local leaders looking to create a community school must choose a model that meets the needs of families in their community. For more information on community school models, see resources at end of this chapter.

STRATEGY 3

Use Early Warning Data Systems to Identify and Help At-Risk Students

Many dropouts fall off the path to graduation early in their high school careers, or even before. Early warning data systems allow schools and their community partners to identify these students and help them get back on track.

Identify Students at Risk of Dropping Out with an Early Warning Data System

Early warning data systems allow schools and community partners to identify students who are at a high risk of dropping out. Such systems enable schools and community partners to target their resources effectively. Many states and districts are now working to put early warning systems in place. While there are currently no official

United Way of Dane County in Madison, WI, and its partners have set out a goal to increase the graduation rate in Wisconsin's Dane County to 95% by 2012. They are driving towards the goal with four key strategies (called the Achievement Connections strategies): increasing student engagement in schools and in the community; increasing the emotional and social supports for parents and guardians; providing early screening for mental health issues; and re-engaging the youth who have dropped out of school.

To successfully impact these issues, Achievement Connections Teams are being convened to engage local communities and be the catalyst for the four Achievement Connections strategies. Drawing from wide community representation, these leadership teams are developing and executing collaborative, measurable solutions that reconnect youth to their families, schools and success. One target goal is to increase student engagement through mentoring, volunteerism, after-school programs and improved educational techniques. United Way of Dane County plans to:

- Create a pool of Graduation Mentors to work with youth as they transition into middle school, continuing with them until they graduate from high school.
- Provide training through United Way on techniques to keep youth engaged in the traditional classroom setting.
- Align afterschool and summer programming to support improved school attendance, academic achievement and graduation rates.
- Promote volunteer activities as career-building experience.
- Expand Schools of Hope tutoring (an early grade reading initiative described in Early Grade Reading section) to additional school districts.
- Support smaller learning communities in schools and other opportunities for students to work in small groups.
- Create peer courts to provide youth with learning and leadership opportunities as they help determine consequences for their peers who have made bad choices.

estimates of the number of districts or schools using early warning systems, the Data Quality Campaign will collect information from states about early warning data systems in its 2011 survey.[105]

Early warning data systems are relatively easy to develop, as they are based on readily available data such as age, grades, attendance, behavior problems, test scores and course failures.[106] In addition, these data systems are typically very accurate; they can identify the vast majority of students who will drop out long before they actually do so.

- In **Philadelphia**, 40% of eventual dropouts could be identified in sixth grade, and 80% showed early warning signs by the end of ninth grade based on indicators of attendance, behavior and course failures.[107]

While there are many ways to develop early warning data systems, one of the most powerful ways of identifying students at risk of dropping out is to create an "off-track indicator."[108] Off-track indicators are created by identifying aspects of students' school performance that significantly increase their risk of dropping out. Schools may then use their data systems to flag students with these risk factors as "off-track." Once students have been flagged as "off-track," school staff can develop a plan to help these students get back on the path to graduation.[109]

- In 2005, the Consortium on Chicago School Research introduced the "off-track" indicator for **Chicago Public Schools**. Students in Chicago Public Schools who earn fewer than five course credits in ninth grade and students who earn more than one grade F in a core ninth grade course are flagged as off-track. On-track students are at least three and a half times more likely to graduate from high school on time than off-track students.[110]

While some aspects of a students' academic performance—such as poor attendance, multiple course failures or few earned credits—seem to be universal risk factors for dropping out, research suggests that off-track indicators work best when they are customized to fit local contexts.[111]

Supporting At-Risk Young People in New York City

United Way of New York City has developed a comprehensive approach to cutting high school dropout rates in its community. As part of this strategy, **United Way of New York City** joined forces with JPMorgan Chase Foundation, National Grid Foundation and Con Edison to roll out and support a youth development program called Focus Forward. Focus Forward began in 2005 as an enhancement initiative for youth that uses strong case management to address barriers to school attendance. Focus Forward often pairs case management and mentoring with an after-school effort to reconnect students to the community.

Focus Forward engages young people in three types of activities:

- Academic—academic enrichment, intervention and support services.
- Youth Development—arts enrichment, sports and conflict mediation.
- Higher Education and Career Exploration—including high school preparation and college readiness.

A 2006-2007 evaluation of Focus Forward revealed that students participating in the program:

- Improved attendance (71%).
- Demonstrated improvements in self-esteem and self-confidence (over 75%).
- Experienced positive changes in school motivation and preparedness (88%).
- Enjoyed the program (99%).

Recently, through an analysis of local data in Brownsville, Texas, the **United Way of Southern Cameron County** debunked long-held myths about the dropout problem. Educators assumed that income, limited English proficiency and behavioral problems were the best predictors of future dropouts, but United Way's careful review of data showed that the best predictors were actually attendance and grades.

Once early warning data systems have been developed, districts, schools and their community partners must collaborate to monitor the data and design targeted interventions for students who—according to the data system—are at risk of dropping out.

Provide At-Risk Students with Targeted Interventions

Once students at risk of dropping out are identified—whether via a sophisticated data system or through less formal means—schools and community partners will need to provide tailored supports and interventions to help them re-engage and stay in school.

Models that have shown success involve a multi-tiered intervention strategy with targeted supports for students who have one or two early warning indicators of dropout risk, and more intensive supports and services (including one-on-one services) for the (fewer) students who demonstrate an even greater likelihood of dropout.[112] Interventions could include: attendance outreach to students and parents; focused behavioral interventions; fast-track credit recovery programs that allow students to recover credit they may have lost (by failing or dropping out of a class) in a timely way; focused tutoring or smaller class sizes for at-risk students; life skills coaching in or out of school; and special supports for students with Limited English Proficiency.

Graduation coaches, or school employees whose sole focus is identifying students at risk of dropping out and connecting them to needed supports, are a promising method of getting likely dropouts the help they need to stay in school. **Georgia's** Graduation Coaches program puts a coach in every public high school. These coaches

work with students in eighth to twelfth grades who are at risk of dropping out, to connect them with needed supports. Graduation coaches can connect students to community mentors, create individualized graduation plans for students and customize credit-recovery programs. The Georgia Department of Education has partnered with Communities in Schools, a national organization, to train graduation coaches.[113]

STRATEGY 4

Reach Out to Dropouts and Re-Engage Them in School

It is critical that states and localities align incentives and accountability structures for re-engaging dropouts and provide improved pathways for dropouts to achieve both secondary and post-secondary credentials.

Support the Development of Dropout Recovery Programs

Dropout recovery can be improved by establishing incentives for districts and schools to re-engage dropouts, as well as by establishing more programs to provide direct outreach to students who have left school. In order to make this outreach effective, community leaders must work to ensure that dropouts can continue their education with a program that meets their needs. Creating education programs that work for returning students is discussed in College, Work and Life section.

In many states, there is no clear responsible party for reaching out to students who have dropped out of high school, nor is there any financial incentive for the K-12 education system to do so. State and district leaders can remedy this problem by creating school funding formulae that reward districts and schools for reaching out to dropouts and reconnecting them to the education systems in their communities.[114]

One way to re-engage a dropout is to reach out directly. Many outreach efforts are simple and involve repeated calls and home visits by teachers, other adults who know the students, volunteers and community members. Others include "one-stop" centers, which provide multiple resources in one location for dropouts seeking to return to school.

- In **Houston**, the mayor and other city officials regularly comb the city to visit high school dropouts and encourage them to re-enroll in school. The program has recaptured more than 5,500 dropouts in the city since it started in 2004.[115]
- Each year, **United Way of Central Iowa**, the Des Moines schools and Aviva USA organize a volunteer-fueled "Reach Out to Dropouts Day," as part of their collaborative Destination Graduation initiative. Last fall, volunteers went door-to-door to visit 382 high school students who had not shown up for school during the first weeks of the academic year. As a result, 23 students re-enrolled and another 58 asked school staff to follow up with them or made appointments to re-enroll. Another 21 told volunteers they are in the process of pursuing their GED.[116]

Support Multiple Pathways to Graduation

Once dropouts have been re-engaged, it is important to present them with opportunities to overcome the challenges that led them to drop out and to ensure that new out-of-class responsibilities—such as work or family obligations—do not keep them from earning secondary or post-secondary credentials. One approach is "multiple pathways to graduation," or education programs that may meet the needs of re-engaged dropouts better than traditional high schools. When re-engaged dropouts can choose their own education programs, they may find it easier to succeed in school.

- **New York City** established the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation in 2005 and has developed a "differentiated portfolio" of options for over-age or under-credited students. These programs include: small, academically rigorous "transfer" schools; blended GED programs offering intensive career exploration and post-secondary counseling; and "Learning to Work" programs which combine workforce readiness and jobs with classes to finish high school or earn a GED. Some of these programs involve online learning components or alternative scheduling (afternoon and weekend classes, for example).[117]

STRATEGY 5

Engage Parents and Families More Effectively

Studies suggest that when parents are appropriately involved in students' education, students' academic achievement and attendance rates are higher.[118] One important way for parents to stay involved in their high school students' education is to maintain high expectations for their children's educational attainment: students whose parents hold higher expectations for them hold higher expectations for themselves, spend more time on homework and achieve more academically.[119] Studies also show that students are less likely to drop out when their parents monitor their progress in school and communicate appropriately with school staff.[120]

Research suggests several strategies that schools can use to improve parental involvement, including: creating one point of contact in schools; providing parents with information on high school graduation requirements; providing parents with information on college admission processes and requirements; forming "action teams" that identify local barriers to parental involvement and design strategies to remove them; working with parents to create individualized student plans; creating homework hotlines; establishing "learning centers," where parents can access information and technology in schools; and creating more flexible schedules for parent-teacher conferences.[121]

The Harvard Family Research Project also suggests that schools can support productive parental involvement in students' education by encouraging them to take certain steps at home, including: communicating often with their children; enforcing rules that help their children understand the relationship between independence and responsibility; and demonstrating the importance of education by supporting homework completion and reading, knowing their children's teachers and helping their children plan for post-secondary education.[122]

Only about half of students in Washoe County, Nevada's second-largest school district, graduate high school on-time. **United Way of Northern Nevada and the Sierra** took up the challenge of bolstering high school success rates. It joined forces with AT&T Foundation and the Education Alliance of Washoe County to convene five all-school meetings at the beginning of 2010. These meetings brought together families, school administrators and staff from 12 high schools, parent involvement facilitators and community members to develop a formal plan for family engagement.

The family engagement plan developed through this process is designed to reach over 600 at-risk ninth graders from 12 high schools. At-risk students are identified using a risk index from Washoe County School District. This index uses various criteria to assess students' likelihood of graduating on time:

- Eighth grade reading and math performance.
- Student retention.
- Student mobility.
- Student attendance.

United Way found that families lacked access to schools' data resources, had difficulty helping their teenagers transition from middle to high school, didn't understand graduation or attendance requirements and in many cases had difficult home circumstances.

Innovations in Washoe County, NV

- Schools are making tools that track student progress more accessible to parents, including use of the new system-wide student-data portal.
- Schools will open computer labs for afterschool use by parents and families, and partner with community organizations, such as the YMCA, to provide computer access in non-school locations.

A planning committee team (which included families, school staff, and administrators) worked together to identify assets and barriers to family engagement and create a system of supports:

- The United Way will help school staff engage in proactive, positive communication, such as welcome phone calls, orientations and home visits, while moving away from the current pattern of only contacting families with negative information.

Schools will communicate graduation requirements and education terms in clear, accessible language to families who may not be familiar with the U.S. education system.

- Schools will match families with academic supports (such as www.smartthinking.com, an online tutoring program) and will include families in their college and career preparation offerings.
- High schools will be more proactive about reaching out to families at the beginning of ninth grade to ensure they have necessary information about courses and other graduation requirements, rather than waiting until problems arise.
- High schools will partner with middle schools to create parent engagement strategies to ensure that parent involvement doesn't drop as students begin ninth grade.
- Schools will develop parent mentors to help parents navigate the education system.
- Schools will provide home visits for families who may not have an easy way to get to the school.
- This parent engagement initiative is too new for educational outcomes to be measured, but before the planning was over, more than 80 parents have been trained on the use of Edline, an online monitoring tool that tracks attendance, assignments and grades. This training included information on high school graduation requirements and college or post-secondary options, and linked parents with a teacher or counselor to develop a high school graduation plan with their teen.

THE WAY FORWARD

United Way laid down a marker when it challenged the nation to cut by half the number of young people who drop out by 2018. In order to meet that goal, we must accelerate our efforts. Research on the underlying causes of the dropout problem is sound, educators and policymakers are focused on results and there are recent successes on which to build.

One of the strongest roles United Ways play in making real community change is that of a mobilizing force, recruiting people with passion, expertise and resources to make a difference. In the case of high school graduation, United Ways are beginning to shape the community conversation, to convene stakeholders to examine issues, develop strategies and execute action plans on the issues that matter most.

By engaging teachers, parents, principals, students and superintendents—along with business and faith leaders, elected officials and other key stakeholders—United Ways can galvanize communities around real change.

And by mobilizing individuals and institutions around shared goals, United Ways can help recruit advocates, volunteers and donors to the cause and partner with key players in the school system and in local and state government. If communities are successful in developing and executing high school graduation strategies, in learning from their mistakes and in building on their successes, they can expect to see high school graduation increase.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Research on the Dropout Problem

- The **Everyone Graduates Center** at Johns Hopkins University **www.every1graduates.org**
- California Dropout Research Project **Research and Policy Reports** (**www.cdrp.ucsb.edu/dropouts/pubs_reports.htm**) **and Statistical Briefs**
- **What Works Clearinghouse** **http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Reports/Topic.aspx?tid=01**
- Institute of Education Sciences Practice Guide: **Dropout Prevention** **http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice-guides/dp_pg_090308.pdf**

Potential Partners / National Campaigns

- **America's Promise Alliance:** Mobilizing America to End the Dropout Crisis **www.americaspromise.org**
- The **Coalition for Community Schools** has a wide array of resources available to help establish and manage a community school **www.communityschools.org**
- **Communities in Schools** is a national network of community schools **www.communitiesinschools.org**

Local and State Data on High School Graduation

- EdWeek's **District Graduation Rate Map Tool** **http://www.edweek.org/apps/gmap/**
- National Center for Education Statistics **Report on Dropout and Graduation Rates** **http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2009064**
- Alliance for Excellent Education's **Economic Costs of the Dropout Problem by State** and **Economic Benefits of Halving the Dropout Rate for each of the 50 Largest Cities** **www.all4ed.org**

Community Planning Guides

- Mobilization Plan Blueprint and tools for increasing high school graduation rates http://online.unitedway.org/education
- Grad Nation: Guidebook, Help and Communities Tackle the Dropout Crisis www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Dropout-Prevention/Grad-Nation-Guidebook.aspx
- Mobilizing a Cross-Sector Collaborative for Systemic Change: Lessons from Project U-Turn, Philadelphia's Campaign to Reduce the Dropout Rate www.jff.org/publications/education/mobilizing-cross-sector-collaborative-sy/987

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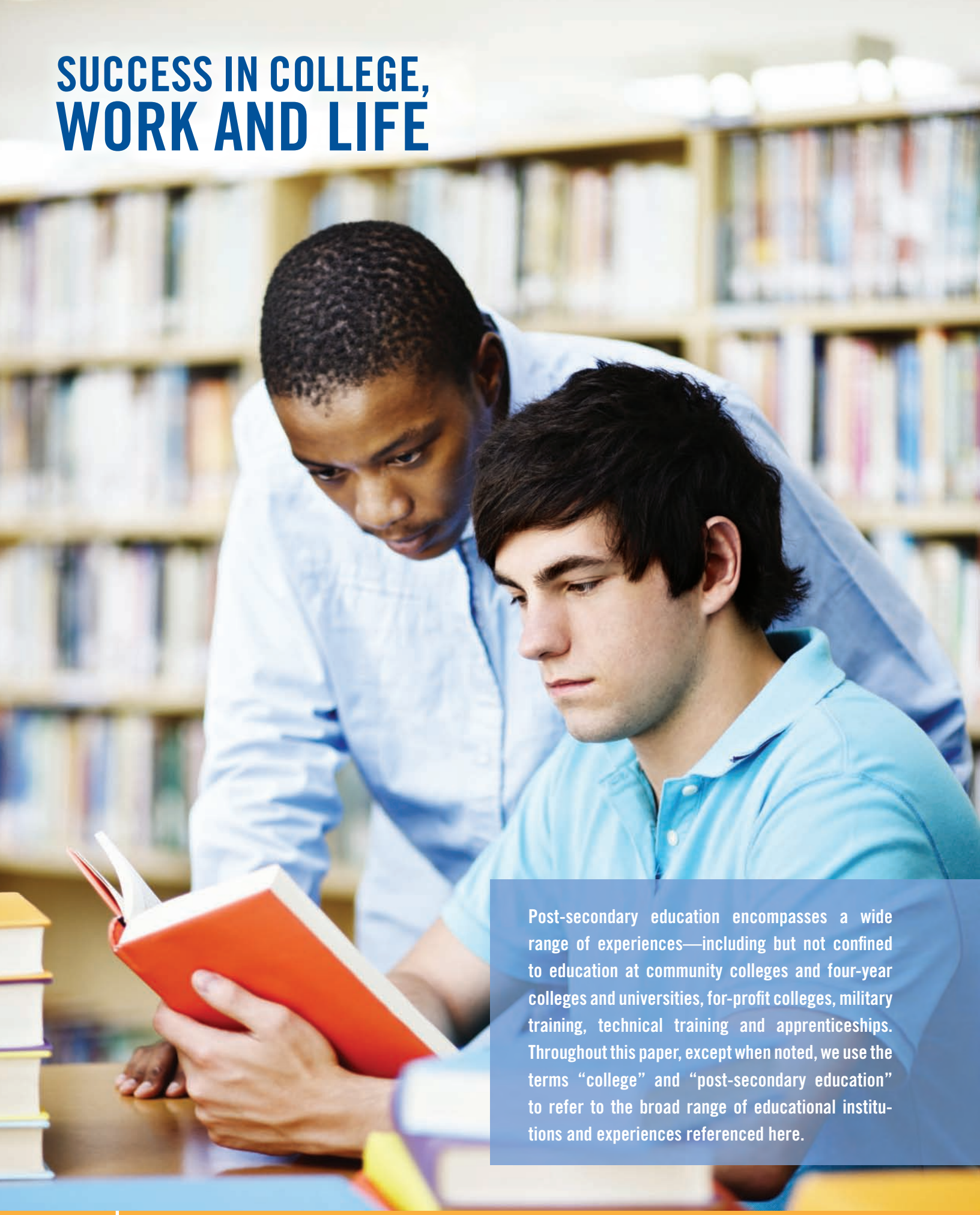
SUCCESS IN COLLEGE, WORK AND LIFE



Post-secondary education encompasses a wide range of experiences—including but not confined to education at community colleges and four-year colleges and universities, for-profit colleges, military training, technical training and apprenticeships. Throughout this paper, except when noted, we use the terms "college" and "post-secondary education" to refer to the broad range of educational institutions and experiences referenced here.

CASE FOR ACTION

As we move into the second decade of the 21st century, the need to ensure that youth succeed in life after high school has become more pressing than ever before. A solid education has become the foundation for a good life. Consider the following:

- Most jobs today that pay wages or salaries high enough to support a family require skills associated with at least some education beyond high school.[1]
- Some 34% of all job openings through 2018 in the United States will require at least a bachelor's degree,[2] and another 45% will be "middle skills" jobs, requiring more than a high school diploma, but less than a four-year degree.[3]
- Employers today need skilled workers at all levels—employees who can communicate well, think critically and be effective team members.[4] Yet, employers report that workers with no education beyond high school are three times less likely to be prepared for work than recent college graduates.[5]
- Employers say 39% of young employees whose education ended with a high school diploma were not prepared for their current jobs and 45% are not prepared for advancement.[6]
- The demand for highly educated employees is growing rapidly. Sectors that require post-secondary education—such as health care, science and technology—are projected to offer some of the fastest growing and highest paying jobs in the future.[7] At the same time, sectors that have not historically required significant post-secondary education—like manufacturing—are shrinking.[8]
- Individuals with bachelor's degrees earn on average $21,800 more per year and $900,000 more over a lifetime than those with only high school diplomas.[9] Those with a two-year college degree earn approximately $7,800 more per year and $400,000 more over a lifetime than high school graduates.[10]

All told, these statistics carry tremendous implications for our future. It's clear that high school is not enough anymore, for anyone who wants to earn a living wage.

But what may not be widely known is that few students are graduating from high school prepared for college. Only 34% of seniors who graduate are ready for college.[11] About half the students who do go to college end up taking at least one remedial math or English class[12] that doesn't count towards a degree or credential.

As is the case all along the education continuum, the numbers are even grimmer for students of color and from low-wage families – for college preparation, enrollment and completion.

- About half as many African American and Hispanic students are prepared for college as white students.[13]
- This translates to lower college enrollment and completion rates for minority students. Some 45% of white 18- to 24-year-olds enroll in college, compared with only 33% of African-American and 27% of Hispanic youth.[14]
- The gap between white and minority student college completion is widening. While 39% of white young adults have bachelor's degrees, only 21% of African-American and 13% of Hispanic young adults hold bachelor's degrees.[15]
- Low-income students are half as likely to enroll in college as their equally qualified but wealthier peers.[16] Over 60% of academically prepared students from higher-income families will earn a bachelor's degree, but only 20% of academically prepared low-income students will do the same.[17]

While the U.S. is making progress on college enrollment—with enrollment increasing 32% between 1998 and 2008[18] – that is not translating to more young adults getting college degrees.[19] And our competitors are way ahead. The United States now ranks twelfth in the percentage of 24- to 35-year-olds with an associate's degree or higher, trailing Canada, Korea and the Russian Federation.[20]

Clearly, we have our work cut out for us to ensure that young people are prepared to succeed in college, work and life.

POST-SECONDARY WORK AND SCHOOL CHALLENGES

In order to prepare young people to succeed in college, work and life we must address several challenges:

- Poor high school preparation and a lack of coordination between the K-12 and post-secondary education systems.
- Failure to make connections between high school learning and a student's future career.
- Insufficient supports to help youth make plans to go to college, then access and pay for it.
- Lack of supports to help students stay in college and complete a degree or credential.

CHALLENGE 1

Poor High School Preparation and a Lack of Coordination Between the K-12 and Post-Secondary Education Systems

Unfortunately, two decades of concerted efforts to strengthen high school course standards, introduce exit exams and increase graduation requirements have done little to get students ready for college.[21]

Only 34% of students graduate from high school prepared for college.[22] Even fewer students of color—only 23% of African-American and 20% of Hispanic students—graduate college-ready. That's a slight increase in the last decade, but not good enough.

From all fronts, the message is the same. Instructors at two- and four-year colleges say 42% of their students were not adequately prepared.[23] Recent high school graduates concurred—four in 10 did not feel prepared.[24]

While there is not a single measure of college or career readiness, it is clear that a high school diploma isn't enough for college, post-secondary training or success in the workplace. Consequently, college remediation rates are high: an estimated 34-50% of all college students require remediation, *and the majority of these students had high school GPAs of 3.0 or higher.*[25] Estimates vary, but two-year colleges report significantly higher rates of remediation than four-year colleges, and in some state community college systems most students (60-90%) have to take at least one remedial course.[26] College remediation extends the amount of time it takes to get a degree, which adds to the overall cost of education. These twin pressures of time and money work together to increase the likelihood that students will drop out.

Moreover, the K-12 system is not sufficiently linked or "aligned" with the system of post-secondary education. In fact, in many states the coursework required for high school graduation does not even meet the minimum requirements for entry into the state's public university system.[27]

One of the biggest barriers is a lack of coordination, consistency and support – often resulting in a frustrating bureaucratic maze. For instance, college placement tests and standards differ from institution to institution, and often focus on different skills and types of knowledge than high school assessments.[28]

End-of-course exams or other graduation tests are often not comparable to the class placement tests students take when they get to college. Some experts say this is because the K-12 education system is not held accountable for student success after high school.[29] In fact, most states and districts do not have data systems that allow them to track whether (or where or when) students enroll in college and how they fare once enrolled.[30]

CHALLENGE 2

Failure to Make Connections Between High School Learning and Students' Future Careers

One of the greatest predictors of academic success in high school and college completion is the extent to which a student links education and his or her own aspirations for the future.[31]

Many high school students can't see the relevance of required high school coursework to their current lives or their immediate futures—and those are the students who are less likely to put in the effort.[32] For some, this disconnect combines with other pressures in their lives to be the "tipping point" that causes them to drop out of high school.[33] Even those who graduate may lack a clear vision for their future, and are likely to stumble on the path forward.

Even if that graduate lands a job that doesn't require a degree, the chances are slim that he'll succeed. Businesses are reporting that high school graduates are not prepared for today's increasingly complex and technology-oriented workplace.[34] Most employers describe high school graduates entering the workforce as "deficient" in basic skills like written communications, professionalism or work ethic, critical thinking, problem solving and mathematics.[35] In addition, more than 30% of employers described high school graduates as "deficient" in reading comprehension skills.[36]

New research shows that effective career education in high school can improve long-term prospects for youth—particularly for low-income young men.[37] Historically, career education (formerly called vocational education) was a popular, but less academically rigorous track, designed for students who did not plan to attend college. As the skills required for the workplace are changing and more jobs require some post-secondary education, the differences between a college-prep and career prep track are fading.[38]

Of course, every student needs to understand his or her potential career path, whether that's through a two-year or four-year college or directly to the workplace.[39] Businesses are concerned about the problem, and many individual companies have developed innovative partnerships and initiatives to help prepare the future workforce; however, the business community has not been collectively engaged in developing solutions.[40]

CHALLENGE 3

Insufficient Supports to Help Youth Make Plans for, Access and Pay for College

Some of the barriers to post-secondary education start at home. Depending on the family's college-going culture, students may not even believe college is in the cards for them. They may lack familial support for the idea of going to college, let alone support to help them identify and apply to schools, take necessary exams and navigate the financial aid system.[41] First-generation college students in particular need additional ongoing supports and flexibility to help them to stay on track and attain a credential or degree.[42]

Low Expectations and Daunting Applications

Schools and communities often don't convey an expectation that all students will go to college. And students often don't know how to apply and don't think they can afford it. Their social networks may provide limited exposure to adults working in professions that require college degrees, and they may not have had access to internship and work experience opportunities. And, perhaps most importantly, no one they know has the first-hand experience to guide them.[43]

Left to their own devices, many high-achieving but low-income high school seniors don't match themselves with a college equal to their abilities.[44] This isn't surprising —the average high school has one guidance counselor for every 300 students, and each student spends about 20 minutes talking to that counselor each year. This lies in direct contrast to more affluent communities where families enroll their children in rigorous test-prep courses and hire college consultants to help determine the best college fit.[46]

On the other hand, students from low-income and minority families and those in rural areas have even less access to counseling than the average student.[47] Counselors and high school staff report

that many students lack knowledge about the college application process and financial aid.[48] Others note that counselors may have a bias towards traditional college advising, with little training or inclination to steer students through the range of other post-secondary or career options.[49]

According to College Summit, students from the low-income quartile who get A grades on standardized tests go to college at the same rate as their higher income peers who get D grades on the same tests.

Rising College Costs and Barriers to Financial Aid

Ever-increasing college costs and the byzantine financial aid system are also barriers to post-secondary success—particularly for low-income families. Finding a way to pay for college is not only a barrier to college entry, but also to college completion.

The average yearly tuition at a public four-year college in 2009 was $7,020, plus approximately $11,000 in room and board. At two-year colleges, students paid an average of $2,500 to attend full-time.[50] Although college is not inexpensive, many students and families have an exaggerated sense of the cost of college or simply do not have enough information about financial aid. They assume that college is not an option.[51] Other families simply don't have the time or the language skills—or understand the need—to fill out financial aid applications.

Those who do apply for financial aid are likely to find the application process extremely cumbersome. The system has become so complicated that more than one million students per year who might qualify for aid fail to pursue it (although recent changes to the federal financial aid application may make it easier to complete).[52]

And there is not enough aid to support everyone who needs it. A study examining working poor families showed that the federal estimate of their ability to contribute to college costs averaged about $900 in the 2003-04 school year—but when financial aid was awarded, families still had a $4,000 gap to fill.[53] Some 30 years ago, the federal Pell Grant program, which provides college funds for low-income students, covered 80% of the cost of a college education; now it covers little more than 30%.[54]

And the student's burden continues to grow. While total financial aid has increased over time to keep up with increased enrollment, the largest share of that increase has been student loans—now making up over 50% of total student aid.[55] The impact is another barrier to college entry and completion. Some studies show low-income students are less willing to borrow to attend college.[56] And grants are increasingly being offered based on academic merit (test scores, grades), rather than financial need.[57]

The bottom line is clear – many students have to work to pay for college. Some studies suggest that working more than 20 hours a week hurts a student's grades.[58] The strain may be worse for students coming to college with weaker academic skills.[59] The need to work can also undercut a student's ability to get financial aid, as aid may not be available at all for students who can't carry a full course load because of work.

A Failure to Provide Alternative Pathways to College and Work for Disconnected Youth

The challenges high school graduates face in accessing post-secondary education pale compared to those faced by dropouts. Many later obtain a secondary credential — 50% of dropouts eventually earn a diploma or a GED[60] — but may still have significant weaknesses in basic math and reading skills. While the GED offers dropouts other opportunities, it can be particularly problematic, as it is not well aligned with college placement exams. Students who attain a GED typically end up with significant remedial challenges in college (see the section on the challenges in remedial education).

The business community has a significant stake in this challenge. While a small number of employers are recognizing the role they can play in providing a critical on-ramp for disconnected young adults, more business involvement is needed to determine the best way to engage corporate America in this effort.

CHALLENGE 4

Lack of College-Level Supports to Help Students Stay in College and Complete a Degree or Credential

Only 75% of full-time four-year college students[61] and 50% of community college students go on to their second year of college.[62] The numbers are even lower for the significant number of community college students who attend part-time[63] and juggle work and family demands. That's on top of all the other challenges discussed previously, like weak academic preparation and inability to access financial aid.

These challenges translate to lackluster completion rates. Just over 50% of full-time students at four-year colleges graduate within six years, and less than three in 10 students at community colleges attain a degree or credential within three years of starting.[64]

College-Level Remedial Education is Ineffective for Highest-Need Students

The remedial education system (also known as "developmental education") needs significant improvement—particularly at the community college level— to ensure that students can succeed.

While an average of 60% of first-time community college students require remediation in one or more core subjects (up to 90% at some schools),[65] less than 50% of students taking these remedial courses end up with a degree or credential or transfer to a four-year college within eight years of enrolling.[66]

In fact, many students never even make it through the remedial coursework required by their institution. The Lumina Foundation has found that only one-third of students complete key remedial courses within three years of enrolling.[67] And many students deplete their financial aid before they are even able to take credit-bearing courses.

How colleges assess students for remedial education is uneven. Assessments used to place students don't do a good job identifying specific skill deficiencies and which deficiencies require remediation vary from school to school. In many cases remedial classes are an afterthought, poorly taught and are not based on research that identifies what works best for the students who need them. For those students who do get through remedial classes, many find they are still unprepared for college-level work.[68]

Lack of Ongoing Support and Flexibility for Students who Enroll in Post-Secondary Schooling

Many students find college overwhelming and isolating, especially first-generation college students. These students can face significant cultural challenges, including families and friends who are unfamiliar with the demands, expectations and rewards of college and may not supportive.[69]

Moreover, as increasing numbers of students with varied academic backgrounds pursue post-secondary studies, more students find they need help understanding the type of work expected—and lack the study and organizational skills needed to thrive—in the college environment.[70]

Work comes into play, too. Some 50% of full-time college students work part-time and 19% work more than 35 hours per week.[71] These figures are even higher for students at two-year colleges. When students were asked why they left college without finishing, the number one reason cited was inability to balance school and work.[72] This reason was cited as a barrier twice as often as the challenge of finding money for college. Other reasons cited are academic challenges, lack of interest in classes and difficulty with the freedom college offers.

Well-implemented support services that address challenges like social adjustment, study and time management skills, and navigating financial aid have been shown to increase persistence and help more first-generation students graduate, but colleges are challenged to employ them effectively.[73]

EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES FOR POST-SECONDARY WORK OR SCHOOL SUCCESS

Evidence suggests four strategies states and communities can implement to improve the odds that youth will pursue a post-secondary credential or degree, or embark on a viable career path by age 21. Each of these actions addresses a challenge identified earlier in this section:

- Improve high school preparation and promote better coordination between the kindergarten through twelfth grade and post-secondary education systems.
- Expand out-of-school time efforts to help students connect to careers and develop career-ready skills.
- Develop policies and practices that help students make plans for, access and pay for college.
- Provide supports to help students succeed in college and complete a degree or credential.

STRATEGY 1

Improve High School Preparation and Promote Better Coordination Between K-12 and Post-Secondary Education Systems

There are several ways that leaders can support efforts to improve high school preparation and alignment with post-secondary education. Leaders can:

- Increase the overall academic rigor of high schools.
- Reform high school curricula to better connect high school with college and work.
- Support state and community level efforts to improve coordination between kindergarten through twelfth grade higher education systems.

Improve the Rigor and Relevance of High School

To increase high school academic rigor, community leaders can advocate for adoption of common core state standards, promote high school reforms that increase academic rigor, and support targeted college preparation programs. The High School Graduation section of this overview delves into that issue in more detail.

Note: The High School Graduation section also goes into detail about making high school curricula more relevant to the real world. But a few additional areas of opportunity are worth highlighting here, in the context of post-secondary success.

College Prep Programs

A number of programs are proven successful in helping disadvantaged middle and high schoolers develop and fulfill on college aspirations. These programs provide academic and social support for students who might not consider college, either because they are not high achievers, they come from low-income families or their parents did not attend college.

While the federal programs are competitive grant programs and not all communities will have access to them, they provide good models for state and local leaders to learn from and build on. State and local leaders can lend their support to colleges and high schools that are applying for these programs and advocate for increased funding for these programs.

- **GEAR-UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs)**, started in 1998, is a federal program that funds partnerships of high-poverty middle and high schools, colleges and universities, community organizations and businesses. These GEAR-UP collaboratives work with entire grade-levels of students, beginning no later than the sixth grade, and stay with these students through high school. Evaluation data have shown participants in GEAR-UP are significantly more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college than their peers.[74] Learn more at **www2.ed.gov/gearup**.
- **AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination)** helps underachieving fourth to twelfth graders with academic potential prepare for entrance into colleges and universities. These reforms can increase the academic relevance and rigor of the high school curriculum. Nearly 95% of AVID's graduates enroll in college and 80% of AVID's graduates remain enrolled two years later. Some 4,500 schools have adopted the AVID program model.[75] Learn more at **www.Advid.com**.

Community leaders can help high school students transition to college or work by advocating for high school reforms that integrate college and work experiences into the high school curriculum. These reforms can increase the academic rigor and relevance of the high school curriculum.

College Coursework During High School

Many high schools offer programs that allow students to take college classes for high school and college credit.[76] Once geared solely to high achievers, these programs are also being developed for low-achievers and those with a low likelihood of attending college. These programs can provide greater motivation, offer increased rigor and relevance, promote college attendance and ease transitions to college for all types of students.[77]

- **Early College** (also called Middle College) programs blend high school and college coursework into a seamless course of study. Students can graduate from high school with a diploma and up to two years of college credit—tuition free. Some 85% of students attending schools that are part of the Early College Initiative earned at least a semester of transferable college credit. More than 60% were accepted to four-year colleges, exceeding national rates for similar populations.[78] Learn more at **www.earlycollege.org.**
- **Dual enrollment** (also called "dual credit") allows high school students to take individual college classes, usually on college campuses. Students receive both high school and college credit for these courses. Evaluations show participants are more likely to graduate from high school and succeed in college, and that males and low-income students benefit even more than their peers.[79] As of 2008, some 46 states had policies allowing or requiring dual enrollment programs, but implementation and the number and kinds of students who participate varies.[80] Find out what your state is doing at **www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/cclo/cbtrans/index.html**.

North Carolina launched a **Learn and Earn** initiative to help improve the state's high school graduation rate and get more students to college. The initiative has both an Early College and a dual enrollment component. Currently, North Carolina has the largest number of early college high schools in the country, with 69 high schools located on its public college campuses. There is also a Learn and Earn Online (LEO) component to help increase dual enrollment access in rural communities. North Carolina public high schools retain the state's per-pupil funding for LEO students and participating colleges also receive payment from the state for each full-time equivalent student they serve.[81] Find out more at **www.nclearnandearn.gov**.

Support State and Community Efforts to Better Coordinate the K-12 and Post-Secondary Systems

Many states and communities are establishing commissions, often referred to as P-16 or P-20 councils, to work on improving alignment and overall communication between all levels of the education and workforce pipeline—from preschool, to the various components of the K-12 system, through higher-education and transition to careers.[82] Historically, these systems have operated in isolation from one another.[83]

These coordinating bodies can bring together representatives from all sectors to address a broad variety of potential education issues (which will vary by state and locality), including:

- Coordination of high school exit and public post-secondary entrance requirements.
- Policy changes that would enable students to transfer more easily between community-college and four-year institutions.
- Alignment of K-12 and post-secondary testing systems.
- Development of early warning systems to help students who are not on a path to graduate college-ready.
- Improvements in communications to students regarding public college requirements and college-ready assessments.
- Better information for high schools on how students fare once they leave.

One task many P-20 councils have taken on is overseeing the development of longitudinal P-20 data systems. While many states share information from K-12 and higher education, it is often aggregate data (e.g., graduation rates for schools) rather than individual student data.[84] By tracking individual student data, high schools and colleges can understand how programs, schools and districts impact particular students and look at student success over time.[85] Longitudinal data systems that track student-level data from pre-K through college are in place in 33 states, but states are only beginning to use this data for continuous improvement.[86]

- **Bridging Richmond** is a P20 initiative headed by Virginia Commonwealth University. A dozen of the area's education, business, civic, and philanthropic leaders are working together to assess and connect the local youth services and education pipeline. The **United Way of Greater Richmond & Petersburg** is involved because of its work with early care and education and its sponsorship of the Partnership for Out-of-School Time, as well as its role as an important hub in the community. This group began its work in 2009 with support from Living Cities, a philanthropic collaborative of large U.S. and international foundations and Strive of Cincinnati.

STRATEGY 2

Expand Out-of-School Efforts to Help Students Connect to Careers and Develop Career-Ready Skills

Opportunities to work and develop workplace skills are essential to long-term success in careers, whether students go to college or directly into the workplace. While formal education can provide some of these connections, there are additional ways that students can develop work-ready skills and connect to employment outside of school.

Expand and Enhance Youth Employment Programs

Good work experience can help young people develop work aspirations, gain insights into potential careers, understand the importance of schooling and experience high school and post-secondary achievement.

Unfortunately, work participation by youth has declined significantly over the last decade—more than for any other group.[87] The federal stimulus funds in summer 2009 fueled a re-energizing of municipal summer jobs programs, serving some 250,000 youth.[88] Community leaders can serve an important role in expanding and ensuring the availability of jobs programs by engaging the business community in public-private partnerships.

The limited research on youth employment programs has shown mixed results. Programs are highly variable in quality, structure and goals. Evidence from a meta-analysis of programs showed that participation did not result in higher employment in the long run, but may have helped participants to secure better jobs (for example, jobs with benefits).[89]

Intensive Work Experiences

More intensive programs seemed to provide greater results. For example, Job Corps, an intensive residential employment program, was shown to increase the long-term earnings of participants.[90] The research does make clear that in order to achieve long-term positive outcomes, youth employment programs, such as service/work-based learning, must be well implemented with careful attention paid to outcomes.[91]

Meaningful Internships

Business leaders say one way to improve the workforce readiness of youth is to provide "more meaningful internships that provide students with actual learning experiences that develop needed workplace skills."[92]

Internships or mentoring through partnerships with local businesses can help students gain work experience, identify potential job and career opportunities, establish career goals and map the steps involved in achieving these goals.[93] Career counseling programs that incorporate internships with local business partners can eliminate gaps in career exploration and development support that often exist in internships or guidance counseling alone.[94] Programs that combine high expectations with meaningful support and strong relationships with employers can yield strong long-term outcomes.

- **Year Up,** a national organization with programs in eight major metro areas across the country, offers "a one-year, intensive training program that provides young urban adults 18-24 with a unique combination of technical and professional skills, college credits, an educational stipend and a corporate internship."[95] Students receive intensive professional and technical skill training, followed by an internship with an employer where they are able to hone these skills. Year Up's student retention rate is 83% and 87% of graduates have been placed in full- or part-time positions within four months of graduation.[96] Find out more at **www.yearup.org**.

Support Out-of-School Programs that Develop College and Career Skills

Quality out-of-school time programs can provide youth with opportunities to prepare for both college and employment.[97] Operating outside of the structure of the school day, out-of-school time programs are better able to cater to specific student interests and have more time flexibility to implement project-based curricula.[98]

United Ways and their corporate partners may be able to bring a lot to this effort. Out-of-school time programs can be fueled by volunteers with specific expertise, and can often explicitly link with business to help develop courses of study around the thinking and interpersonal skills in demand by employers—including, for example, collaborative problem-solving, creativity and innovation, and leadership.

- **JA Academy** in Worcester, MA provides an after-school mentoring program to high school juniors and seniors that combines Junior Achievement's quality financial literacy and workforce awareness programs with college familiarization and preparation. Created as a partnership between Junior Achievement, College of the Holy Cross and Morgan Stanley, the program is housed at Holy Cross, with Morgan Stanley volunteers delivering the financial literacy and work skills curriculum. Holy Cross faculty, staff and student leaders provide admissions and financial aid workshops, and information on academics and student life.
- **After School Matters** (ASM) in Chicago offers a teen apprenticeship program that allows high school students to explore a variety of career opportunities in the arts, technology, science, journalism and other areas. ASM is supported through a network of public and private partnerships that include the City of Chicago, Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Park District, Chicago Public Library and community organizations across the city. ASM students miss fewer days of school, fail fewer core academic courses and have higher graduation rates than similar non-participants, even after taking into account student demographic characteristics.[99]
- **Citizen Schools** partners with schools to provide "a second shift of educators" to extend the learning day for low-income middle school students. Paid staff and volunteers work in an afterschool program that provides students with academic support and apprenticeships with local employers. As part of its curriculum, Citizen Schools provides information and guidance on college attendance and helps students identify the high school programs and classes that will best prepare them for college. Citizen Schools participants earn higher grades and standardized test scores, and have better attendance and fewer discipline problems than comparable non-participants. Former program attendees continue to outperform their peers through high school. Citizen Schools engages 3,200 volunteers to serve 4,400 students at 37 sites across seven states.[100] Find out more at **www.citizenschools.org**

STRATEGY 3

Develop Policies and Practices to Help Students Plan for, Access and Pay for College

The most consistent predictor of whether students are prepared for college and take the steps necessary for college entry is whether a student's high school has a "strong college-going culture."[101] Many high school students and families have college aspirations but are unaware of the steps required to reach their goals.[102] Students need strong supports to navigate the path to college entry.[103]

To improve college access, leaders can:

- Promote a college-going culture for all students in all high schools and communities.
- Expand mentoring and other community-based supports for college access.
- Develop and coordinate resources that provide community-wide information on the full-range of post-secondary opportunities.
- Improve the financial aid system.
- Provide alternative pathways to college and work for disconnected youth.

Promote a College-Going Culture for All Students

It's all about the culture. A student's family or school environment – and its "college-going" culture – can make the difference. Research says that the social environment is a key factor in student success in high school and college.[104] A "college- going" climate at school or home emphasizes college-going ideals, including the notion that all students, not just high achievers or those with financial means, can and should pursue further education after high school.

Adults in a "college-going" environment hold high academic expectations. And "college-going" schools and districts implement policies and practices to support those expectations and help students do what is needed to get to college—while building student skills to help succeed once they get there. In this environment, students (and their families) understand that their work in high school is laying the foundation for success in college and career.

Guidance counselors can play a vital role in helping to develop a college-going culture in school.[105] Counselors and other adults who actively support students by helping them develop and follow a college admissions timeline can have a significant positive impact on college-going rates.[106] Moreover, the potential for school guidance counseling to improve student outcomes is greatest for low-income, minority and first-generation students. Yet, these students are least likely to have access to quality counseling.[107]

Traditionally, college advising in many high schools, particularly large urban high schools, is understaffed. Providing more resources to support guidance counselors and ensure that all students have access to adequate counseling is one important way to help boost college access. School leaders can also support all school staff in encouraging college-going efforts. Teachers and other staff can extend the reach of guidance counselors by working to raise student expectations for college, and helping students identify colleges, complete applications and maintain timelines. Additional and ongoing training is needed to make certain that all staff—counselors and teachers— have the necessary skills and access to up-to-date information to guide students through the application process.

United Way of Central Ohio has partnered with the Ohio College Access Network and I Know I Can (IKIC), one of the most successful non-profit college access organizations in the nation, to support the Ohio College Guide Initiative. IKAC deploys college advisors to reach out to students to inspire them to go to college, enable them to find financial assistance and support them in completing their degree once they get to college. The goal of the Ohio College Guides initiative is to provide effective and cost-efficient college access services that will raise awareness of post-secondary education opportunities and increase college enrollment rates of underrepresented, low-income and first generation students.

A number of new programs are helping schools promote a college-going culture, providing in-school support and "college knowledge" to staff and students:

- College Summit (www.collegesummit.org) creates partnerships with schools and districts to strengthen the college-going culture and increase college enrollment rates. The model includes a post-secondary education-planning curriculum for high schools; intensive summer workshops for students; counselor and teacher professional development; training and support for students who serve as peer advisors; and data tracking. According to an independent evaluation, College Summit high schools increase the college enrollment rate for participants by 20%. The organization serves over 25,000 students each year.
- **Career Coaches**, provided by Virginia community colleges, work in 150 high schools in Virginia to help students develop career and post-secondary educational plans and to map out the necessary high school coursework. The coaches, who are community college employees, help students link to programs like dual enrollment or "tech prep" programs at local community colleges. In 2008-09 the program saw a 50% increase in the number of students with plans for post-secondary education after meeting with a coach.[108] **www.vccs.edu/WorkforceServices/CareerPathways/CareerCoaches/tabid/258/Default.aspx**
- **National College Advising Corps** places recent university graduates as salaried college advisers in low-income high schools and community colleges, providing the counseling and encouragement students need to navigate college admissions. Find out more at **www.advisingcorps.org**

Nnamdi Asomugha and College Prep

Star NFL cornerback Nnamdi Asomugha, with the Oakland Raiders, started the Asomugha College Tour for Scholars (ACTS), an annual college tour program for high-achieving high-school students of color. Asomugha, who is also National NFL Ambassador for United Way's Live United campaign, takes groups of students to college campuses every year.

Since 2004, Asomugha has been making regular visits to the East Oakland Youth Development Center, committing almost every Monday afternoon to mentor and tutor inner-city youth at the center. In 2007, he founded ACTS and takes groups of students to visit college campuses across the country every year. So far, he's helped 25 young people get into college. For United Way's 2010 Day of Action last year, Nnamdi teamed up with United Way volunteers to provide 47 Bay Area youth with professional clothing and accessories, as well as job training. For more information, visit www.asomughafoundation.org.

Expand Mentoring and Other Community-Based Supports for College Access

Mentoring can also be an effective form of student support—whether advisors are college students, community members or business professionals.[109] The better the mentor-mentee relationship, the better the outcomes, including improved grades, application and acceptance to college, and persistence in college.[110]

An effective mentor helps students identify, understand, and complete the steps involved in reaching their college and career goals.[111] Mentors can more easily establish trusting relationships with mentees when they share similar backgrounds, high schools or neighborhoods.[112] Mentoring can be effective individually or in small groups and can occur in a variety of settings—as part of after-school or community programs, as part of classroom activities or in the form of internships.[113]

- **California's Puente Project** (**www.puente.net**) provides supports to high school and college students to help more minorities attend college in California. The program includes a two-year English/writing class (in high school), a Puente counselor and a mentoring program (in high school and at college). A mentoring coordinator pairs each student with a college-educated professional in the community. Both the Puente counselor and the mentor are usually Hispanic. Evaluation data show that Puente participants are more likely than similar peers to attend a four-year university, and the overall college enrollment rate is 84% compared to 75% of non-Puente students. The Puente evaluators attribute its success to the network of supportive adults and peers in the students' lives.

In addition to school-based support and guidance services for college attendance, some communities have worked outside the school to build "college knowledge" and develop a college-going culture in the community at large. In many communities, there are diverse groups of players who are either already providing supports to students, or who could be easily tapped to engage in this work. These programs show promise to enhance and expand the support students receive in school.

- **Louisville's** "Close the Deal" program pairs students with mentors who help them explore post-secondary options, fill out financial aid forms and college applications and go on college interviews and visits. In its first year, the number of seniors planning to go to college at one high school jumped from 20 to 97, and they earned more than $200,000 in scholarships. Started by the Mayor and supported by the Chamber of Commerce, more than 1,000 students at three high schools have now taken part. The College Board recently chose the program as winner of the College Keys Compact Innovation Award, calling it an "innovative, effective practice" that helps students get ready for, get in and get through college.[114] Five other KY schools systems have followed suit.
- **KnowHow2GO** (**www.knowhow2go.org**) is a national public service advertising campaign that combines education, community-based and government partnerships to raise awareness among low-income and first-generation students in eighth through tenth grade about preparing for college. The campaign was developed by the Ad Council in partnership with the Lumina Foundation and the American Council on Education.[115]

Develop Innovative Financial Aid Options

While financial aid reform is a topic that Congress is tackling, some states and communities are tackling the challenge in their own ways. For example, to make its financial aid system more user-friendly, the Arkansas State Department of Higher Education recently released **YOUniversal**, a new online universal scholarship application that pulls up all the financial aid opportunities for which a prospective student is eligible.

Many United Ways are hosting services like the Benefit Bank, a free online system for accessing state and federal benefits that is now linking its online tax forms with the federal student aid application (the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA).[116] This has the benefit of streamlining and simplifying the process of applying for financial aid.

A number of localities have explored other community-wide initiatives to help students pay for college:

- **College Goal Sunday** is a 21-year effort, now led by the YMCA USA, to help families complete financial aid applications. Kicking off each year on Super Bowl Sunday, the program is designed to reach youth ages 18-24 who are racial or ethnic minorities, first-generation college students or from families earning less than $40,000 per year. College Goal relies on about 9,000 trained volunteers each year, and in 2009 it served over 42,100 students in 37 states.[117]
- **Georgia's HOPE Scholarships** use state lottery funds to provide full college scholarships to state institutions for residents meeting certain minimum grade requirements. These very popular merit-based scholarship programs, which have been replicated in a number of other states, have had success at increasing student achievement and getting more students, and more students of color, to college.[118] However, decreased lottery revenues are forcing the state to evaluate plans to cut benefits, limit participation or both.[119]
- In **Denver**, the **Mile High United Way** has led the way on **Children's Development Accounts** (CDAs), special bank accounts (similar to an individual development account) designed to help families build assets and save for college. These initiatives typically have community sponsors that offer incentives like matching funds provided by private or public donations.[120]
- Starting in 2009, the **United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County**, Citibank, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Mayor's office and other local partners joined together to sponsor **Cribs to College**, a local CDA initiative for low-income families in the San Antonio region.[121]

Create Alternative Pathways to Post-Secondary Education and Careers for Disconnected Youth

Some communities have started to develop promising programs that focus not only on supporting youth to earn a high school diploma, but also on providing access and transition to post-secondary education and employment. These programs show great promise for students who were not successful in the traditional high school setting and who may not have the skills necessary to transition to a traditional college or workplace setting without significant support. These typically blend high school completion or attainment of a GED credential, with college or work, or both. Some of these programs have originated out of higher education, some out of the K-12 system and some from private business.

- **Gateway to College** is a national initiative focused on helping dropouts ages 16-20 get back on track to earn a high school diploma while also earning credits towards an associate's degree or certificate at a local community college or technical school. Started at Portland Community College in Oregon, the program is now being replicated across the country with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Participants start their classes in a small community of peers to hone their academic and personal skills before transitioning into classes in the general college population. Students show improved attendance, a greater sense of connection and relationships, improved academic performance and significant accumulation of college credits.[122]

- CVS/Caremark is piloting an innovative **Pathways to Retail Careers** program in Boston and Detroit. This program targets youth with significant barriers to success in a traditional work environment, and helps them enter and stay in the retail field. Based on a model developed in partnership with Corporate Voices for Working Families, it integrates job training, mentoring and post-placement career development supports with a work-based learning curriculum. The pre-employment phase includes training in basic academic competencies as needed, including reading comprehension and computational math skills. Program participants also complete an unpaid internship at a local CVS store. Once on the job, career development supports include continued work with a learning coach, the creation of a plan for career and personal advancement and the opportunity to earn college credit toward an associate's degree.

STRATEGY 4

Provide Supports to Help Students Succeed in College and Complete a Degree or Credential

Young adults know that college is the key to future success, yet many are still unable to stay in school and earn a degree or credential. While many of the strategies to help students prepare for and start college are the same strategies that will help students persist and complete college, state and community leaders can take additional steps to support those strategies. Leaders can:

- Provide continuing academic and social support for students once they are in college.
- Reform the developmental education system.

Provide Continuing Academic and Social Support for Students Once They Are in College

Once in college, students need comprehensive academic, social and financial supports that encourage persistence and completion.[123] Many strategies for increasing retention are particularly important for low-income and first-generation college students,[124] who often begin school less academically prepared and have greater difficulty engaging in campus life.[125]

A common element among successful retention programs is their focus on creating and supporting a personal learning environment in which students cannot be "anonymous.[126] This means that the school takes an active role in major and course selection and intervenes when students are struggling.[127] It also means providing students—whether through professional advisors, well-trained faculty, peer counselors or mentors—

with financial aid counseling, career counseling, employment assistance and transfer or graduate school counseling. Financial counseling, particularly in combination with grants and quality work-study programs, can help remove a major barrier that working students face to continuing and completing postsecondary studies.[128]

Retention-support efforts should primarily concentrate on the transition to college and on supporting students during their first year.[129] Effective strategies include bridge courses and other programs offered during the summer before college begins, smaller learning communities or class sizes, and orientation and college skills classes before and during the first year.

In addition to colleges and universities themselves, about a third of which provide support programs for at-risk students, there are federal programs, research institutions, foundation-funded programs and programs supported by national organizations.[130] One example that shows promise is:

- **The Enhanced Opening Doors Program**, a demonstration project developed by MDRC, targets community college students on academic probation and provides them with additional academic support and study skills training. Evaluation found that, "the Enhanced Opening Doors program significantly increased the average number of credits earned by participants, their likelihood of earning a GPA above 2.0, and their likelihood of passing all of their classes."[131]

Reform the Remedial Education System

More than three-quarters of all colleges offer remedial courses, and reform is needed throughout the developmental education system. Changes are most needed in community colleges, where remediation needs are greater and more time is spent in remediation.[132]

Community colleges, because they are open-access institutions, often bear the greatest burden of under-prepared students. In several states, students judged in need of remediation must take those classes at a community college rather than at the state's public four-year institutions.[133]

While it is critical that higher education take an increased role in working together with the K-12 system to prevent the need for college-level remediation (referenced in Strategy 1 earlier), the remedial education system itself is still necessary and must be repaired. Repairs should focus on better matching of student remediation needs with available supports, and acceleration of student progress through remediation and on to credit-bearing coursework so they are more likely to earn a credential or degree.

Reform of developmental education is still an emerging issue, but there is a growing consensus that what is needed is:

- Improvements in the college-level student advising system to help students better address their remediation needs and navigate the developmental education system at their institution
- More professional development for faculty to improve their skills in teaching remedial or developmental classes, along with consideration of how best to staff these courses to ensure a stable, engaged and skilled set of instructors
- Improvements in diagnostic assessments to pinpoint student needs and determine the intensity of potential remedial supports
- Innovation in the current curriculum and instruction models to allow for greater flexibility and personalization in addressing student needs—whether students have significant basic skills deficiencies or more targeted needs. This could include greater use of technology, and/or creative ways to blend enhanced supports with credit-bearing classes.[134]

THE WAY FORWARD

Fixing the last piece of the education and workforce pipeline is a critical issue for communities and our nation—we cannot simply stop at high school graduation. By arming teachers, parents, principals, students and superintendents—along with business and faith leaders, elected officials and other key stakeholders—with up-to-date information on the challenges and solutions to improving post-secondary outcomes, United Ways can help set the stage for change.

Through our research, United Way Worldwide has identified the strategies needed to help youth succeed after high school and evidence-based approaches to implementing these strategies. How should state and local United Ways approach these strategies? One way to look at it is as an "ingredient list" that's been endorsed by national experts, United Way field leaders, and corporate partners. Use it as a guide—a set of research-based strategies that can be knit together with other strategies in the local context to achieve results.

One of the strongest roles United Ways play in making real community change is that of a mobilizing force, recruiting people with passion, expertise and resources to make a difference. In the case of post-secondary success, United Ways are still fairly new to the conversation, but are increasingly convening stakeholders to examine issues, develop strategies, and execute collective action plans on the issues that matter most.

If communities are successful in developing and executing post-secondary strategies, in learning from their mistakes and in building on their successes, they can expect to see more young people succeeding in work, school and life.

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